

Eight Key Concepts of Media Literacy

These concepts provide an effective foundation for examining mass media and popular culture.

1. All media are constructions

The media do not present simple reflections of external reality. Rather, they present carefully crafted constructions that reflect many decisions and result from many determining factors. Media Literacy works towards deconstructing these constructions, taking them apart to show how they are made.

2. The media construct reality

The media are responsible for the majority of the observations and experiences from which we build up our personal understandings of the world and how it works. Much of our view of reality is based on media messages that have been pre-constructed and have attitudes, interpretations and conclusions already built in. The media, to a great extent, give us our sense of reality.

3. Audiences negotiate meaning in the media

The media provide us with much of the material upon which we build our picture of reality, and we all “negotiate” meaning according to individual factors: personal needs and anxieties, the pleasures or troubles of the day, racial and sexual attitudes, family and cultural background, and so forth.

4. Media have commercial implications Media Literacy aims to encourage an awareness of how the media are influenced by commercial considerations, and how these affect content, technique and distribution. Most media production is a business, and must therefore make a profit. Questions of ownership and control are central: a relatively small number of individuals control what we watch, read and hear in the media.

5. Media contain ideological and value messages

All media products are advertising, in some sense, in that they proclaim values and ways of life. Explicitly or implicitly, the mainstream media convey ideological messages about such issues as the nature of the good life, the virtue of consumerism, the role of women, the acceptance of authority, and unquestioning patriotism.

6. Media have social and political implications

The media have great influence on politics and on forming social change. Television can greatly influence the election of a national leader on the basis of image. The media involve us in concerns such as civil rights issues, famines in Africa, and the AIDS epidemic. They give us an intimate sense of national issues and global concerns, so that we become citizens of Marshall McLuhan's "Global Village."

7. Form and content are closely related in the media

As Marshall McLuhan noted, each medium has its own grammar and codifies reality in its own particular way. Different media will report the same event, but create different impressions and messages.

8. Each medium has a unique aesthetic form

Just as we notice the pleasing rhythms of certain pieces of poetry or prose, so we ought to be able to enjoy the pleasing forms and effects of the different media.

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