MEDIA LITERACY

Keys to Interpreting Media Messages

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA LITERACY

The contemporary media scenario have assumed a large role in the lives of the average Indian family.

For instance:

- A TAM Media Research data suggests that there are 148 million households owning television in India. These includes 79 million in rural households and 69 million in urban households.¹

- The CII-PwC Report says there are 821 licensed television channels covering almost all the major languages of India. It says India had about 127 million pay TV subscribers in 2012 as compared to 113 million in 2011.²

- The Report also suggests that, Indian television market could be the fastest growing in the world.³

At the same time:

- A global Deloitte study on Media Democracy in 2010 says television is the most favourite media source for a large number of consumers; 92 percent of the respondent of the study said watching television was their main media source.⁴

- Around 94 percent of the respondents suggested that watching advertisements in television was an influential source impacting their buying decisions.⁵

- The National Youth Readership Survey 2010 shows that television is the most important preferred leisure activity followed by newspapers.⁶

And remember that television represents only one media system.

The traditional definition of literacy applies only to print: “having a knowledge of letters; instructed; learned.” However, in light of the emergence of the channels of mass communications (i.e., print, photography, film, radio, television, and digital media), this definition of literacy must be expanded. The National Telemedia
Council defines media literacy as “the ability to choose, to understand--within the context of content, form/style, impact, industry and production--to question, to evaluate, to create and/or produce and to respond thoughtfully to the media we consume. It is mindful viewing, reflective judgment.”

At the National Conference on Media Literacy, sponsored by the Aspen Institute in December, 1992, the groups’ representatives settled on a basic definition of media literacy: “It is the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes.” In the context of a developing country like India, media literacy would also entail critical skills to evaluate the role of media in a developing democratic society.

Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share (2005) opine, “Literacy involves gaining skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artifacts and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one’s culture and society”. Kellner and Jeff Share (2005) further state:

Literacy in our conception, comprises gaining competencies involves in effectively learning and using socially constructed forms of communication and representation. Cultivating literacies involves attaining competencies in practices in contexts that are governed by rules and convention. Literacies are socially constructed in educational and cultural practices involved in various institutional discourses and practices”.

Emphasizing the need of media literacy from a critical perspective, Biswajit Das (2009) stresses on the need for a reformation in media education and research traditions in India. Considering the wide variety of alternatives in Indian media space, which has expanded its reach and operation in the post liberalization period, Das argues for a reconceptualization of the place of media in society and consequently of media education policies. As Das writes, “In this media saturated environment, the boundaries of the formal education are merely confined to a
concept of literacy that stresses proficiency in reading, writing and speaking need to be reconsidered.”

In Media Studies in School Curriculum: Obstacles, Challenges and Possibilities, Yadav Anubhuti (2011) stressed that the need to introduce Media Literacy at school level. She emphasized, “keeping in view the importance of media in society and students’ continuous engagement with media, it is important that the students start understanding media rather than just being passive viewer or reader.” She stressed on the point that the way school authorities help children to understand language, social science, science and mathematics, similarly, keeping in view the enormity of media content and students’ continuous engagement with it, it is important that media literacy should be treated as one of the integral subject in school education.

This definition of media literacy builds on the preceding ideas emphasizes the following elements:

1. Media literacy promotes the critical thinking skills that enable people to make independent choices with regard to: 1) which media programming to select; and 2) how to interpret the information that they receive through the channels of mass communication.

Media literacy is, first and foremost, a critical thinking skill that is applied to the source of most of the information we receive: the channels of mass communication. However, for a variety of reasons that will be discussed later in the chapter, we often blindly accept the information that we receive through the media—with disastrous results. We develop brand loyalties that have little to do with the quality of the product. We take the word (or pictures) of journalists to provide us with a clear understanding of our world. And we vote for candidates on the basis of “gut reactions” to political spots devised by clever political media consultants.

Rather than tuning to a specific program, all too often the audience simply watches the medium (“I’m going to watch TV”). Indeed, forty percent of TV viewers don’t bother to check the TV listings before turning on the set; instead, they simply flip
through the channels to determine what they want to see (or what is least objectionable). One of the criteria of becoming an educated person is developing the critical faculties to understand one’s environment—an environment that, increasingly, is being shaped by the media. As Bill Moyers observes, “At stake is our sense of meaning and language, our sense of history, democracy, citizenship and our very notions of beauty and truth.”

The vision of democracy articulated by the Secondary Education Commission (1952) constituted by the Government of India, is worth recalling here and how media understanding fits into the vision is motivating enough for those who would be interested in taking the concept of Media Literacy forward. “Citizenship in a democracy involves many intellectual, social and moral qualities… a democratic citizen should have the understanding and the intellectual integrity to sift truth from falsehood, facts from propaganda and to reject the dangerous appeal of fanaticism and prejudice…” This is what media literacy initiatives world over propagates. The strategies to implement them may vary in different countries but the idea is to make students reflect critically on media issues. It entails the acceptance of multiple views on social issues and commitment to democratic forms of interaction, and helps children to see issues from different perspectives, and understand how such issues are connected to their lives. The content and language of media products provide ways of looking at the world.

2. Understanding the process of mass communication.

A number of factors determine the impact of a media presentation, including an understanding of the elements involved in the process of media communications: 1) *media communicator*: who is producing the presentation; 2) what is the *function* (or purpose) behind the production of the presentation; 3) *comparative media*—the distinguishing characteristics of each medium; and 4) who is the intended *audience*. Besides the above mentioned principles the various components of the mass media, such as: ownership, space and personnel engaged in the process of content creation and dissemination must be prioritized to arrive at the ideological elements underlying
media text. More over, texts should be perceived from a broader perspective that includes both the experiential and symbolic space. In this context, Lefebvre’s\textsuperscript{14} account on space and spatial practices prove to be of utmost importance in literacy theory and praxis, and its impact on the condition of social space. (see Chapters 2-5)

3. An awareness of the impact of the media on individuals and society.

The media have transformed the way we think about the world, each other, and ourselves. Media presentations convey cumulative messages that shape, reflect and reinforce attitudes, values, behaviors, preoccupations, and myths that define a culture. Within this context, media literacy education has had an impact on young students’ behaviors and attitudes with regard to alcohol and tobacco usage and eating disorders. In addition, media literacy “interventions” have helped curb aggressive and anti-social behaviors among 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 4\textsuperscript{th} grade children (Art Silverblatt, Donald C. Miller, Julie Smith ,2014)\textsuperscript{15} Hoechsmann and Stuart Poyntz (2012) have argued that, “students need to engage with issues of media production, language, representations and audiences to address how meaning operates in the broadcast media.”\textsuperscript{16}

4. The development of strategies with which to analyze and discuss media messages.

Media literacy provides strategies that enable individuals to decipher the information they receive through the channels of mass communications. These keys also provide a framework that facilitates the discussion of media content with others--including children, peers, and the people responsible for producing media programming.

5. An awareness of media content as a “text” that provides insight into our contemporary culture and ourselves.

As we will see in Chapter 6 (Cultural Context), media presentations often provide insight into the attitudes, values, behaviors, preoccupations, patterns of thought, and myths that define a culture. And conversely, an understanding of a culture can furnish perspective into media presentations produced in that culture.
Media literacy focuses on the social and cultural contexts of media presentations—what Szwed (1981) refers it to as “the social meaning of literacy”. As Szwed writes:

> The roles these abilities play in social life; the varieties of reading and writing available for choice; the context of their performance and the manner in which they are interpreted and tested, not by experts, but by ordinary people in ordinary activities.

As a result, the discipline of media literacy adopts a deconstructive approach in line with Derridean philosophy in analyzing and arriving at the multiple facets of meanings and is compatible with semiotic/textual approaches prevalent in French linguistic and literary traditions in the works of Michele Foucault and Roland Barthes.

6. **The cultivation of an enhanced enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation of media content.**

Media literacy should not be considered as merely an opportunity to bash the media. Critical analysis as an important component of media literacy practice can heighten your awareness of media at its best: insightful articles, informative news programs, and appreciating films. Moreover, an understanding of media literacy principles should not detract you from enjoyment of programs but, rather, enhance your appreciation of media content.

7. **In the case of media communicators: the ability to produce effective and responsible media messages.**

In order to be successful, professionals in the field of media must demonstrate an awareness of the mass communication process, as well as a mastery of production techniques and strategies. But in order to truly improve the media industry, media communicators must also be aware of the challenges and responsibilities involved in producing thoughtful programming that serves the best interests of the public.

In addition to becoming more discerning consumers of media content, individuals may choose to engage in different *Sectors*, or applications of media literacy,
including: Education, Activism, Community Media, Public Policy, Writing, Research, Business, and Advertising.

Media literacy practice focuses more on the ability of the media to promote democratic societies and a critical, informed and active citizenry. In India, the mass media plays a prominent role in its fast changing social, cultural and political landscape. With regular supply of ideas and information the media influences the popular imagination and everyday life. Moreover, in light of India’s rich cultural diversity in terms of religion, race, caste, and ethnicities, media literacy has become essential for intercultural dialogue and information sharing with a participatory orientation. As Nagaraj and Vedavhyas Kundu explain:

The pedagogical approach to MIL [Media and Information Literacy] in India needs to encapsulate the country’s rich cultural diversity so that it can be used to encourage dialogue and diverse discourses on sustainable development goals.”

OBSTACLES TO MEDIA LITERACY

One would think that the development of mass communication would eliminate the traditional barriers to literacy. After all, one must be educated in order to read. On the other hand, all that is required to watch television is a strong thumb to operate the remote control.

However, universal access to the media should not be confused with media literacy. Despite the pervasiveness of the channels of mass communication, media illiteracy remains a problem, for several reasons:

ELITISM

Reflecting on the elitist nature of Indian Television, Tilak Wijesundara writes, “It is evident that most of Indian Television channels today display western lifestyles, and thus they ensure western consumerism in Indian society. This is specifically true in relation to private channels.”
In a study asking “To what degree does the media have an effect on society?,” eighty percent “Strongly Agreed” that media had an effect on society as a whole. At the same time, however, only 12% of these respondents “Strongly Agreed” that media had a personal impact on them. The implications of this survey are both intriguing and disturbing. Participants in the study apparently had no difficulty seeing the influence of the media on other people. However, these same people were unable to recognize the impact of the media on their own lives. And the more that people deny personal influence of mass media, the more susceptible they are to media messages. Consequently, a first step in media literacy requires an admission that you are exposed to numerous messages daily through the media and that these messages can influence your attitudes, values, and behavior.

Affective Nature of Photography, Film, Television, Radio, and Digital Media

Imagine glancing up from this text and gazing out the window. Suddenly, you spot a small, unattended toddler wandering into the street. Your immediate reaction might include:

- Experiencing a sudden jolt as your nervous system carries this information to your brain.
- Feeling a tightening sensation in your stomach.
- Breaking out in an immediate sweat.
- Struggling to translate these feelings into words and actions to help the child.

In contrast with print, visual and aural stimuli initially touch us on an affective or emotional level. In his discussion of the impact of the visual image, art historian E. H. Gombrich observes:

The power of visual impressions to arouse our emotions has been observed since ancient times...Preachers and teachers preceded modern advertisers in the knowledge of the ways in which the visual image can affect us, whether we want it to or not. The succulent fruit, the seductive nude, the
repellent caricature, the hair-raising horror can all play on our emotions and engage our attention.22

Because of the affective nature of visual and aural media, it may seem more natural (and considerably easier) to simply “experience” a song or film rather than undertake the arduous task of conceptualizing, articulating and analyzing your emotional responses. Consequently, the level of discourse about media programming is often reduced to emotional responses; in the immortal words of Beavis and Butthead, programs are either “cool” or they “suck.”

But while affective responses may initially discourage discussion, they can ultimately serve as a springboard for in-depth analysis and discussion. As a result, one effective strategy for the interpretation of media messages is to ask why you reacted as you did while watching a program. (For further discussion, see Chapter 2, Process: Affective Response)

Audience Behavior Patterns

During the communication process, audience members select the most pertinent bits of information to store and assimilate into meaning. However, audiences are often engaged in competing activities while receiving media messages. Because your primary attention may be focused on other activities (driving while listening to the radio, for instance), you may be susceptible to subtle messages that affect your attitudes and behaviors. Further, if you answer the phone or leave the room for a portion of a telecast, the text of information from which to select has been altered. As a result, you may be receiving an altogether different message than was originally intended by the media communicator. (For further discussion, see Chapter 2, Process: Audience).

Audience Expectations

In many instances, the function, or purpose that you decide to engage in a media activity has nothing to do with the critical analysis of media content. For instance,
after a long, stress-filled day at school, you may turn on your television to wind down and put the day’s events in perspective. This form of “electronic meditation” signals to others that you are not in the mood for conversation. But furthermore, on these occasions, you do not feel particularly inclined to analyze media content. And the only way to discover media messages is to look for media messages.

**Nature of Programming**

Reflecting on the current state of Indian media, Jain (2011) observes:

> Large sections of the media have adopted the market as the ultimate arbiter of everything they do—if they succeed in reaching larger audiences, they are doing what the market wants...not only is the news a product to be sold to audiences, the news space is also a product to be sold to advertisers, be they corporate interests or politicians. This unrestrained pursuit of profit has led to an abandonment of the media’s role as an ethically credible watchdog in matters of governance and democracy.\(^23\)

But Katzu cautions:

> No doubt the media should provide some entertainment also to the people, but if 90 per cent of its coverage is devoted to entertainment, and only 10 per cent to all the socio-economic issues put together, then the sense of priorities of the media has gone haywire. (2011)\(^{24}\)

To illustrate, broadcast journalists are now pressured to present the news in an entertaining fashion. This trend toward “infotainment” has severely compromised the content of many news programs. Nevertheless, programs that were never intended to instruct the public convey messages about how the world operates, provide models of acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and reinforce cultural definitions of success and failure.
Credibility of Media

Audiences are often predisposed to believe what appears in the media. One particularly dangerous media message is that information presented on television or in the newspaper must be true, simply because it appears in the media. Many Indian television channels have crime based serials to cater to the audiences both urban and rural. For example in one of the television channels there is a crime thriller with the title CID. It revolves around crimes committed by white collar perpetrators and their resolutions by the detectives.

In its ability to preserve a moment of time in space, photography creates the illusion of verisimilitude, or lifelike quality. We must remember, however, that photographs only present a distorted picture of reality. For instance, a photograph captures only a brief instant, without the context that gives it meaning. In addition, the audience’s attention is confined to the space within the frame. We only see what the photographer or filmmaker wants us to see; we cannot see what is happening outside of the boundary of the camera lens. Further, because digital technology enables a photographer to alter images seamlessly, a photograph may not represent what originally was captured by the camera.

Indeed, the very presence of the media alters the event it is intended to capture. Consider the typical wedding. The photographer does not hesitate to interrupt the proceedings and whisk the newlyweds away from the celebration. Like trained seals, the bride and groom strike the conventional poses: holding the rose, cutting the cake, and standing in formation with assorted relatives. The entire occasion has been transformed into a photo session, to be enjoyed later, when the couple leafs through the photo album.

Within this context, one of the fundamental tenants of media literacy, as identified by Canadian Association for Media Literacy, is that “All media are constructions of reality”: 
This is arguably the most important concept. The media do not simply reflect external reality. Rather, they present carefully crafted constructions that reflect many decisions and are the result of many determining factors. Media Literacy works towards deconstructing these constructions (i.e., to taking them apart to show how they are made).²⁵

Media literate individuals have learned to examine the information presented through the media with a healthy skepticism and determine for themselves whether the content is accurate.

**Complexity of the Language of Media**

Media audiences generally can identify the sign and symbol system of media. For instance, although the narrative in a film is generally presented in chronological order, the filmmaker often manipulates its time sequence to establish relationships between people, locations, and events. Thus, a flashback is a formulaic narrative technique, in which a past event is inserted in the narrative to show the influence of the past on the present.

However, as Mark Crispin Miller observes, audience members often underestimate the “language” of media production. “Most Americans still perceive the media image as transparent, a sign that simply says what it means and means what it says. They therefore tend to dismiss any intensive explication as a case study of reading too much into it.”²⁶ For example, many children are unable to detect spatial and temporal inferences depicted on screen. Daniel Anderson explains, “[Children’s] failure to comprehend cinematic transitions cumulatively gives them a fragmented comprehension of lengthy televised narratives. With age and viewing experience, however, the child more rapidly and automatically makes the bridging inferences necessary to achieve connected comprehension.”²⁷

Understanding the different “languages” of media has become essential in the world of business. In an Indian context, television is still considered to be the dominant
medium of information and entertainment. As the Deloitte ASSOCHAM (2011) report states:

> Television (TV) plays a major role in the flow of information and is equipped with the power to influence people, their beliefs and their opinions. Being a visual medium, its impact transcends the social and educational background of its viewers; more so, in a diverse country like India, where TV dominates the Media & Entertainment landscape as the preferred choice of entertainment.²⁸

However, digital media, especially Internet and new media are rapidly penetrating into the Indian media space and are predicted to become the most important medium of information, entertainment and communication. Digitalization has its own impact on the journalistic practices and structures of media organizations. Almost all the media houses in India both print and TV now have their own digital portals. The severe impact of digitalization on the lives of Indian populace could be sensed from the United Nations’ (2010) fact that more Indians have access to mobile phones than they have access to toilets. Prabhudesai (2012) observes that there are 800 million mobile phone users in India, out of which 600 are unique users who get regular news alerts on their mobile phones²⁹. Social media especially of Facebook and others have gained their status and prominence not only as platforms for virtual interaction but their role seems to be more fruitful both in public discourses and organizational management. Consequently, many companies now place a value on employees who have the ability to interpret, construct, and disseminate messages, using different “languages” of media, such as film, television, audio, and the Internet. Besides, understanding media messages require orientations with a wide variety of theoretical and practical approaches from semiotic analysis to technicalities associated with audio visual productions. A familiarity with various production elements (i.e., editing, color, lighting, shot selection) can enhance your understanding and appreciation of media content. (For additional discussion of production elements see Chapter 10-11).
LEVELS OF MEANING: MANIFEST AND LATENT MESSAGES

Manifest messages are direct and clear to the audience. We generally have little trouble recognizing these messages when we are paying full attention to media presentation. For instance, have you ever noticed how many commercials tell you to do something?

- The Telegraph: The Unputdownable”
- “Just Do It” (Nike)
- “Thanda Matlab”--- Coca Colla (cold drinks)
- “Why should boys have all the fun?”-- (Scooty motor bike)

But in addition, media presentations may contain latent messages. Latent messages are indirect and beneath the surface, and, consequently, often escape our immediate attention. Latent messages may reinforce manifest messages or they may suggest entirely different meanings. For example, “G.I. Joe” commercials promote their line of war toys. But at the same time, the G.I. Joe ad campaign conveys latent messages equating violence with masculinity and glorifying war.

Cumulative Messages

Cumulative messages occur with such frequency over time that they form new meanings, independent of any individual production. Consistent messages with regard to gender roles, racial and cultural stereotypes, and measures of success recur throughout many media presentations. As an example, Amitabh Bachan of Bollywood is always associated with the character of angry young man whereas Salman Khan of Bollywood is known for his macho image. Similarly, from Hollywood there are countless media figures, including John Wayne, Sylvester Stallone, and the Marlboro Man, that send an aggregate message about the ideal of masculinity.
Point of View

Point of View In any media presentation, the story can be told from a range of perspectives, or points of view:

- The media communicator
- The characters in the presentation
- The prevailing point of view of the period in which it was produced
- Your own point of view

Point of view has an impact on: 1) How a story is told; 2) What information is conveyed; and 3) How the audience responds to the information being presented.

Identifying the prevailing point of view in media representations enables you to filter the information and come to your own conclusions. For instance, *NDTV (New Delhi Television)* in India is a bit lenient towards leftist ideology and supports a conservative political agenda. Similarly, *The Hindu* is lenient towards leftist ideology. Whereas *Times Now* takes a progressive stand in news presentation just like its sister organization *The Times of India*. But there is nothing wrong in watching *Times Now* or reading *The Times of India* newspaper, so long as you know what it is and what it isn’t. The danger lies in thinking that these ideological channels are presenting objective news. (For further discussion, see Chapter 12, Journalism.) The Keys to Interpreting Media Messages provide you with tools to identify the point of view of the program, media communicator, or primary character in the presentation.

Affective Strategies

As mentioned earlier, visual and aural media (photography, film, television, radio, and digital media) are particularly well suited to emotional appeals. Media communicators can influence the attitudes and behavior of audiences by appealing to their emotions. For instance, some advertisers sell products by appealing to primal emotions such as guilt or the need for acceptance. In addition, production elements such as color, shape, lighting, and size convey meaning by evoking emotional responses in the audience. Thus, media communicators convey meaning through
their production choices, involving the use of lighting, music, and connotative words and images.

**Embedded Values**

Media literacy analysis can furnish perspective into the values of media communicators by identifying the *preferred reading* of the narrative. Media communicators establish a preferred reading, in which the text dictates the responses of the audience. The preferred reading asks the audience to assume the role, perspective, and orientation of the heroes and heroines, who may be surrogates for the media communicator.

Production elements such as music, lighting and angle distinguish the heroes from the villains and, consequently, direct how the audience is to respond to these characters. In this way, the sympathies of the audience are aligned with his/her values and beliefs.

Word choice can also furnish perspective into the attitudes of the media communicator toward the subject of the presentation.

To illustrate, consider the following headlines for two newspaper stories reporting on a car bombing incident that took place in Baghdad in 2003, during the War in Iraq:

“Five Consecutive Martyrdom Operations Rock Baghdad"^30 car bombings kill 34, wound 224.”^^31

In the first headline, which appeared in an Egyptian government-owned newspaper, the word “martyrdom” is an indication that the media communicator regarded this action as morally justifiable. In contrast, the term “suicide bombings,” in *Newsday*, a mainstream American publication, reveals that, according to the reporter considered this to be a brutal and senseless attack.
Endnotes


2 India Entertainment and Media Outlook. CII-PWC, 2013.

3 Ibid.,

4 Deloitte Survey “State of the Media Democracy—India”. 2010, p. 4

5 Ibid., p.5

6 Rajesh Shukla, “Indian Youths Demographics and Readership”. NBT & NCAER, 2010, p. 25


8 Silverblatt, A Donald C. Miller, Julie Smith, Nikole Brown( 2014) Media Literacy: Keys to Interpreting Media Messages


10 Ibid.


15 Silverblatt, A Donald C. Miller, Julie Smith, Nikole Brown( 2014) Media Literacy: Keys to Interpreting Media Messages


19 Nagaraj, K.V & Vedavyas Kundu, “The Role of Media and Information Literacy in Promoting Mutual Respect and Sustainable Development in Culturally Diverse
India”, in Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue, Eds. Ulla Crlsson and Sherri Hope Culver, NORDICOM, 20013, p. 216.


31. Bazzi, Mohamad; Bloodied Baghdad; Four coordinated car bombings kill 34, wound 224; Newsday; October 23, 2003.