Introduction to Media Literacy

SESSION 2

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Learning objectives

- Understand media **literacy** and its importance
- Learn about key media literacy **concepts**
- Analyse and interpret media **messages**
- Separate **facts** vs. **fiction**
- Learn about how to develop media literacy **skills**
- Study and use **techniques** for analysing media messages

Media

- The plural of "**medium**" (originally denoting something intermediate in nature or degree – literally middle)

- **Medium**: a substance or a method in which something is communicated; it's the vehicle for a message

- Examples of **media**: books, films, paintings, songs, TV shows, poems, video games, magazines, podcasts, music videos, newspapers, web forums, coupons, email newsletters, tweets, receipts, traffic signs, street art, word of the day calendars, protest signs, breaking news notifications

- **The media (= mass media):** an umbrella term for the main ways that large numbers of people receive information and entertainment, that is television, movies, radio, newspapers, and the Internet (e.g. CNN, The New York Times, Disney, YouTube, etc.)

Literacy

- In the past, the concept of "literacy" meant having the skill to interpret "squiggles" on a piece of paper as letters which, when put together, formed words that conveyed meaning.
  (squiggles = written or drawn lines with irregular twists and curves)

- Today information about the world around us comes to us not only by words on a piece of paper but more and more through the powerful images and sounds of our multi-media culture.

- Mediated messages use a complex audio/visual "language" which has its own rules (grammar) and which can express multi-layered concepts and ideas about the world.

- Today's generation needs to be fluent in "reading" and "writing" the language of images and sounds just as they are fluent in "reading" and "writing" the language of printed communication.

Literacies

- Media literacy
- News literacy
- Visual literacy
- Digital literacy
- Financial literacy

Media Literacy as a field of study

- Interdisciplinary field

- Includes theories and concepts from:
  - critical thinking
  - psychology
  - linguistics
  - ethics
  - information technology

The concept of text

- The concept had to be expanded

- It includes not just written texts but any message form – verbal, aural or visual (or all three together) – that is used to create and then pass ideas back and forth between human beings.

Important quotation 1

"Whatever we know about our society,
or indeed about the world in which we live,
we know through media."

(Luhmann, 2000, p.1)

Important quotation 2

"The number one principle of media education is that media are not windows into the world, media are not mirrors of society, but carefully manufactured products. …and they are always selective and incomplete."

(from *Tuning In to Media: Literacy for the Information Age* documentary)

Why is media literacy important?

Why media literacy is important

1. The influence of media in central democratic processes.

People need three skills in order to be engaged citizens of a democracy:
- critical thinking
- self-expression
- participation
Media literacy instils these core skills, enabling students to
- sort through political packaging
- understand and contribute to public discourse
- make informed decisions in the voting booth

Why media literacy is important

2. The high rate of media consumption and the saturation of society by media.

We are exposed to more mediated messages in one day than our great-grandparents were exposed to in a year.
Media literacy teaches the skills we need to navigate safely through this sea of images and messages.

Why media literacy is important

3. The media's influence on shaping perceptions, beliefs and attitudes.

While research disagrees on the extent and type of influence, it is unquestionable that media experiences exert a significant impact on the way we understand, interpret and act on our world.
By helping us understand those influences, media literacy can help us separate from our dependencies on them.

Why media literacy is important

4. The increasing importance of visual communication and information.

Our lives are increasingly influenced by visual images – from corporate logos to huge billboards to cell phones to Internet websites.
Learning how to "read" the multiple layers of image-based communication (i.e. developing your visual literacy) is a necessary aspect of traditional print literacy.

Why media literacy is important

5. The importance of information in society and the need for lifelong learning.

The growth of global media industries is challenging independent voices and diverse views.
Media literacy can help in understanding where information comes from, whose interests may be being served and how to find alternatives views.

Key concepts and questions in media literacy: DECONSTRUCTION

Core concept 1: **AUTHORSHIP**
All media messages are constructed.

Key question: **Who created this message?**

- All media messages are created by people who must make many decisions in creating and shaping them – whether it's a TV show, comic book, email, or the cover of a new CD.

- Because choices are being made all along the construction process, no media message is ever neutral or value free.

- Even the news are constructed: choices are made about what stories will be covered and in what order, etc.

- This goal of this concept is not to make us cynical about media in our lives – it aims to expose the complexities of media's constructedness and thus create the critical distance we need to be able to ask other important questions.

Core concept 2: **FORMAT**
Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules

Key question: **What techniques are used to attract my attention?**

- This explores how a message is constructed and the creative components that are used in putting it together: words, music, colour, movement, camera angles, juxtaposition, and many more.

- Much of today's communication comes to us visually – that's why it is critical to learn the basics of visual communication ("visual literacy"): lighting, composition, camera angle, editing, use of props, body language, symbols, etc.

- We should be aware how the use of these techniques influences the various meanings we can take away from any one message.

- Understanding the techniques not only helps us to be less susceptible to manipulation but also increases our appreciation and enjoyment of media as constructed texts.

Core concept 3: **AUDIENCE**
Different people experience the same media messages differently.

Key question: **How might different people understand this message differently?**

- Each audience member brings to each media encounter his or her own set of life experiences: age, gender, education, cultural upbringing, etc. These create unique interpretations.

- The ability to see how different people can interpret the same message differently is important for diverse and multicultural education.

- A pluralistic democracy depends on a citizenry who embraces diverse perspectives as a natural consequence of different experiences, histories, and cultures.

- Understanding and appreciating that different people see things differently than I do is essential for global citizenship in an interconnected world.

Core concept 4: **CONTENT**
Media have embedded values and points of view.

Key question: **What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?**

- Because all media messages are constructed, choices have to be made. These choices inevitably reflect the values, attitudes, and points of view of the individuals doing the constructing.

- The decisions are made about a character's age, gender, and race; the lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviours that are portrayed; the selection of a setting; and the actions and re-actions in the plot.

- The values of mainstream media typically reinforce, and therefore affirm, the status quo of existing social structures.

- Two challenges to democracy in today's media age:
  1. Less popular or new ideas have a harder time getting published or aired especially if they challenge long-standing assumptions or commonly held belief
  2. The status quo values of mainstream media can create and perpetuate stereotypes.

Core concept 5: **PURPOSE**
Most media are organized to gain profit and/or power

Key question: **Why was this message sent?**

- There are fewer than ten transnational corporations dominating the global media market – this concentration of ownership threatens the independence and diversity of information and creates the possibility for the global colonization of culture and knowledge.

- The issue of why messages are created has changed dramatically since the internet became an international platform through which groups and organizations – even individuals – have gained access to powerful tools that can strengthen – or undermine – democracy.

- The internet provides multiple reasons for users of all ages to be able to recognize propaganda, interpret rhetorical devices, verify sources, and distinguish legitimate internet resources from bogus, hate, or hoax websites.

Key concepts and questions in media literacy: CONSTRUCTION

Core concept 1: **AUTHORSHIP**
All media messages are constructed.

Key question: **What am I authoring?**

- What kind of "text" genre am I creating?

- What various elements (building blocks) make up the whole?

- How similar or different is it to others of the same genre?

- Which technologies am I using to create? What will my medium be?

- How would my construction be different in a different medium?

- What are my choices? What choices might I make differently?

- Have others contributed to this construction? How should they be credited?

- Have I respected copyright, trademarks or other intellectual property that I may have used?

Core concept 2: **FORMAT**
Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules

Key question: **Does my message reflect understanding in format, creativity and technology?**

- What do I want people to notice…or not…(about the way I am constructing my message)?

- What technologies am I using? How is my message structure affected?

- What techniques stand out the most? Color and shapes? Sound? Silence? Dialogue or Narration? Movement? Composition? Lighting? Texture? Scent?

- How am I telling the story? Do I know the storytelling conventions available to me? What storytelling conventions am I using?

- When does my message take place? What is the setting or timing of my message? What impact might the setting or timing of my message have on other choices I make?

- What visual or verbal, musical or visual symbols or metaphors am I using?

- What emotional appeal am I using?

- What persuasive devices am I employing? Am I being ethical?

- What factual information am I presenting? Are my facts and information accurate? How do I know?

- Does my message seem "real?" Why?•

Core concept 3: **AUDIENCE**
Different people experience the same media messages differently.

Key question: **Is my message engaging and compelling for my target audience?**

- Who is the target audience for my message?

- What do I know about this person or people? What are some important characteristics about them I should know?

- How wide an audience do I want to appeal to? Or how narrow?

- Have I respected the need for privacy or confidentiality on the part of my audience?

- Have I taken into consideration the appropriateness of my message for special or vulnerable audiences, such as very young children or youth or those disabled?

- How might my audience interpret my message and respond to it?

- What effect might I anticipate my message having on my audience? Positive, negative, neutral?

- Why should my audience care about my message?

Core concept 4: **CONTENT**
Media have embedded values and points of view.

Key question: **Have I clearly and consistently framed values, lifestyles and points of view in my content?**

- What is my main message?

- How am I supporting my main message? What information am I including? What am I leaving out? Why?

- Who or what do I invite my audience to identify with through my message? What lifestyles, values and points of view are overt? What are implied?

- Have I represented other voices or social groups? Are these representations nuanced or are they stereotypical?

- What might the opposition to my message say? Have I treated my opposition with respect?

- Have I made appropriate disclosures about conflicts of interest or assumptions?

- Have I considered the needs of the "whole" person that I'm relating the message to? If not, are my reasons ethical?

- Does my message convey real-life behaviors or consequences? If not, why not?

- What is the overall worldview depicted in my message?

Core concept 5: **PURPOSE**
Most media are organized to gain profit and/or power

Key question: **Have I communicated my purpose effectively?**

- What is my intent? Whose needs am I trying to satisfy with my message?

- Am I primarily entertaining, persuading, informing, or encouraging action and participation as the form of my message?

- Who is paying for this message to be constructed and sent? Should I disclose this underwriting for any reason?

- Do I want my audience to feel, think or do anything specific as a result of engaging with my message?

- How is the audience served by my message? How do I profit or benefit? How does the audience profit by or benefit from my message?

- Who wins? Who loses? Who decides?

- What economic decisions may have influenced my message and how I constructed or transmitted it?

- Have I considered ethical, social and/or legal constraints on achieving my purpose?

Media literacy – process model (Hobbs)

1. **ACCESS**: using, finding, and comprehending

2. **ANALYZE**: the critical thinking dimension

3. **CREATE**: the expressive dimension

4. **REFLECT**: the social responsibility dimension

5. **ACT**: make a difference in the world

The Access Dimension

- Learning how to find, comprehend, and use symbolic resources

- Access is always media specific: each media form has a distinctive group of things you need to know in order to make sense of it
  - to find information online: generating appropriate keywords, selecting appropriate search engines
  - to contribute to a blog: understanding file management, editing, using formatting tools

- Using technology tools: for finding information, problem solving, self-expression, and communication

- Gathering information: effective strategies for finding information from diverse sources

- Comprehending: multiple interpretations of texts

Analyse: The Critical Thinking Dimension

- The capacity to analyse messages, considering the author, purpose, and point of view to understand how they are constructed and the assumptions that underpin them

- Developing an informed, critical understanding that involves:
  - examining the techniques, technologies, and institutions involved in media production
  - being able to critically analyse media messages
  - recognizing the role audiences play in making meaning from those messages

- We have to be aware that the practice of analysis always has an embedded point of view (a message will be analysed differently by a conservative, liberal, man, woman, Caucasian, Afro-American, Hispanic, Asian, young, elderly, straight, gay, disabled, etc.)

Create: The Expressive Dimension

- When using media, you compose for meaningful purposes and real audiences (not just to complete a homework assignment), using video, sound, and interactivity

- Digital composition is also increasingly collaborative

- "Textual Power" – the interconnection between analysis, evaluation, and composition

- Expression in multiple ways: different genres (narrative, persuasive, and expository forms) and different modes (image, language, sound, graphic design, performance, and interactivity) to get your message across

- Shaping content and choosing the most appropriate form in relation to real purposes and real target audiences

Reflect: The Social Responsibility Dimension

- All communication involves ethical and social values

- The Internet creates complex new ways for people to interact socially

- Privacy, copyright, fair use, attribution, and new forms of sharing – they all involve ethical issues

- Multiperspectival thinking: being able to imagine the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of others, moving beyond either-or thinking, building empathy by reflecting on the experience of standing in someone else's shoes

- Predicting consequences and using hypothetical reasoning

- Power and responsibility: examining how social status, hierarchy, respect, and power are exercised through communication practices, including praise, criticism, rumours, and gossip.

Act: Make a Difference in the World

- There is a relationship between education and citizenship – therefore, media literacy education includes the concept of taking action

- Developing needed skills for engaging in genuine ethical democratic citizenship

- Taking action to address meaningful real-world problems that require solutions

- Using problem-solving skills to influence others toward a specific goal

- We should be aware of our own leanings and inclinations and not claim the superiority of a particular critique (e.g. radical leftist) – that would just be another type of propaganda instead of encouraging true dialogue that is necessary for civic action.

Facts versus fiction

- **READ** both sides.
  THINK critically.
  DECIDE for yourself

- ProCon.org is an award-winning nonpartisan resource for pro, con, and related research on controversial issues.

Sources

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