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# **Introduction to Media Studies**

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## **I. History of Mass Media**

The information distributed to people on a large scale through the use of television, radio, movies, newspapers, Internet, magazines and books is termed as Mass Media.

Can we ever imagine life without mobile phones, televisions or the Internet? Possibly not! It is a fact that the world would have been a much bigger place, if we did not have gadgets that enhanced connectivity. We can communicate with ease, gain knowledge with the click of a button, and know about world events as they happen. Let's have a look at how mass media evolved over the years.

### Evolution of Mass Media :

Mass Media has been evolving through the ancient periods when kings patronized their writers and poets for writing books and creating dramas. The power of mass media is known to the world. It has thrown away mighty dynasties and created new empires. Mass media has helped in creating social awareness and has also provided people with an easy way of living life. The print media played an important part in the historical events such as, The Renaissance, The American War of Independence, The French Revolution and many more...

### Early Years :

The mass media started evolving as early as 3300 B.C., when the Egyptians perfected the hieroglyphics. This writing system was based on symbols. Later in 1500 B.C., the Semites devised the alphabets with consonants. It was around 800 B.C. that the vowels were introduced into the alphabet by the Greeks.

### The Book

Many books were written in ancient times, but sources confirm that the first printed book was the 'Diamond Sutra' written in China in 868 A.D. But with the slow spread of literacy in China and the high cost of paper in the country, printing lacked the speed required to reach large numbers of people. However, printing technology quickly evolved in Europe. In 1400 A.D., Johannes Gutenberg, a German goldsmith, invented the printing press of movable type, which is said to be based on screw bases. The first book was printed in the year 1453 A.D. One of the books that were printed was, 'The Gutenberg Bible'. From a single city in Germany, the printing press spread all over Europe, like a wild fire. In 1468 A.D. William Caxton produced a book with the first printed advertisement in England. By the year 1500 A.D., two million copies of books were printed in these countries. In the next hundred years, the printing rose to two hundred million copies.

### The Rise of Newspaper :

The newspaper developed around 1600 A.D., but it took this form of mass media more than a century to influence the masses directly. The first printed newspaper was "The Relation". Later, in the year 1690, Benjamin Harris printed the first colonial newspaper in Boston. There was an increase in the circulation of newspaper in the nineteenth century. The first African-American paper titled "Freedom's Journal" was published in the year 1827. By the end of 1900, print media could be found in the form of books, pamphlets, magazines and newspapers. Newspaper provided all the necessary information about the world for the people at remote locations. Even today, newspapers remain an important global source of information.

### Telegraph and Telephone :

The first telegraph line was set in the year 1844 by Samuel Morse. And by the year 1858, the first transatlantic cable was established, making it easier for people to communicate. The telephone was invented by Alexander Graham Bell in the year 1876 which brought about a revolution in the field of communication. People were now able to sit in the comfort of their homes and chat with friends and relatives across the globe.

### Radio and Television :

Meanwhile, in the year 1885, George Eastman invented the photographic film. The film developed by Eastman helped Gilbert Grosvenor to introduce photographs in 'National Geographic' in the year 1899. The print media began losing popularity in the twentieth century with the emergence of televisions and radios.

During the year 1894, the radio was invented by Guglielmo Marconi. Radios worked on the principle of transmission of electromagnetic waves. As the transmission of radio programs began, it became a prominent source of entertainment for the public.

The television was invented by John Logie Baird in the year 1925. The first television transmission was done in the year 1927 by Philo Farnsworth. Walt Disney produced the world's first full color film "Flower and trees" in the year 1932. It was during the 1950s that the black and white television became a part of the American household. What was earlier in the paper could now be seen audio-visually. Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon was televised globally in color, in the year 1969. Mass media in this form became technologically dependent and progressed along with developments in fields of electricity, semi-conductors and cathode ray tubes.

## Internet and Smartphone :

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Internet evolved. With the concept of the Internet, the world got globally connected. The e-mail technology developed during the 1970s. It was Tim Berners-Lee who had come up with this idea of WWW (world wide web) in the year 1990. By the year 2004 Internet broadband connected more than half of American homes. Instant message services were introduced in the year 2001. Since its introduction, the Internet has been providing us with information and connectivity. Today, there are more than two billion people who use the Internet. The world is now at our fingertips. With the click of a button we can search for anything we want.

In recent times, the introduction of smartphones has brought about a major change in the lives of people. People do not have to wait for hours to avail valuable information. The portability of this device is an added advantage. Smartphones have specific features such as touchscreen, GPS, web browsers, Wi-Fi connectivity and many more applications which have added comfort and convenience.

Mass media is a super-power that has connected the world in multiple ways. We think of media just as newspapers, televisions and the Internet, but it has been present in some form or the other since hundreds of years. Who knows what forms of communication we may have a hundred years from now? Will mobile phones work on the power of thought? Civilization will progress and its means of sharing intelligent thought will keep evolving over time.

## **II. What is Media Studies ?**

The media refers to the different channels we use to communicate information in the everyday world. 'Media' is the plural of medium (of communication), and the main media are:

- Internet (online media)
- Television/Radio (broadcast media)
- Magazines/Newspapers (print media)
- Film
- Music
- Video Games

Advertising is also considered a medium, as it is a separate channel of communication of messages within other broadcast, print and online media.

## What is Media Studies?

Media Studies is the analysis of the images, sounds and text we experience via the media, and the effects these images, sounds and text have on us, the audience. It involves looking closely at individual media texts (such as movies, YouTube channels, TV shows, mobile phone games, pop songs etc) and applying some of the following ideas:

- Who made them ("institution")?
- How they were made ("process")?
- Why they were made ("purpose")?
- Who they were made for ("audience")?
- What rules were followed when making them ("conventions" and "genre")?

As well as essays, research, and reports, Media Studies also involves practical work, where you learn the techniques involved for the production of your own media text. Students produce music videos, phone apps, TV commercials, magazine advertisements, computer animation, photo-essays and documentary videos. Media is a 'learn by doing' subject, and you compare your own experiences with what the 'professionals' go through.

Media Studies can be taken as A-level course and many students go on to study it at university. Success in this subject comes from a combination of creativity and understanding. It is a unique fusion of practical and theoretical learning, which, although it can be hard work and very time consuming, is always rewarding. It's also a lot of fun – what other subject deals with your favourite movies, popstars and TV shows?

## Why Is It Important?

As we progress into the 21st century, communications are becoming faster and faster and faster. Think of the millions of different media images you are bombarded with every day. It is as important now to be able to read and make sense of those images, as it has been to be able to read ordinary text. If you do not know how to read the messages coming at you from TV, the Internet, your smart phone, advertising etc, then you may become very lost and misled in the 21st century. You also need to have a good idea of how those messages are made, and who is making them, so that you may quickly become aware if someone (or some corporation!) is trying to manipulate your thoughts and feelings.

Media Studies is also about appreciating the skill and creativity which goes into the production of media texts. Just as analysing the different techniques used in the creation of a poem or novel helps you appreciate the talent of the writer, so does learning about media techniques help you appreciate the skill with words and pictures that the creators of a media text have to possess.

Media Studies also deals with the very latest ideas - which is why you need a website to help you study it, rather than relying on textbooks that get out of date very quickly. Although you do need to have some understanding of the history of media (particularly how new technological developments have changed things), the focus of your studies is what is happening right now, buzzing round the airwaves of the globe.

### **Key concepts :**

1. Media Forms : This means the type of media text or media platform that we are studying. For example, a TV programme is a different media form to a magazine or a website. The media language we use to analyse a media text will change with different media forms. For example if we were analysing a film, we would talk about camera movement, editing, sound, location, props and mise- en-scene, where as if we were analysing a CD, we would talk about image, font, colour, genre and representation. Different media forms are then split into genres. Film for example can be split into horror, comedy, action, western or thriller. TV might be split into soap opera, documentary, game show or drama.

Different genres have different 'codes and conventions'. For example, we know a science fiction film when we see one because there are spaceships and aliens, themes of discovery and technology, the future, time travel and robots. The dominant colours are metallic silver and neon blue or green. These codes and conventions are very different to a western where we would expect to see cowboys and saloons, horses, spurs, guns and maybe a cactus. The narrative or story is also different; different themes and different types of characters too. The codes and conventions show us the type of narrative and genre and this helps us recognise and analyse the form of the text we are studying.

Media form involves dealing with the type of language used. Media messages are encoded and then decoded by audience. Encoding is the process by which a source performs conversion of information into data. Decoding is the reverse process of converting data into information understandable by a receiver. Encoding is the process of formulating messages, that is, person's skill of using language to convey messages. Decoding is the process of analyzing the message, that is, a person's skill of understanding language. Language is a code established through rules and regulations. These rules govern the meaning and usage of the code. The understanding (decoding) and production (encoding) of the code is also based on mutual agreement of these rules.

This process of communication requires the use of media language. News and information, analysis and interpretations, education, public relations, sales and advertising are mass messages. These messages are the perceptible part of our relationship to the media and it is for these messages that we pay attention to media.

2. Representation: The process of presenting information about the world to the world is called representation. The key issue here is to explore, who is being represented and why, and by whom and how? Fairness of representation has always been a critical area of enquiry in Media Studies. According to Patricia J. Williams, “The media do not merely represent; they also recreate world as desirable, and saleable. What they reproduce is chosen, not random, not neutral, and not without consequence”. The key questions are: who produces (creator or author), who are the target audience, what is missing & why?

Media Representations can seem complicated but it's very simple once you get it and possibly the most important of all the key concepts. What we see and hear in the media is never real... It is a RE-presentation of reality. When we see young people in the media, they are being re-presented to us. How a person or organisation is represented is really important. A representation could be either positive or negative depending upon the way it is constructed. Costume, the language they use, the location are all part of how meaning is created. Another example might be with race. As Media analysts, we need to look at the representation of characters and organisations critically to uncover whether there is an unfair dominance of negative stereotypes.

Try watching an episode of “The Wire or Skins” and think about the representation of young people. Is it good or bad, fair or unfair, is it stereotypical or more balanced? Try watching an episode of “Britain's Next Top Model” and thinking about the representation of women, is it positive or negative and why? As you watch TV, read magazines, go to see films or listen to the radio, or read the paper or surf the net, try thinking about the key concepts. Why not stop and think – who is the audience and how are they responding? What are the stereotypes being used here and are the representations positive or negative? Which institution made this media text and how are they funded; what is their vision?

3. Institutions: Media institutions arrange, create, illustrate, design, put together, print or broadcast, advertise and distribute media products to the masses via existing delivery systems. It's important to understand how these media institutions work and how they work can influence the media products. How a text is influenced by various institutions? How ownership and other organization control and affect text? Concentration of media ownership is a serious concern for many. Though, there are few who would still align with the cultural

imperialism thesis, but very few will disagree on the fact that six global media giants regulate the entire world opinion. It is also important to realize that concentration of media ownership seems to work against the alternative sources of opinion, voice of the dissent, diversity and ultimately against democracy.

In Media studies, it is important to consider the company or organisation that produce or broadcast the media texts that we receive. Different media institutions have different aims and visions and they often have different audiences or compete with each other for the same audience. Some media institutions are huge and they own lots of different media forms; Rupert Murdoch owns a company called 'News Corp International' which owns *Sky TV*, *The Sun newspaper*, *The Times newspaper*, *FOX TV* and *20th Century Fox films* and lots more. Some people see this as worrying because increased concentration of ownership means that all our media content is getting more and more similar and its only real purpose is making money.

The study of institutions also includes looking at how a company makes its money. For example, a commercial institution like *The Sun Newspaper* makes its money from advertising which means they need a very big audience to interest their advertisers. News articles are often cut or shortened to make more space for advertising to make more money for the institution. This worries some analysts, because it means that *The Sun* is not really concerned with news so much as advertising revenue and audience figures.

Another important part of institution is ownership and control. If an owner is able to control their institution and its content or audience then should there be a limit on how much one media conglomerate should be allowed to own?

4. Audience: An audience is/the recipient of message. An audience is the/a group of people who participate & experience work of art, literature, theatre, music. An audience is the/a group of consumers for whom the media text is constructed & who is exposed to the text. Audience is an abstract concept and can't be defined in terms of space and time. Audiences can't be controlled but they can be sought. It's an abstract concept for those persons who use a medium. Audience is a part of the whole, made up of individuals but measured as a collective and can be established by quantitative and qualitative methods. Individuals differ from audience in terms of usage of different media to meet their wants. Individuals spend different amounts of time serving different wants with different media. Collections of individuals meet different wants through different media use create audiences.

If the media is about MASS COMMUNICATION, then it's very important to look at who a media text is communicating with. Different media companies have different

audiences. For example, Kerrang! Radio has a different 'target Audience' to Classic FM or Choice. Different media texts can also have a different target audience. For example BBC1 make Newsround and News at Ten but the target audiences are clearly different. Media audiences can be broken down into different groups, this is called audience segmentation. You can segment audiences by age, race, gender, social class, how much education they have, where they live, what sort of interests they have or the subculture they identify with.

Audiences also respond to the media texts they watch, listen to or download. Media Studies is also concerned with audience responses. Sometimes audiences identify with certain texts, like teenagers may like 'Skins' because they identify with the characters. Or maybe they aspire to be like them, or are gratified by the story lines or action. Audiences also respond by participating like when they vote for The X Factor, or for a 'eviction' type programme.

## UNDERSTANDING MEDIA AUDIENCES

Researchers investigating the effect of media on audiences have considered the audience in two distinct ways.

### 1. Passive Audiences :

The earliest idea was that a mass audience is passive and inactive. The members of the audience are seen as couch potatoes just sitting there consuming media texts – particularly commercial television programmes. It was thought that this did not require the active use of the brain. The audience accepts and believes all messages in any media text that they receive. This is the passive audience model.

#### The Hypodermic Model

In this model the media is seen as powerful and able to inject ideas into an audience who are seen as weak and passive.

It was thought that a mass audience could be influenced by the same message. This appeared to be the case in Nazi Germany in the 1930s leading up to WWII. Powerful German films such as "Triumph of the Will" seemed to use propaganda methods to 'inject' ideas promoting the Nazi cause into the German audience. That is why this theory is known as the Hypodermic model. It suggests that a media text can 'inject' ideas, values and attitudes into a passive audience who might then act upon them. This theory also suggests that a media text has only one message which the audience must pick up.

In 1957 an American theorist called Vance Packard working in advertising wrote an influential book called *The Hidden Persuaders*. This book suggested that advertisers were

able to manipulate audiences, and persuade them to buy things they may not want to buy. This suggested advertisers had power over audiences. In fact this has since proved to be an unreliable model, as modern audiences are too sophisticated.

Basically this theory stems from a fear of the mass media, and gives the media much more power than it can ever have in a democracy. Also it ignores the obvious fact that not everyone in an audience behaves in the same way. How can an audience be passive – think of all the times you have disagreed with something on television or just not laughed at a new so called comedy, or thought a programme was awful.

### Cultivation Theory

This theory also treats the audience as passive. It suggests that repeated exposure to the same message – such as an advertisement – will have an effect on the audience's attitudes and values. A similar idea is known as desensitisation which suggests that long term exposure to violent media makes the audience less likely to be shocked by violence. Being less shocked by violence the audience may then be more likely to behave violently.

The criticism of this theory is that screen violence is not the same as real violence. Many people have been exposed to screen murder and violence, but there is no evidence at all that this has lead audiences to be less shocked by real killings and violence. Also this theory treats the audience as passive which is an outdated concept.

### Two Step Flow Theory

Katz and Lazarsfeld assumes a slightly more active audience. It suggests messages from the media move in two distinct ways. First, individuals who are opinion leaders, receive messages from the media and pass on their own interpretations in addition to the actual media content. The information does not flow directly from the text into the minds of its audience, but is filtered through the opinion leaders who then pass it on to a more passive audience. The audience then mediate the information received directly from the media with the ideas and thoughts expressed by the opinion leaders, thus being influenced not by a direct process, but by a two step flow. This theory appeared to reduce the power of the media, and some researchers concluded that social factors were also important in the way in which audiences interpret texts. This led to the idea of active audiences.

## 2. Active Audiences

This newer model sees the audience not as couch potatoes, but as individuals who are active and interact with the communication process and use media texts for their own purposes. We behave differently because we are different people from different backgrounds

with many different attitudes, values, experiences and ideas. This is the active audience model, and is now generally considered to be a better and more realistic way to talk about audiences.

### Uses and Gratifications Model

This model stems from the idea that audiences are a complex mixture of individuals who select media texts that best suits their needs – this goes back to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. The users and gratifications model suggests that media audiences are active and make active decisions about what they consume in relation to their social and cultural setting and their needs. This was summed up by theorists Blumier and Katz in 1974; “Media usage can be explained in that it provides gratifications (meaning it satisfies needs) related to the satisfaction of social and psychological needs.”

Put simply, this means that audiences choose to watch programmes that make them feel good (gratifications) e.g. soaps and sitcoms, or that give them information that they can use (uses) e.g. news or information about new products or the world about them.

Blumier and Katz (1975) went into greater detail and identified four main uses:

- a. Surveillance – our need to know what is going on in the world. This relates to Maslow’s need for security. By keeping up to date with news about local and international events we feel we have the knowledge to avoid or deal with dangers.
- b. Personal relationships – our need for to interact with other people. This is provided by forming virtual relationships with characters in soaps, films and all kinds of drama, and other programmes and other media texts.
- c. Personal identity – our need to define our identity and sense of self. Part of our sense of self is informed by making judgments about all sorts of people and things. This is also true of judgments we make about TV and film characters, and celebrities. Our choice of music, the shows we watch, the stars we like can be an expression of our identities. One aspect of this type of gratification is known as value reinforcement. This is where we choose television programmes or newspapers that have similar beliefs to those we hold.
- d. Diversion – the need for escape, entertainment and relaxation. All types of television programmes can be ‘used’ to wind down and offer diversion, as well as satisfying some of the other needs at the same time.

### Reception Analysis

Reception analysis is an active audience theory that looks at how audiences interact with a media text taking into account their ‘situated culture’ – this is their daily life. The theory suggests that social and daily experiences can affect the way an audience reads a media text and reacts to it. This theory about how audiences read a text was put forward by Professor

Stuart Hall in “The television discourse – encoding/decoding” in 1974 with later research by David Morley in 1980 and Charlotte Brunsden. He suggests that an audience has a significant role in the process of reading a text, and this can be discussed in three different ways:

1 The dominant or preferred reading. The audience shares the code of the text and fully accepts and understands its preferred meaning as intended by the producers (This can be seen as a hegemonic reading).

2 The negotiated reading. The audience partly shares the code of the text and broadly accepts the preferred meaning, but will change the meaning in some way according to their own experiences, culture and values. These audience members might argue that some representations – ethnic minorities perhaps – appear to them to be inaccurate.

3 The oppositional reading. The audience understands the preferred meaning but does not share the text’s code and rejects this intended meaning and constructs an alternative meaning. This could be a radical reading by a Marxist or feminist who rejects the values and ideology of the preferred reading.

### **III. How to study media ?**

#### **1. KEYPOINTS**

1.1 One needs to look at media communication as a process that includes institutions, production systems, production conditions, texts, representations, meanings, audience, a CONTEXT to production, and reception.

1.2 Investigation of the media should be based on a careful description of these aspects, the use of analysis based on critical approaches and interpretation of their significance.

1.3 Repeated patterns in the content and treatment of media material are likely to be significant.

1.4 Items that are missing or not mentioned may be significant because of this.

1.5 There are primary and secondary sources of information to be researched,

1.6 Media material may be seen as texts to be analysed for meanings.

#### **2. METHODS OF STUDY**

2.1 Textual analysis involves looking for the meanings that are generated by media material.

2.2 Semiotic analysis is based on the premise that all texts are composed of signs that produce meanings on two levels: connotative and denotative.

2.3 Structural analysis assumes that texts have organizing principles or structures that help produce meanings.

2.4 Content analysis tries to quantify exactly the amount and nature of material.

2.5 Image analysis breaks into the meaning of visual material through careful description of where the camera is placed, of technical and other devices that contribute to the treatment of the Image, and through careful observation of elements of image content in relation to one another.

2.6 Using questionnaires to investigate audience knowledge and attitudes in particular.

2.7 Using in-depth interviews to investigate attitudes and knowledge in personal detail.

2.8 Using focus groups to investigate the opinions and attitudes of a cross-section of the audience at one time.

2.9 Ethnographic surveys involve discussions with the audience at the time and point of media consumption.

One does not really study the media just by, for example, reading magazines and talking generally about their style or about the sort of articles that are in them. Nor is it sufficient only to seek out facts such as newspaper circulation figures, or information about how television is run. Though these activities may be useful, they are not enough. What one has to do is to try different methods through which to examine various aspects of the media (not just the material that they put out).

Three major aspects of what we loosely call 'the media' are INSTITUTIONS, TEXTS and AUDIENCES. But there are different ways of understanding what we mean by these terms and why they matter in terms of the study of media. Although texts are the obvious aspect of the media we experience, they are not the only, or the most important, part of media study. Many commentators are interested in how the media affect our understanding of the world. This involves looking at more than just texts. It also involves taking different approaches to description and analysis, which helps make sense of how the media are part of our lifestyles, our beliefs and even our social relationships. They are your tools for taking things apart, seeing how things work, seeing where meanings about our world may come from. All this should become clearer as you read on.

## 1. KEY POINTS

### 1.1 Process

The aspects of the media one may look at are:

- ✓ the institutions (organizations) that own, run and finance the media
- ✓ the production systems that put together the material
- ✓ the conditions under which media material is put together
- ✓ the texts (or products, or materials) that are produced
- ✓ the representations (or versions of subject matter) that are in the texts
- ✓ the meanings that are in the representations, or in our minds, or circulating in society.
- ✓ the audiences that make sense of the product
- ✓ the context in which the material is received and understood.

All this should emphasize the point that studying the media is not just about the product, even though it is true that this is the easiest part of the process of communication for one to get at.

### 1.2 Investigation

In general, investigative approaches for all subjects involve kinds of:

- ✓ description of the features of your object of study.
- ✓ analysis of such features
- ✓ application of ideas and of analytical approaches
- ✓ interpretation of what one takes from analysis and description.

In media this could be, for example, about how a newspaper is produced, how the internet operates, how people watch television, how magazines represent people with disabilities. Some of the features described will seem to be significant in various ways. This significance affects the interpretation. The reasons for features seeming to be significant will have a lot to do with the frameworks for understanding that are in your head. Put another way, you could say that investigation focuses on the *how* and the *why*. That is, for example:

- ✓ *why* do things happen the way that they do?
- ✓ *why* do we have the kinds of production systems and product that we do?
- ✓ *how* do these systems work?
- ✓ *how* does the audience make sense of what it reads and sees?
- ✓ *why* does it make a particular kind of sense of this material?

These are basic questions that you can ask yourself as you carry out close examination of, for example, a magazine or of satellite broadcasting.

### **1.3 Repetition and Significance**

One simple fact that may help your investigations is that anything that is repeated may well be significant. In a sense, all study and research is looking for patterns of repetition. What this means is that if you are describing ownership of the media, and this seems to repeat some characteristics across most of the media, then those characteristics are significant in some way. To take another fairly obvious example, if you study magazines for women in a certain age band and find that certain topics are repeated again and again, then these topics must be more significant than those that are not repeated. How you interpret this significance is another matter. But in this case it is fairly obvious that such repetition means that the makers of the magazines think that these topics are important, that they think they will sell the magazine, that they think the readers will like them, that whatever is said in the articles will contribute to the knowledge and opinions of the readers.

### **1.4 Absence and Significance**

It is worth realizing that there are other reasons why the topic that you are investigating could throw up significant evidence. What is absent may be as significant as what is present. So, for example, the fact that there are no teenage boys' magazines like those for girls does seem significant. The fact that there is virtually no hard political news in the most popular newspapers does seem significant.

### **1.5 Source and Significance**

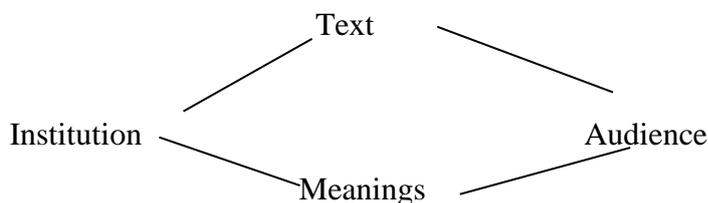
There may also be significance in the SOURCE of the information that you obtain. For example, if you read a book like *American Independent Cinema* (Hillier, 2000), then what you find out from reading the interviews with directors has the significance of being a primary or first-hand source. If you read the BBC Charter, that is primary; if you read what I tell you about it, then that is secondary. Someone's opinion about the director's work is secondary. Both kinds of source have their own usefulness. You also have to take into account just what you are trying to study. If you are trying to study a film critically, then the film itself is more primary than a description of it in some critical work. In general, it may be difficult to get to primary sources, but it is really useful if you can. What counts as primary rather depends on what you are trying to investigate.

## 1.6 Texts and Meanings

Studying the media involves looking for MESSAGES and MEANINGS in the material. There is a kind of assumption (which you need to test) that these meanings are there and can influence you. Meanings come through all forms of communication, not only words. In fact, it is arguable that they come more powerfully through pictures because these are more like real life (iconic) than words are (symbolic). That is to say, looking at a picture of a person is quite like looking at the real person, whereas looking at a set of words describing that person is not the same thing at all. It is this illusion of 'being like' that is important, and that makes IMAGE ANALYSIS important. If you are able to break into the image in a methodical way, then you are breaking into an illusion. And, let's face it, a great deal of media material is pictorial nowadays: comics, television, film. Even newspapers are very visual if you think about the graphic qualities of layout and the number of photographs that fill the popular tabloids. You can check this emphasis on pictures by using the CONTENT ANALYSIS method of study.

Meanings are embedded in texts by the producers who work for the institution, intentionally or otherwise. Texts yield meanings when audiences engage with them. Audiences construct meanings in their heads through interaction with the text.

*Essential concepts in media studies*



## Media Study

Should media study concentrate on textual material?

Or, should it deal with factors that influence the making and reading of texts?

## 2. METHODS OF STUDY

Now we can look at some specific methods that range across the media. These methods are not, of course, mutually exclusive. They can complement one another. It is also possible to adapt methods to suit particular needs. An example of this is David Buckingham's investigation (1987) of EastEnders and its audience. In this case he interviewed the producers, he interviewed groups of young people as audience, he described and interpreted the marketing of the programme, he conducted textual analysis of certain episodes.

## 2.1 Textual Analysis

This is something of a catch-all term for analysis of any media material. Really, it stands for a range of specific analytical approaches such as semiotic analysis, image analysis, content analysis, narrative analysis and genre analysis. All these are based on specific theories and concepts, and take a particular approach to the text in question. They try to describe and make sense of certain features of a text. Indeed, they make claims that these features (such as signs or CONVENTIONS) actually do exist. All of them lead to ideas about meanings in the text, ideas about how audiences make meanings out of reading texts, suggest something about how and why texts are produced. So textual analysis refers in general to the taking apart of a text. It tends to look for structures and patterns of one kind or another in the text. It treats all media material, visual or otherwise, as a kind of 'book', with meanings to be read into it. It may be argued that we can only make sense of a text because it operates within a system of meanings that we share in our CULTURE. SEMIOTICS, with its foundation of signs and codes, is an example of such a system.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS, STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS, semiotic analysis all involve understanding of similar concepts, and are all ways of getting to the same thing: how the text is put together, how we read meanings into it. Semiotics concentrates on the building blocks of the text to get to meanings- the words or the elements within a picture - what it calls signs. Structuralism looks for organizing principles and at whole sections of text – for example, chunks of narrative, or the *mise en scene* (composition) of a film shot.

What you should remember is that media study is not just about texts. We tend to do a lot with texts because we can get at them. But there are dangers in, for example, assuming too much about institution or audience from reading a text. Similarly, be careful about assuming that meaning is all in the text. Texts aren't like a truck, onto which we pile some goods called meanings. Maybe texts work on your mind, but you also work on a text to make sense of it.

## 2.2 Semiotic Analysis (of Text)

This approach assumes that all texts are made up from sets of signs, and that these signs have meanings attached to them. (You should also look at the section on semiotics in Chapter 3.) The point is that the meanings of signs (or combinations of signs) is not fixed. So semiotic analysis is not like using a theorem or a formula to work out a problem of meaning. It is also the case that some meanings are more literal, and some are more ambivalent and cultural. The word 'cat', therefore, may mean the creature we call a cat; it may also mean ideas about 'cat-ness' - perhaps about the independent nature of the cat or about the furry warmth of a cat. The first meaning is labelled denotative, the second one is connotative. As Taylor and Willis

(1999) say, “a knowledge about the VALUES and beliefs of a particular culture is necessary if connotative readings of signs are to be successfully arrived at.” Indeed, one could also say that such readings (meanings) are ideological - they are about the particular view of the world held by that culture.

The way the word SIGN is used is quite complicated. But the essence of it for your analysis is to recognize words as signs, pictures as signs, and parts of pictures as signs (the colour of the cat or the background to the cat). The process of suggesting meaning through signs is a process of signification. Semiotic analysis may be used on word texts. It might recognize the repetition of certain kinds of word in a story that produce a certain kind of impression or feeling in the reader. But it also works on visual texts and those many texts, like magazine adverts, that combine words and images. It has also tended to be used for the decoding of certain kinds of meaning - those that are ideological in nature, that are about the major beliefs and values that dominate the way we think about relationships, about social institutions, about the way we believe society should operate. In the case of images, you should tie this in with my approach to image analysis below.

A semiotician would look at the following aspects.

- Denotation - picture elements that you describe factually and objectively. Meanings about things that are referred to from a material world, e.g. this is an image of a male kicking a round leather ball; the ball is in the foreground of the image.
- Connotation - meanings from those elements. Meanings from a world of ideas, e.g. this image creates a meaning of aggression because the ball and the foot seem to be kicking into the face of the viewer of the picture.
- Anchorage - picture elements that really pin down meaning, e.g. this is an image of X taking a penalty kick (and we know this because it says so in the caption to the photo). Further connotations from this image might be about the game of football in general and about its place in our culture. So this method of study involves looking carefully at what makes up a written or visual text, and looking for what might be suggested as much as for what is actually described.

### **2.3. Structural Analysis (of Text)**

This method involves looking at how the text is organized and at what this may tell us. The patterns of organization may be within one image or in a sequence of pictures, within a short piece of writing or within a whole story. In terms of words, of written language, one key structure that we get to by analysing a text is essentially that of grammar. This means that we are also talking about conventions or rules, which are organizing principles (see also

semiotics and codes). Other organizing principles within language are the rules of spelling and the rules of word order, or syntax. But all 'languages', all media, can be analysed for their structures. The proposition is that all texts have an underlying system of elements and rules that helps produce the meaning of a text. Genres would be a particularly recognizable example of this. This principle of structure has caused critics to look for basic elements in a text - types of character or patterns of storyline - and then look for principles by which these are put together. Strictly, this is as much about looking for how the meaning is put in the text, as it is about clarifying what that meaning is.

This approach also has problems, it has to be said. For example, it seems attractive to suppose that many stories use the element of the Villain' character, from the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* to those various Asian, East European and Russian villains in Bond stories. The trouble is that the meaning of villain is not necessarily 'written into' the structure of the text. It is also constructed in the head of the reader/viewer. With a given story, different cultures might read different characters as villains. So they would not see the text as being structured in quite the same way. At this point it is sufficient to take on two main kinds of structure: the structure of opposites in a story; the structure of narrative, which affects things like building to the climax of a story.

BINARY OPPOSITIONS are opposing concepts that one reads into the text, usually through contrasting sets of words or of pictures. The most basic oppositions are to do with good and evil, or with male and female. One can then find words or picture elements lined up on one side or the other, to underline the opposition, and of course to suggest approval or disapproval of one element or the other. Males are tough, hard, reasonable; females are pliant, soft, emotional. Villains are filmed in shadows, in dark clothes, with unshaven faces; heroes are clean-cut, in pale clothes, in light. Although I suggest elsewhere that there are more than two sides to every story (especially a news story), it does seem deeply ingrained in our culture that we should think in these opposing ways. Many texts do have this structure built into them. Many stories are based on conflict, and the easiest conflict to set up is that between two people or two views. There may be more than one set of oppositions in a story. To describe this structure is to describe how the text is put together. One has found a pattern. But, to make sense of the text, one has to explain what the opposition means. Usually that meaning is about the positive and the negative: one of the opposing elements being valued in terms of 'right' or 'good' or 'attractive', the other as 'wrong', 'bad', 'unattractive'. In fact, one is into what is valued and what is not, into aspects of ideology.

Narrative structures are the arrangement of the building blocks of plot and drama in a story. Describing and interpreting the structure of the narrative is another kind of structural analysis. For example, what is called mainstream narrative or the classic realist text has a developmental structure. This is your average story in most media, where the plot develops from some initial problem or conflict, through various difficulties to some neat ending where everything is sorted out. Analysis of such narrative structures not only leads to understanding of how we come to see that text meaning what it does, but is also likely to help explain how we, as readers or viewers, are positioned in relation to the text. For example, autobiography depends on us being privileged to see into the mind of the story-teller and to see things through their mind.

Looking for a structure in the narrative of a text leads to more than just a description of how the 'machinery' works. It helps explain how we understand a text. It helps us understand that what we think a text means is, first, more complicated than it appears on the surface and, second, is not a matter of chance.

#### **2.4. Content Analysis (of Text)**

In this approach you simply break down (under headings) the content of, for example, a particular programme or paper, and measure it. You may express this breakdown in terms of a percentage of the total number of pages. For instance, in a given magazine it may be that 3 per cent of it is occupied by advertisements. Such an approach can also be used to objectify what is in fact treatment, not content. For example, you could add up the number of shots in a drama programme that show the heroine in close-up as compared with other female characters. You will find many more shots for the heroine. This proves that one of the reasons why we know (subconsciously) that she is meant to be a heroine is because she is given so much screen time. The great thing about such analysis is that it stops people making generalizations such as 'there's too much violence in that thriller series'. If (and it is a big if) you measure violence in terms of the number of violent acts, as researchers have done, then you can do the counting for yourself. Find out just how many violent acts the supposedly violent programme actually contains. You could even stop-watch how long they last relative to the total programme length. It may well be that the generalization is completely wrong. So this analysis can be used to prove or disprove snap judgements on material. Of course, it may also throw up points that you had not thought about until you saw the figures.

## 2.5. Image Analysis (of Text)

There are different approaches to such analysis. But in general they will seek to break down the elements of a given image (whether film shot or magazine photograph), and to find out how the meaning in the image is constructed into it. In fact, there is often more meaning in the image than there seemed to be at first. I have found the following approach to be useful as a method for teasing out meanings from images.

I would argue that there are three main elements to any image.

- The Camera/Spectator Position

Where the camera was when the picture was shot. This automatically puts us, the viewer, in a particular position relative to the objects in the image. This position may be significant because, for example, we come to realize that the camera lens centre is pointing at the bottle of perfume in the advertisement and not just at the scene in general.

- The Image Treatment

Devices used to put the image together. These also affect one's view of what the image means, at all levels. For instance, a modern photograph may be sepia-toned in order to make it seem old-fashioned (and so to give it a quality of nostalgia). The use of focus, of lighting, of composition, of framing, are all devices that can affect our understanding of what is actually in the picture. It is rather like talking about how one says something, as opposed to what one says.

You may find that, elsewhere, these devices are referred to as 'technical codes'. If you are dealing with film or television then you also have to take account of devices or codes of sound, which will affect the meanings you read into the pictures. This sound is made up of three main types: music, effects noises (FX), and dialogue or voice (including voice-over or narrator). This is discussed further under narrative.

- Image Content

The objects that are represented within it. And content analysis can throw up some interesting points here too, and prove that we do not usually look at images with any great care. For instance, a scene from a film may show two people fighting in a room. It is apparently just a picture of two people fighting, but the paper knife behind them on a sideboard gives new meaning to the image. It suggests that something dire may be about to happen. It suggests that the fight may turn out to be more than just a brawl. So what is in the image, where it is placed, what symbolic meanings it may have, all matter.

Other approaches to image analysis include the semiotic method described in 2.2 above. There is also that approach described in terms of *mise en scene*, developed through Film

Studies, but applicable to any visual medium. In this case the image as text is looked at in terms of the composition of elements within the frame, across it and in terms of depth. The relationship of people within the frame may, for instance, tell us about their emotional relationship – a couple may be separated on either side of a the picture. Or the background in the picture may tell us something about fear and threat, as this relates to a character in the foreground. There may be symbolic elements in the picture. The juxtaposition of picture elements may be important for bringing out meaning for the viewer.

## **2.6. Use of Questionnaires (for Audience)**

Another way of studying the media is to construct and administer some questionnaires of your own. The media and their market research arms are asking us questions every day about ourselves, and our reading and viewing preferences. You can do the same thing. As a rule of thumb, it's a good thing to start by telling the respondent what the questionnaire is about; then ask some simple questions about the respondent and their background; then go on to ask questions with Yes/No answers (which are easy to process); then to graded questions, ending with open questions for which any answer goes. This is a useful structure to follow.

The validity of your questionnaire depends on numbers questioned as well as how tightly you have defined your audience. For example, it is useful either to ask questions of a particular age group, or of an audience (respondents) covering a range of ages and occupations, and both genders.

This method of media study is obviously useful for finding out about things like reading habits, or opinions of programmes. If you could also persuade your local newsagent to answer a few questions about what magazines sell best in your area, or even talk to someone in the local media about programming policy, then you would have some useful information that could also be compared with what you found out from your questionnaires to the public. Whether you fill out the questionnaire form as you conduct an interview, or whether your interviewees do this themselves, you are in fact conducting a survey.

## **2.7. In-depth Interviews (for Institutions or Audience)**

This approach is one often used by the media themselves and by market researchers. In essence it involves a lengthy one-to-one interview with prepared questions. Such an interview could be used to elicit information, perhaps from someone who is particularly expert in their field. It is also likely to be used to find out people's opinions, perhaps about an advertisement for a certain brand of perfume. It is important to select your interviewee carefully to be representative of your audience, or because they are especially well informed. Then a long interview is like taking a core sample.

## **2.8. Focus Groups (for Audience/Marketing)**

These are a development of the above, where one talks to a selected group about a given topic in order to gain information and opinion. Again, market researchers will, for example, show the group samples of publicity material or perhaps the pilot for a programme and ask standard questions. Certainly you could, for example, select a group of women within a certain age band and show them some television soap opera material in order to find out how they make sense of the material. This is a primary source of material, where reading someone else's research into women watching soaps would be using a secondary source.

This research methodology has been very popular for some years in the field of market research. However, it is now being realized that, like all methodologies, it has some drawbacks. The most obvious of these is that what people say in the special situation of a selected focus group may not be what they really say and do in their everyday lives.

## **2.9. Audience Analysis/Ethnographic Surveys**

This approach is less about measuring and counting than it is about describing experience. In this case you would, for example, watch some television with your chosen group for survey. You could ask prepared and standard questions, but you would also use an open-question, conversational approach to get people to talk about how they watched, as much as what they watched. You could also observe what actually went on in terms of how viewing happened and whether people talked much when the programme was on, for example. Necessarily this is about small samples, but it does get to the heart of an audience really behaving as an audience.

### **Study Methods**

Is it valid to use only one method to study some aspects of the media?

Or does one have to use a variety of methods in order to come up with any meaningful conclusions?

#### **IV. Media Literacy concepts**

Media literacy is a set of skills that anyone can learn. Just as literacy is the ability to read and write, media literacy refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media messages of all kinds.

These are essential skills in today's world. Today, many people get most of their information through complex combinations of text, images and sounds. We need to be able to navigate this complex media environment, to make sense of the media messages that bombard us every day, and to express ourselves using a variety of media tools and technologies.

Media literate youth and adults are better able to decipher the complex messages we receive from television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, billboards, signs, packaging, marketing materials, video games, recorded music, the Internet and other forms of media. They can understand how these media messages are constructed, and discover how they create meaning – usually in ways hidden beneath the surface. People who are media literate can also create their own media, becoming active participants in our media culture.

Media literacy skills can help children, youth and adults:

- Understand how media messages create meaning
- Identify who created a particular media message
- Recognize what the media maker wants us to believe or do
- Name the "tools of persuasion" used
- Recognize bias, spin, misinformation and lies
- Discover the part of the story that's not being told
- Evaluate media messages based on our own experiences, beliefs and values
- Create and distribute our own media messages
- Become advocates for change in our media system

Media literacy education helps to develop critical thinking and active participation in our media culture. The goal is to give youth and adults greater freedom by empowering them to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media.

In schools: Educational standards in many states -- in language arts, social studies, health and other subjects -- include the skills of accessing, analyzing and evaluating information found in media. These are media literacy skills, though the standards may not use that term. Teachers know that students like to examine and talk about their own media, and they've found that media literacy is an engaging way to explore a wide array of topics and issues.

In the community: Researchers and practitioners recognize that media literacy education is an important tool in addressing alcohol, tobacco and other drug use; obesity and eating disorders; bullying and violence; gender identity and sexuality; racism and other forms of discrimination and oppression; and life skills. Media literacy skills can empower people and communities usually shut out of the media system to tell their own stories, share their perspectives, and work for justice.

In public life: Media literacy helps us understand how media create cultures, and how the "media monopoly" - the handful of giant corporations that control most of our media - affects our politics and our society. Media literacy encourages and empowers youth and adults to change our media system, and to create new, more just and more accessible media networks.

The study and practice of media literacy is based on a number of fundamental concepts about media messages, our media system, and the role of media literacy in bringing about change. Understanding these concepts is an essential first step in media literacy education.

We've organized Media Literacy Concepts into three levels: Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. Basic concepts focus on how media affect us. Intermediate concepts examine more closely how we create meaning from media messages. Advanced concepts examine the interaction of media and society, and the role of media literacy in bringing about change.

### Basic concepts

1. 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, music, video games, and the Internet.

2. Media messages affect our thoughts, attitudes 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.

3. 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."

4. Media construct fantasy worlds. While fantasy can be pleasurable and entertaining, it can also be harmful. Movies, TV shows, and music videos 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.

5. 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.

6. Media messages contain “texts” and “subtexts.” The text is the actual words, pictures and/or sounds in a media message. The subtext is the hidden and underlying meaning of the message.

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. 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.

#### Intermediate concepts

11. The human brain processes images differently than words. Images are processed in the “reptilian” part of the brain, where strong emotions and instincts are also located. Written and spoken language is processed in another part of the brain, the neocortex, where reason lies. This is why TV commercials are often more powerful than print ads.

12. We process time-based media differently than static media. The information and images in TV shows, movies, video games, and music often bypass the analytic brain and trigger emotions and memory in the unconscious and reactive parts of the brain. Only a small proportion surfaces into consciousness. When we read a newspaper, magazine, book or website, we have the opportunity to stop and think, re-read something, and integrate the information rationally.

13. Media are most powerful when they operate on an emotional level. Most fiction engages 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.

14. 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.

15. Media effects are subtle. Few people believe everything they see and hear in the media. Few people rush 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.

16. 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.

17. Media convey ideological and value messages. Ideology and values are usually conveyed in the subtext. Two examples include news reports (besides covering an issue or event, news reports often reinforce assumptions about power and authority) and advertisements (besides selling particular products, advertisements almost always promote the values of a consumer society).

18. 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 snap a photo, 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.

### Advanced concepts

19. Our media system reflects the power dynamics in our society. People and institutions with money, privilege, influence, and power can more easily create media messages and distribute them to large numbers of people. People without this access are often shut out of the media system.

20. 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, services, and ideas?

21. Media monopolies reduce opportunities to participate in decision making. When a few huge media corporations control access to information, they have the power to make some information widely available and privilege those perspectives that serve their interests, while marginalizing or even censoring other information and perspectives. This affects our ability to make good decisions about our own lives, and reduces opportunities to participate in making decisions about our government and society.

22. Changing the media system is a justice issue. Our media system produces lots of negative, demeaning imagery, values and ideas. It renders many people invisible. It provides too little funding and too few outlets for people without money, privilege, influence, and power to tell their stories.

23. We can change 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 21st century. All over the world, people are taking action to reform our media system and create new alternatives.

24. 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.

## V. Text & Subtext

### Text

We often use the word “text” to mean “written words.” But in media literacy, “text” has a very different meaning. The text of any piece of media is what you actually see and/or hear. It can include written or spoken words, pictures, graphics, moving images, sounds, and the arrangement or sequence of these elements. Sometimes the text is called the “story” or “manifest text.” For most of us, the text of a piece of media is always the same.

### Subtext

The “subtext” is your interpretation of a piece of media. It is sometimes called the “latent text.” The subtext is not actually heard or seen; it is the meaning we create from the text in our own minds. While media makers (especially advertisers) often create texts that suggest certain subtexts, each person creates their own subtext (interpretation) based on their previous experiences, knowledge, opinions, attitudes and values. Thus, the subtext of a piece of media will vary depending on the individual seeing/hearing it.

Example :

Magazine ad: “got milk?”

*The text of this media message includes:*



- An image of musician Sheryl Crow holding a guitar case and a glass of milk in a room with a lamp, bed, open door, etc. behind her.

- The logo “got milk?” and the words “Rock hard.”

- The short paragraph: “To keep the crowd on their feet, I keep my body in tune. With milk. Studies suggest that the nutrients in milk can play an important role in weight loss. So if you’re trying to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight, try drinking 24 ounces of low-fat or fat free milk every 24 hours as part of your reduced-calorie diet. To learn more, visit [24 24milk.com](http://24milk.com). It’s a change that’ll do you good.”

- Another logo that reads “milk. your diet. Lose weight! 24 oz. 24hours”

- A small image of Sheryl Crow’s album Wildflower.

*Possible subtexts include:*

- Sheryl Crow drinks milk.
- Sheryl Crow can only perform well by drinking milk.
- Sheryl Crow wants to sell her album.
- Milk renders great concerts.
- If you drink milk you will lose weight.
- Beautiful people drink milk.
- If you drink milk, you'll be beautiful and famous, too.
- Sheryl Crow stays at cheap motels.
- Rock stars like ripped jeans

## **VI. The Language of Persuasion**

The goal of most media messages is to persuade the audience to believe or do something. Hollywood movies use expensive special effects to make us believe that what we're seeing is real. News stories use several techniques – such as direct quotation of identified sources – to make us believe that the story is accurate.

The media messages most concerned with persuading us are found in advertising, public relations and advocacy. Commercial advertising tries to persuade us to buy a product or service. Public relations (PR) "sells" us a positive image of a corporation, government or organization. Politicians and advocacy groups (groups that support a particular belief, point of view, policy, or action) try to persuade us to vote for or support them, using ads, speeches, newsletters, websites, and other means.

These "persuaders" use a variety of techniques to grab our attention, to establish credibility and trust, to stimulate desire for the product or policy, and to motivate us to act (buy, vote, give money, etc.) We call these techniques the "language of persuasion." They're not new; Aristotle wrote about persuasion techniques more than 2000 years ago, and they've been used by speakers, writers, and media makers for even longer than that. Learning the language of persuasion is an important media literacy skill. Once you know how media messages try to persuade you to believe or do something, you'll be better able to make your own decisions.

Advertising is the easiest starting point: most ads are relatively simple in structure, easily available, and in their original format. Media literacy beginners are encouraged to learn the language of persuasion by examining ads. Keep in mind that many media messages, such

as television commercials, use several techniques simultaneously. Others selectively employ one or two.

Political rhetoric – whether used by politicians, government officials, lobbyists, or activists - is more difficult to analyze, not only because it involves more emotional issues, but also because it is more likely to be seen in bits and fragments, often filtered or edited by others. Identifying the persuasion techniques in public discourse is important because the consequences of that discourse are so significant – war and peace, justice and injustice, freedom and oppression, and the future of our planet. Learning the language of persuasion can help us sort out complex emotional arguments, define the key issues, and make up our own minds about the problems facing us.

NOTE: We've divided our list of persuasion techniques into three levels: Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. Basic techniques are easily identified in many media examples, and they are a good starting point for all learners. Identifying many intermediate techniques may require more critical distance, and they should usually be investigated after learners have mastered the basics. More abstraction and judgment may be required to identify the advanced techniques, and some learners may find them difficult to understand. However, even media literacy beginners may be able to spot some of the intermediate or advanced techniques, so feel free to examine any of the persuasion techniques with your group.

### Basic persuasion techniques

1. Association. This persuasion technique tries to link a product, service, or idea with something already liked or desired by the target audience, such as fun, pleasure, beauty, security, intimacy, success, wealth, etc. The media message doesn't make explicit claims that you'll get these things; the association is implied. Association can be a very powerful technique. A good ad can create a strong emotional response and then associate that feeling with a brand (family = Coke, victory = Nike). This process is known as emotional transfer. Several of the persuasion techniques below, like Beautiful people, Warm & fuzzy, Symbols and Nostalgia, are specific types of association.
2. Bandwagon. Many ads show lots of people using the product, implying that "everyone is doing it" (or at least, "all the cool people are doing it"). No one likes to be left out or left behind, and these ads urge us to "jump on the bandwagon." Politicians use the same technique when they say, "The American people want..." How do they know?
3. Beautiful people. Beautiful people uses good-looking models (who may also be celebrities) to attract our attention. This technique is extremely common in ads, which may also imply (but never promise!) that we'll look like the models if we use the product.

4. Bribery. This technique tries to persuade us to buy a product by promising to give us something else, like a discount, a rebate, a coupon, or a "free gift." Sales, special offers, contests, and sweepstakes are all forms of bribery. Unfortunately, we don't really get something for free -- part of the sales price covers the cost of the bribe.

5. Celebrities. (A type of Testimonial – the opposite of Plain folks.) We tend to pay attention to famous people. That's why they're famous! Ads often use celebrities to grab our attention. By appearing in an ad, celebrities implicitly endorse a product; sometimes the endorsement is explicit. Many people know that companies pay celebrities a lot of money to appear in their ads (Nike's huge contracts with leading athletes, for example, are well known) but this type of testimonial still seems to be effective.

6. Experts. (A type of Testimonial.) We rely on experts to advise us about things that we don't know ourselves. Scientists, doctors, professors and other professionals often appear in ads and advocacy messages, lending their credibility to the product, service, or idea being sold. Sometimes, "plain folks" can also be experts, as when a mother endorses a brand of baby powder or a construction worker endorses a treatment for sore muscles.

7. Explicit claims. Something is "explicit" if it is directly, fully, and/or clearly expressed or demonstrated. For example, some ads state the price of a product, the main ingredients, where it was made, or the number of items in the package – these are explicit claims. So are specific, measurable promises about quality, effectiveness, or reliability, like "Works in only five minutes!" Explicit claims can be proven true or false through close examination or testing, and if they're false, the advertiser can get in trouble. It can be surprising to learn how few ads make explicit claims. Most of them try to persuade us in ways that cannot be proved or disproved.

8. Fear. This is the opposite of the Association technique. It uses something disliked or feared by the intended audience (like bad breath, failure, high taxes or terrorism) to promote a "solution." Ads use fear to sell us products that claim to prevent or fix the problem. Politicians and advocacy groups stoke our fears to get elected or to gain support.

9. Humor. Many ads use humor because it grabs our attention and it's a powerful persuasion technique. When we laugh, we feel good. Advertisers make us laugh and then show us their product logo because they're trying to connect that good feeling to their product. They hope that when we see their product in a store, we'll subtly re-experience that good feeling and select their product. Advocacy messages (and news) rarely use humor because it can undermine their credibility; an exception is political satire.

10. Intensity. The language of ads is full of intensifiers, including superlatives (greatest, best, most, fastest, lowest prices), comparatives (more, better than, improved, increased, fewer calories), hyperbole (amazing, incredible, forever), exaggeration, and many other ways to hype the product.

11. Maybe. Unproven, exaggerated or outrageous claims are commonly preceded by “weasel words” such as may, might, can, could, some, many, often, virtually, as many as, or up to. Watch for these words if an offer seems too good to be true. Commonly, the Intensity and Maybe techniques are used together, making the whole thing meaningless.

12. Plain folks. (A type of Testimonial – the opposite of Celebrities.) This technique works because we may believe a “regular person” more than an intellectual or a highly-paid celebrity. It’s often used to sell everyday products like laundry detergent because we can more easily see ourselves using the product, too. The Plain folks technique strengthens the down-home, “authentic” image of products like pickup trucks and politicians. Unfortunately, most of the “plain folks” in ads are actually paid actors carefully selected because they look like “regular people.”

13. Repetition. Advertisers use repetition in two ways: Within an ad or advocacy message, words, sounds or images may be repeated to reinforce the main point. And the message itself (a TV commercial, a billboard, a website banner ad) may be displayed many times. Even unpleasant ads and political slogans work if they are repeated enough to pound their message into our minds.

14. Testimonials. Media messages often show people testifying about the value or quality of a product, or endorsing an idea. They can be experts, celebrities, or plain folks. We tend to believe them because they appear to be a neutral third party (a pop star, for example, not the lipstick maker, or a community member instead of the politician running for office.) This technique works best when it seems like the person “testifying” is doing so because they genuinely like the product or agree with the idea. Some testimonials may be less effective when we recognize that the person is getting paid to endorse the product.

15. Warm & fuzzy. This technique uses sentimental images (especially of families, kids and animals) to stimulate feelings of pleasure, comfort, and delight. It may also include the use of soothing music, pleasant voices, and evocative words like “cozy” or “cuddly.” The Warm & fuzzy technique is another form of Association. It works well with some audiences, but not with others, who may find it too corny.

### Intermediate persuasion techniques

16. The Big Lie. According to Adolf Hitler, one of the 20th century's most dangerous propagandists, people are more suspicious of a small lie than a big one. The Big Lie is more than exaggeration or hype; it's telling a complete falsehood with such confidence and charisma that people believe it. Recognizing The Big Lie requires "thinking outside the box" of conventional wisdom and asking the questions other people don't ask.

17. Charisma. Sometimes, persuaders can be effective simply by appearing firm, bold, strong, and confident. This is particularly true in political and advocacy messages. People often follow charismatic leaders even when they disagree with their positions on issues that affect them.

18. Euphemism. While the Glittering generalities and Name-calling techniques arouse audiences with vivid, emotionally suggestive words, Euphemism tries to pacify audiences in order to make an unpleasant reality more palatable. Bland or abstract terms are used instead of clearer, more graphic words. Thus, we hear about corporate "downsizing" instead of "layoffs," or "enhanced interrogation techniques" instead of "torture."

19. Extrapolation. Persuaders sometimes draw huge conclusions on the basis of a few small facts. Extrapolation works by ignoring complexity. It's most persuasive when it predicts something we hope can or will be true.

20. Flattery. Persuaders love to flatter us. Politicians and advertisers sometimes speak directly to us: "You know a good deal when you see one." "You expect quality." "You work hard for a living." "You deserve it." Sometimes ads flatter us by showing people doing stupid things, so that we'll feel smarter or superior. Flattery works because we like to be praised and we tend to believe people we like. (We're sure that someone as brilliant as you will easily understand this technique!)

21. Glittering generalities. This is the use of so-called "virtue words" such as civilization, democracy, freedom, patriotism, motherhood, fatherhood, science, health, beauty, and love. Persuaders use these words in the hope that we will approve and accept their statements without examining the evidence. They hope that few people will ask whether it's appropriate to invoke these concepts, while even fewer will ask what these concepts really mean.

22. Name-calling. This technique links a person or idea to a negative symbol (liar, creep, gossip, etc.). It's the opposite of Glittering generalities. Persuaders use Name-calling to make us reject the person or the idea on the basis of the negative symbol, instead of looking at the available evidence. A subtler version of this technique is to use adjectives with negative

connotations (extreme, passive, lazy, pushy, etc.) Ask yourself: Leaving out the name-calling, what are the merits of the idea itself?

23. New. We love new things and new ideas, because we tend to believe they're better than old things and old ideas. That's because the dominant culture in the United States (and many other countries) places great faith in technology and progress. But sometimes, new products and new ideas lead to new and more difficult problems.

24. Nostalgia. This is the opposite of the New technique. Many advertisers invoke a time when life was simpler and quality was supposedly better ("like Mom used to make"). Politicians promise to bring back the "good old days" and restore "tradition." But whose traditions are being restored? Who did they benefit, and who did they harm? This technique works because people tend to forget the bad parts of the past, and remember the good.

25. Rhetorical questions. These are questions designed to get us to agree with the speaker. They are set up so that the "correct" answer is obvious. ("Do you want to get out of debt?" "Do you want quick relief from headache pain?" and "Should we leave our nation vulnerable to terrorist attacks?") Rhetorical questions are used to build trust and alignment before the sales pitch.

26. Scientific evidence. This is a particular application of the Expert technique. It uses the paraphernalia of science (charts, graphs, statistics, lab coats, etc.) to "prove" something. It often works because many people trust science and scientists. It's important to look closely at the "evidence," however, because it can be misleading.

27. Simple solution. Life is complicated. People are complex. Problems often have many causes, and they're not easy to solve. These realities create anxiety for many of us. Persuaders offer relief by ignoring complexity and proposing a Simple solution. Politicians claim one policy change (lower taxes, a new law, a government program) will solve big social problems. Advertisers take this strategy even further, suggesting that a deodorant, a car, or a brand of beer will make you beautiful, popular and successful.

28. Slippery slope. This technique combines Extrapolation and Fear. Instead of predicting a positive future, it warns against a negative outcome. It argues against an idea by claiming it's just the first step down a "slippery slope" toward something the target audience opposes. ("If we let them ban smoking in restaurants because it's unhealthy, eventually they'll ban fast food, too." This argument ignores the merits of banning smoking in restaurants.) The Slippery slope technique is commonly used in political debate, because it's easy to claim that a small step will lead to a result most people won't like, even though small steps can lead in many directions.

29. Symbols. Symbols are words or images that bring to mind some larger concept, usually one with strong emotional content, such as home, family, nation, religion, gender, or lifestyle. Persuaders use the power and intensity of symbols to make their case. But symbols can have different meanings for different people. Hummer SUVs are status symbols for some people, while to others they are symbols of environmental irresponsibility.

#### Advanced persuasion techniques

30. Ad hominem. Latin for "against the man," the ad hominem technique responds to an argument by attacking the opponent instead of addressing the argument itself. It's also called "attacking the messenger." It works on the belief that if there's something wrong or objectionable about the messenger, the message must also be wrong.

31. Analogy. An analogy compares one situation with another. A good analogy, where the situations are reasonably similar, can aid decision-making. A weak analogy may not be persuasive, unless it uses emotionally-charged images that obscure the illogical or unfair comparison.

32. Card stacking. No one can tell the whole story; we all tell part of the story. Card stacking, however, deliberately provides a false context to give a misleading impression. It "stacks the deck," selecting only favorable evidence to lead the audience to the desired conclusion.

33. Cause vs. Correlation. While understanding true causes and true effects is important, persuaders can fool us by intentionally confusing correlation with cause. For example: Babies drink milk. Babies cry. Therefore, drinking milk makes babies cry.

34. Denial. This technique is used to escape responsibility for something that is unpopular or controversial. It can be either direct or indirect. A politician who says, "I won't bring up my opponent's marital problems," has just brought up the issue without sounding mean.

35. Diversion. This technique diverts our attention from a problem or issue by raising a separate issue, usually one where the persuader has a better chance of convincing us. Diversion is often used to hide the part of the story not being told. It is also known as a "red herring."

36. Group dynamics. We are greatly influenced by what other people think and do. We can get carried away by the potent atmosphere of live audiences, rallies, or other gatherings. Group dynamics is a more intense version of the Majority belief and Bandwagon techniques.

37. Majority belief. This technique is similar to the Bandwagon technique. It works on the assumption that if most people believe something, it must be true. That's why polls and

survey results are so often used to back up an argument, even though pollsters will admit that responses vary widely depending on how one asks the question.

38. Scapegoating. Extremely powerful and very common in political speech, Scapegoating blames a problem on one person, group, race, religion, etc. Some people, for example, claim that undocumented (“illegal”) immigrants are the main cause of unemployment in the United States, even though unemployment is a complex problem with many causes. Scapegoating is a particularly dangerous form of the Simple solution technique.

39. Straw man. This technique builds up an illogical or deliberately damaged idea and presents it as something that one’s opponent supports or represents. Knocking down the “straw man” is easier than confronting the opponent directly.

40. Timing. Sometimes a media message is persuasive not because of what it says, but because of when it’s delivered. This can be as simple as placing ads for flowers and candy just before Valentine’s Day, or delivering a political speech right after a major news event. Sophisticated ad campaigns commonly roll out carefully-timed phases to grab our attention, stimulate desire, and generate a response.

## **VII. Deconstruct Media Messages**

Deconstructing a media message can help us understand who created the message, and who is intended to receive it. It can reveal how the media maker put together the message using words, images, sounds, design and other elements. It can expose the point of view of the media maker, their values, and their biases. It can also uncover hidden meanings – intended or unintended.

### **How to Deconstruct a Media Message ?**

All media messages – TV shows, newspapers, movies, advertisements, etc. – are made or constructed by people. One of the most important media literacy skills is deconstruction – closely examining and “taking apart” media messages to understand how they work. Deconstructing a media message can help us understand who created the message, and who is intended to receive it. It can reveal how the media maker put together the message using words, images, sounds, design, and other elements. It can expose the point of view of media makers, their values, and their biases. It can also uncover hidden meanings – intended or unintended. There is no one “correct” way to deconstruct a media message – each of us

interprets media differently, based on our own knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and values. Just be prepared to explain your interpretation.

### Key Concepts for Deconstructing Media :

#### SOURCE :

All media messages are created. The creator could be an individual writer, photographer or blogger. In the case of a Hollywood movie, the scriptwriter, director, producer, and movie studio all play a role in creating the message. Ads are usually put together by ad agencies, but the “creator” is really the client – the company or organization that’s paying for the ad. The key point is: Whose message is this? Who has control over the content?

#### TEXT

We often use the word “text” to mean “written words.” But in media literacy, “text” has a very different meaning. The text of any piece of media is what you actually see and/or hear. It can include written or spoken words, pictures, graphics, moving images, sounds, and the arrangement or sequence of all of these elements. Sometimes the text is called the “story” or “manifest text.” For most of us, the text of a piece of media is always the same.

#### SUBTEXT

The “subtext” is an individual interpretation of a media message. It is sometimes called the “latent text.” The subtext is not actually heard or seen; it is the meaning we create from the text in our own minds. While media makers often create texts that suggest certain subtexts, each person creates their own subtext (interpretation) based on their previous experiences, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and values. Thus, two people interpreting the same text can produce two very different subtexts.

#### AUDIENCE

Media messages are intended to reach audiences. Some are designed to reach millions of people. Others may be intended only for one person. Most media messages are designed to reach specific groups of people – defined by age, gender, class, interests, and other factors – called the “target audience.”

#### PERSUASION TECHNIQUES

Media messages use a number of techniques to try to persuade us to believe or do something. If we can spot the techniques being used, we’re less likely to be persuaded, and more likely to think for ourselves.

#### POINT OF VIEW

No one tells the whole story. Everyone tells part of the story from their point of view. Deconstructing a media message can expose the values and biases of the media maker, and uncover powerful messages.

### **VIII. Creating counter-ads**

Advertising is a huge business, not only across America but across the entire globe. Advertising is mainly used to make someone or something well and widely known nationwide. Depending on how you advertise, it can make or break your career. However, most people have never heard of the term "counter-advertising," nor do they know of its importance. Counter-advertising is when an advertisement poses an argument against a preceding argument in regard to a certain issue, person or product. In other words, advertisements cannot only be used for promoting a product or an individual. Advertisements can also take stands against other advertisements in controversial topics.

Basically, counter-advertising is exposing a previous ad and its product or products. Let's take fast food, for example. There are countless advertisements for. A counter advertisement would be an ad that would expose "the truth" about McDonald's and the health concerns the restaurant has. This actually leads me to my next point. Counter advertisements are easy to identify. They are the ads that target large corporations that produce products such as alcohol, cigarettes and fast food. However, one thing you will need to consider is the complexity of counter advertisements. Counter-advertising is, in actuality, not that intricate when you really think about it. The more difficult part of the ad is merely the research aspect of creating the advertisement.

Once you finish your research, generating your ad will be rather easy.

There are, technically, different types of counter-advertising. There is counter advertising for smoking. Many smoking counter ads will provide the viewers information regarding the dangers of smoking. Examples can range from the number of deaths smoking causes a year to the number of poisons each cigarette contains. Smoking counter ads will also provide viewers information regarding the dangers of nicotine. You also have counter advertisements regarding fast food. As stated before, many counter advertisements regularly target fast food restaurants, particularly McDonald's, because of health concerns. Fast food counter-advertisements, however, don't just target McDonald's. They also target myriad other fast food restaurants, including Taco Bell (another main target) and Wendy's.

One additional point that is important to consider in regard to counter advertising is the film industry. What I mean is a documentary can be an hour-long counter advertisement. Take “Super Size Me”, for example. “Super Size Me” is one large counter advertisement because the documentary/film opposed not only McDonald's but also essentially the entire fast food industry. The film provided detailed information supporting the cons of McDonald's food, including obesity and heart disease. The film also provided statistics regarding the percentage of people in America who are overweight/obese. Films and documentaries that target large corporations are basically large counter advertisements.

Counter-advertising has already been ingrained in our society; we are just not aware of its presence yet. We still think these are regular advertisements. However, they have a stronghold in not just America, but also across the planet. You can “talk back” to deceptive or harmful media messages by creating counterads. These are parodies of advertisements, delivering more truthful or constructive messages using the same persuasion techniques as real ads. By creating counter-ads, you can apply media literacy skills to communicate positive messages, in a fun and engaging exercise.

The simplest way to create a counter-ad is to alter a real ad (magazine or newspaper ads work best) by changing the text or adding graphic elements; just write or draw over the original ad, or paste new materials onto it. (An example: change “Come to Marlboro Country” to “Come to Marlboro’s Graveyard” and add a few tombstones to the landscape.) A counter-ad can also be created by drawing a new image, copying the design and layout of a real ad. Collage techniques work well, too. You can also write scripts for radio or TV counter-ads, and read them to a class or group. Or take it a step further and record or videotape your counter-ad. Here are a few tips to help you make effective counter-ads:

- Analyze. Look at several real ads and try to figure out why they’re effective. The best counter-ads use the same techniques to deliver a different message.
- Power. Your message has to break through the clutter of all the real ads that people see or hear. Think about what makes an ad memorable to you. What techniques does it use to grab your attention? Use them.
- Persuade. Use the same persuasion techniques found in real ads – like humor, repetition, or flattery -- to deliver your alternative message.
- Pictures. Visual images are incredibly powerful. People often forget what they read or hear, but remember what they see. The best counter-ads, like the best ads, tell their stories through pictures.

- Rebellion. Advertising targeted at young people often appeals to a sense of youthful rebellion. Effective counter-ads expose misleading and manipulative advertising methods and turn their rebellious spirit toward the corporate sponsors who use them.
- “KISS” – Keep It Short & Simple. Use only one idea for your main message. Focus everything on getting this message across.
- Plan. Try to think of everything – words, images, design -- before you begin production. Make a few sketches or rough drafts before you start crafting the final product.
- Practice. If you’re going to perform a radio or TV script (and especially if you’re making an audio recording or video) your cast and crew will need to rehearse. Then, rehearse it again.
- Teamwork. Working in a team can lighten your workload and spark creativity. Brainstorm ideas as a group. Make sure all members share responsibility for the work.
- Revise. When you think you’re finished, show your counter-ad to uninvolved people for feedback. Do they understand it? Do they think it’s funny? Use their responses to revise your work for maximum impact.
- Distribute. Your ideas were meant to be seen! Make copies of your counter-ads and post them around your school, workplace, community center, etc. Get them published in your organizational or school newspaper. Show your videotape to other kids and adults. Your counterad can stimulate needed discussion and debate around media issues.
- Have fun! Making a counter-ad is a fun way to learn about media, to be creative, and to express your views. Enjoy it!

## **IX. Looking Beyond the Frame**

The ability to analyze and evaluate media messages is an essential first step in becoming medialiterate. Deconstructing individual media examples, identifying the persuasion techniques used, and applying the media literacy concepts discussed earlier in this section are important skills that can lead us to a deeper understanding of the media messages that bombard us every day. But this is just the beginning. True media literacy requires “looking beyond the frame” of the media message – the individual TV commercial, news story or website, for example – to examine its context.

This involves four interrelated concepts and skill sets:

1. Media messages reflect the social, political, economic, and technological environment of the mediasystem in which they are created. They either reinforce that environment – by

perpetuating stereotypes, for example –or they challenge it. For example, big-budget Hollywood blockbusters are produced by media conglomerates seeking to maximize short-term profits. They often rely on familiar character types, storylines, and genres because old formulas create a safer investment. In contrast, films made by independent filmmakers – particularly those with little access to money and power --are often more original, covering subject matter and featuring characters we haven't seen before.

Instead of appealing to the lowest common denominator, independent films often challenge audiences' assumptions and beliefs. Looking beyond the frame to consider the context of both kinds of films enriches one's understanding of our media culture. This involves deconstructing our media system to examine issues of media ownership, power and control, and to recognize how these issues influence media content.

2. Examining the relationship between media and society raises the issue of media justice. Our media system produces a lot of negative, demeaning imagery. It privileges some people and some perspectives, and ignores or silences others. It renders entire groups of people invisible. The dominant media system – consisting almost entirely of private corporations producing and distributing media for profit – provides too little funding and too few outlets for people without money, privilege and power to tell their stories. The media system is unjust, and it perpetuates and strengthens injustice throughout society. The media justice movement works to create a fairer and more just media system that serves everyone, particularly communities that have been historically underrepresented and misrepresented in the mainstream media, including indigenous communities, people of color, people with disabilities, working class people, and others. The media justice movement believes that communication is a human right and that media should belong to the people.

3. Just as literacy is the ability both to read and write, media literacy involves both understanding media messages and creating media. We all create media. We write notes and send email. We draw and doodle. Some of us play and compose music. Some take photos or make videos. Many people blog and use social-networking websites. High-tech or low-tech, our own media creations contribute to the media landscape. Learning how to express oneself in a variety of media is an important part of being media literate.

4. Media literate individuals are active participants in our media culture. While many people analyze and criticize media messages, and others focus on creating their own media, more and more people are also becoming media activists. They are changing the way they use media, challenging media messages and media institutions, supporting independent media, and working for media justice and media reform. Since media create so much of our culture, any

social change will require significant change in our media environment, in media policies and practices, and in media institutions. Becoming an active agent for change in our media culture is a natural result of being media literate.