

**SKILLS  
FOR LIFE**

# Media Literacy and Critical Thinking

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# Abstract

Media literacy education is a tool for combating mis/disinformation in a time where there is so much uncertainty. The lack of credible news means that we are left with news stories driven by propaganda, misinformation, or manipulated content and even fiction or just fallacy. This impacts every person in every situation and influences the conversations, policy, and beliefs whether we are talking about race, gender, economics of poverty, climate, and so much more. This paper takes the reader through explaining the value of this instruction, the process of understanding the key questions of media literacy, as well as recommendations for assessments and further dialogue. The purpose is to encourage readers to consider the use of these media literacy skills in educational and community settings to help the public better understand how to manage various mediated environments.

# 1. Importance of Media Literacy Education

We are living in difficult times. People are confused by what they hear from the media, health officials or politicians. Facts and opinions are not clearly defined to the populace. Accepting “information” presented by the media has become contentious and worrisome when the media is polarized, and the information is not based on facts.

Media literacy education offers a response and possible solution to this worldwide problem. Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information in a variety of forms and formats. More importantly, media literacy is an action whereby any person is involved in creating, engaging, or delivering information. Media literacy promotes critical thinking beyond the traditional literacies of reading and writing, including visual and computer literacies. Potter (2005) suggests that these literacies are the key components that compose the greater concept of media literacy is by stating:

*Media literacy is a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the media to interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter. We build our perspectives from knowledge structures. To build our structures, we need tools and raw materials. These tools are our skills. The raw materials are information from the media and the real world. Active use means that we are aware of the messages and consciously interacting with them (p. 22).*

A primary goal of media literacy education is to weave an understanding of the media in daily life. A discourse in media can potentially serve as a transformative component whereby a significant connection can be made from literature to film to television, and other online environments. This transference of learning is necessary within the educational paradigm and communities, as all citizens experience the ‘infodemic.’

In this brief, I will explain how we can help nurture media literacy through education and training. Then, I will explain how we can measure and assess media literacy. Lastly, I will discuss the implications of media literacy education, as misinformation and disinformation impact individuals personally, professionally, and as civic participants in society.

## 2. Media Literacy Education and Training

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has introduced a global curriculum that incorporates both media and information literacy as necessary for the global development and learning of citizens. As part of this global initiative, a focus was placed on media literacy education. Instead of looking at the media as the enemy, UNESCO took the stance that the media were part of the public discourse and of participatory democracy, and that their role should be to create informed citizenry. UNESCO defined media literacy as the following for teachers:

- Understand the role and functions of media;
- Understand the conditions under which media fulfill their functions;
- Critically analyze and evaluate media content;
- Use media for democratic participation, intercultural dialogue, and learning;
- Produce user-generated content;
- Learn ICT and other media skills (Wilson et al., 2011).

In many educational spaces in the United States, media literacy education emphasizes understanding the five core concepts and five key questions that have been developed by the Center for Media Literacy in Los Angeles, California (2005). These same concepts are transferable to classrooms worldwide. I will provide a broader explanation to help further the understanding of each concept.



**Table 1. Five Core Concepts and Key Questions developed by the Center for Media Literacy**

Questions	Description
1 Who creates the message?	All media messages are “constructed.”
2 What techniques are used to attract my attention?	Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3 How might different people understand this message differently from me?	Different people differently experience the same media message.
4 What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message?	Media have embedded values and points of view.
5 Why was this message sent?	Media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power.

### **Idea 1: All Media Messages are “Constructed”**

Knowing that media messages exist is just one part of learning, but understanding ‘who’ is putting the message forth is the more important part. Media messages are placed in the public sphere with an idea in mind. For example, marketers spend time collecting data and interpreting messages so that they can immediately know right away how to construct a message to appeal to that audience (De Abreu, 2019). It is not just happenstance that certain colors are used for certain cultural communities or that words are selected with an idea in mind. Advertisements are placed in certain magazines to deliver the message to the audience. Ads will also include images of the types of people they think would fit the concept of the message, much like stereotyping (De Abreu, 2019).

## **Idea 2: Media Messages are Constructed Using a Creative language with its Own Rules**

The types of language used in the media are not so much ‘creative’ as much as targeted to a specific audience. To understand the message, students must analyze and deconstruct it from start to finish. For example, brightly colored letters are usually designated for children. Television shows are also developed with a certain constructed language (Glasser, 1988). Programs with a comedic intent tend to begin with fonts and words that roll or move quickly, almost as if laughing. Horror or thriller movies have music that signals to us that a dramatic or frightening event is about to occur. Television dramas are written in ways that make the plots intricate, with three or four stories going on simultaneously. The actual script is fast-paced, and the actors are directed to speak in that way, with quirky and complex language, which in turn makes viewers presume that this television show is intelligent. The list goes on. Yet this concept is not readily taught in schools. The language of media is just as important as the language of literature, because media intentionally use meanings that almost immediately engage and attract an audience. This also applies to people on social networks, who are looking at likes and clicks, to make things more appealing to the user (De Abreu, 2019).

## **Idea 3: Different People Experience the Same Media Message Differently**

While this may seem obvious, most children and young adults, (this is true of some adults as well), are not always aware of or open to the idea that another perspective exists. Typically, youth’s ways of thinking are shaped by their communities, family backgrounds, racial backgrounds, peer groups, and other influences, which limit their ability to see other perspectives (Potter, 2019). Thus, it is easy to see how a youth will believe what they see on television as truth and believe it without question. By asking students to consider what someone in a poor neighborhood or an affluent neighborhood would think about a product or a television program, or asking if what they are seeing is “real,” we can foster a provoking conversation. This concept that different people experience the same media message differently promotes the teaching and understanding of why someone of a different race, socioeconomic standing, religion, etc., may be offended by a media message.

Analyzing media forms and the news, and understanding that all media representations are not accurate, create invaluable lessons. By furthering the discussion about stereotypes within the context of movies, music videos, television programs, and social media —and examining how the mainstream media subscribes to those stereotypes for the audience to recognize the story, plot, or theme—we can promote higher-order thinking skills (De Abreu, 2019).

#### **Idea 4: Media Have Embedded Values and Points of View**

This concept is most significant to those who are concerned with how the value system is promoted via the media. For example, parents worry that their values and beliefs are not transmitted via the media or at all. Consider how a media message is designed to encourage a certain behavior, whether positive and negative. Who is not a part of that message or who is ignored often? Who is being told by the media that they are unimportant because of the messaging? Look at how news stories position different races—is it positive or negative? How does that influence the viewer?

In schools, teachers have a unique opportunity to discuss and deconstruct the values and messages transmitted via a variety of media. Students are asked to consider that there are many views on any one topic. When teachers are discussing political messages or even a basic television advertisement, there is an opportunity for understanding the audience, the idea represented behind the message, and who and what is the target audience. Most importantly, the discussion of who is omitted from media messages must also be a part of any media literacy curriculum. News stories in magazines, television, radio, newspapers, and social media” show time and time again a bias and general underrepresentation of certain racial groups.

Images are another avenue for how a story, or a person can be misrepresented. Magazines that show photographs of models who are incredibly thin or that have been airbrushed, strikingly demonstrate an inaccurate perspective not based on how an average American woman looks or feels. All these contemporary issues can provide valuable implications and lessons for consideration in classrooms, community centers, and in building policy (De Abreu, 2019).

#### **Idea 5: Media Messages are Constructed to Gain Profit and/or Power**

All messages have the intention, such as gaining profits or power. Money is a key factor for why media messages exist. For example, when car commercials show a vehicle with wonderful new safety gimmicks, their ultimate motive is to convince us, the buyers, to purchase the vehicle at a high cost. Each medium delivers messages driven by profit motives. The cost of the product includes a portion of the price of advertising. Other media messages have the similar intentions. Yet, how many students know that very fact? The answer is, very few. The most important part of this concept is that talking about money regarding goods can be very informative for students (De Abreu, 2019).

# 3. Media Literacy Assessment and Measurement

Each of these core concepts and core questions requires higher-order thinking, which is often associated with critical thinking. Analysis and evaluation are the fundamental thought processes necessary for media literacy. In the case of media literacy, “analysis” is about deconstructing messages, detecting bias and propaganda, and detecting the construction of a wide range of media messages and how they portray reality for the viewer.

Assessment must begin with a pre-screening to understand a person’s level of media knowledge. Questions to consider and ask include:

- How do they determine the validity of what they read and watch?
- What/who do they get their current events news from? Why do they trust the source?
- Should anyone be censored or understand censorship?
- Does the truth matter? If yes, how do they know what the truth is?
- How do they think media are biased? Do they understand personal bias and how it is reflected outward?
- Do they know and understand confirmation bias?
- How do they define truth?
- How do they process information in the media—understand what they are seeing. Does it relate to their backgrounds—socioeconomics, race, religion, etc.?



One can go deeper by asking audiences to assess how much media is in their life and take note of their screening and viewing habits for a week. From there, a discussion can be formulated to discern how information is being affected by its origins. There are variations of models on assessment to consider as you work through the ideas of media literacy. The following represents an assessment model for a Global Media Literacy Education Framework (2006) used in our teacher education classrooms.

**Table 2. Global Media Literacy Education Assessment Framework Developed based on Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Education (2006)**

<b>Who assess?</b>	<b>Assessment for learning/ Diagnostic/Formative: The process of seeking and interpreting evidence.</b>	<b>Assessment of learning/ Summative: Assessing the final</b>	<b>Assessment as learning/ Formative: Assessment focuses learning during the teaching activity.</b>
<b>Teacher</b>	<p>Engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit information about student learning to get there</p> <p>Identify and outline learning concepts and lesson plans goals and success criteria</p> <p>Engaging students as learning resources for one another</p> <p>Cultivate students to become responsible of their own learning</p>	<p>Provides final grade/ summative evaluation</p>	<p>Providing descriptive feedback that moves learners forward (i.e., outlining what was done well, what needs improvement, and how to improve)</p>
<b>Student (Self)</b>	<p>Outline learning goals/ rubrics/ checklist</p> <p>Engage in self-assessment and goal setting</p>		<p>Reviews materials and seeks feedback.</p>
<b>Peer</b>	<p>Engage in peer assessment and provide constructive feedback</p>		<p>Provides feedback and common understanding and sharing</p>
<b>Parent</b>	<p>Reviews homework, classroom projects</p> <p>Provides formative insight assessment and provide constructive feedback</p>		<p>Participates in classroom activities, open houses and provide feedback.</p>

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**Other stakeholders (e.g. Department of Education Accreditation agencies)**

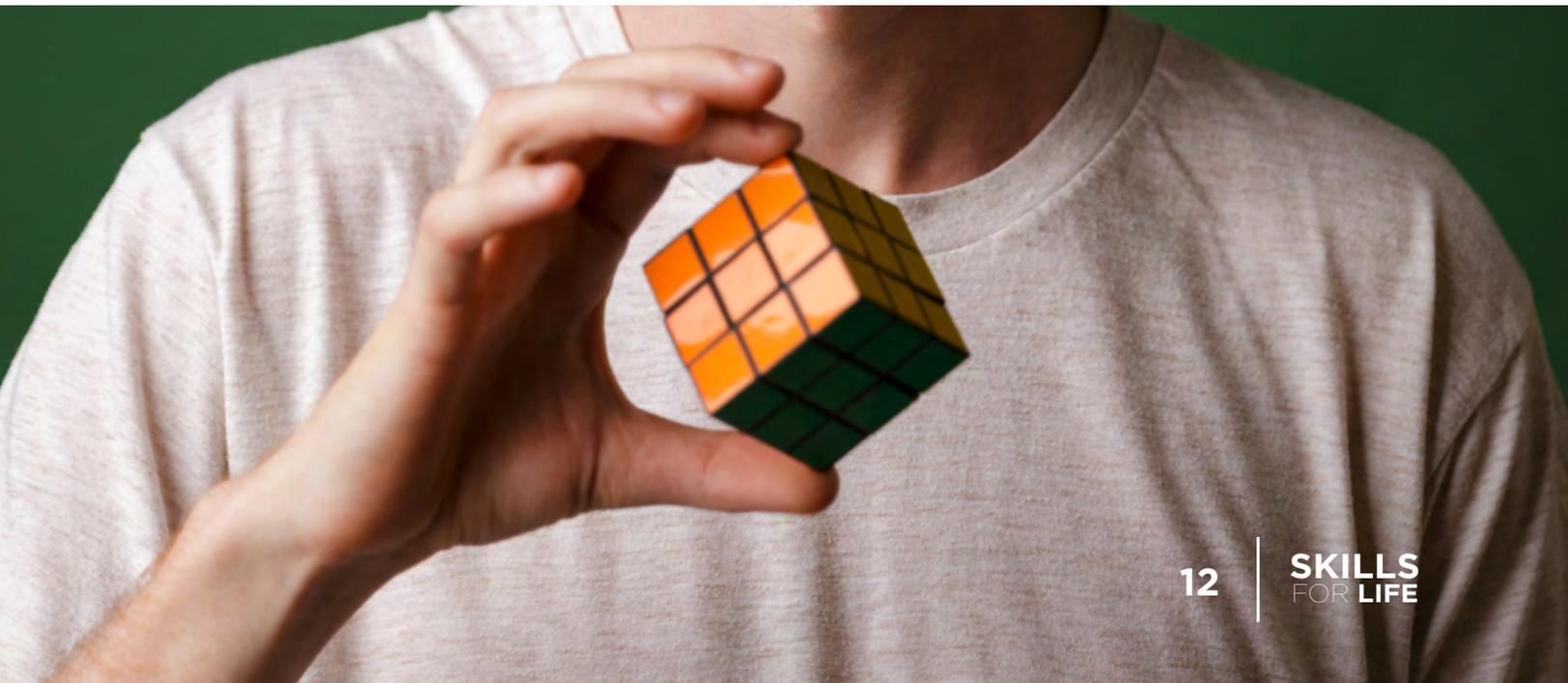
Engage in multicultural dialog and provide constructive feedback and alternative points of view

**Global Community**

Engage in multicultural dialog and provide constructive feedback and alternative points of view

Source: De Abreu & Yildiz (2016)

Students are encouraged to learn through a process wherein they question the questions, deconstruct the learning materials (e.g., textbooks), learn advanced search tools and information literacy skills, and construct their own projects and share them on their e-portfolios. The following Global Media Literacy Curriculum framework (De Abreu & Yildiz, 2016) brings about this type of idea.



**Table 3.**

## **Global Media Literacy Education Curriculum Framework**

### **Research**

(Use Media) Information Literacy (Library Skills, researching internet resources, etc.)

### **Construct**

(Write Media) Media Production (Create an oral history project, video documentary, website, weblog, and multimedia presentation). Students create media projects integrating new media and technologies.

### **Assess**

(Celebrate Learning using Media) Assessment of learning and for learning methods. Students participant in assessment process. They can be encouraged to provide test questions. They assess their peers and use self-assessment checklist and rubrics.

### **Action**

(Talk back to Media) Social reconstructivist theory. It advocates change, improvement and the reforming the society through education. Social reconstructivist perspectives claim that the learning environment is active, that assessment is based on creative work, and that education is relatively autonomous and can and does lead to social change. The role of education is to enhance students' learning through the interpersonal negotiation of meaning. Knowledge is socially constructed through language and interpersonal processes.

Source: De Abreu & Yildiz (2016)

Assessments can also be situated around a student's ability to identify the purpose, target audience, point of view, and construction techniques used in media messages. When there are many issues related to social justice in the mainstream media, assessment should include the ability to identify omitted information from those formats.

Variations on this model can be made, but assessments should also be personalized for the trainer or educator who develops a curriculum to fit the needs of the community.

# 4. Implications

Media literacy education should be provided both in schools and communities centers, such as libraries or senior centers. Media literacy education is needed by all. Some people pass on information without thinking of the consequences of those actions, while some people purposefully create malicious content and share that information. Consider how social media has influenced what is happening in elections or about medical advice, which influences choices being made impacting communities around the world. Messaging done via Facebook contributed to the genocide of people of Myanmar (Mozur, 2018). We have seen many others which have contributed to conspiracy theories.

Messaging has become distorted. People are no longer quite certain about what they are seeing and hearing. There is confirmation bias as algorithms feed information to the user that is believed to be of interest.

A consciousness regarding the world needs to be developed and explored with just as much rigor as learning to read text, and that is what media literacy education offers to each individual. Freire and Macedo (1987) wrote about a need to read the world as a universal motivator for thinking and politicizing the way we accept all elements of society. Teachers and community leaders need to teach students a new set of skills which enable them to locate, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize the vast amounts of information available (Yildiz & De Abreu, 2013).



Without media literacy education, misinformation, disinformation, or “fake news” will continue unfettered. This is a global problem. Misinformation has worked both for and against governments. It has created a distrust of information sources, which is problematic for developing communities who may not have availability to educational access or access to various portals of sources and information. Media literacy will protect people from being prey to those who seek to harm at a societal level such as we have seen with the misinformation regarding the current global health crisis. Some people believe there is a pandemic going on, but others question it. Those that believe there is a health crisis question vaccination. This pandemic has seen the manifestation of misinformation grow to the point where many health organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO), and others have been working to clear their messaging to the public regarding health matters.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, media literacy is even more critical due to coups, political strife, the economy, and access to technology. Furthermore, each country tends to exist within its own realm. Moreover, there are differences between urban and rural areas, which have marginalized some groups. In particular, education has suffered in terms of quality and infrastructure gaps (Mateus, 2018). Low performance on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has demonstrated these relationships to be problematic regarding math performance, cumulative expenditures in educational institutions, and private and public education (OECD, 2018). In these countries, the gap between rich and poor students has continued to increase within international rankings. For example, the PISA report stated:

*In many countries, the quality of the education a student acquires can still best be predicted by the student's or his or her school's socio- economic background. In fact, the 10% most socio- economically advantaged students outperformed their 10% most disadvantaged counterparts in reading by 141 score points, on average across OECD countries. This adds up to the equivalent of over three years of schooling in the countries which were able to estimate learning progress across school grades, and this gap has essentially remained unchanged over the past decade. Moreover, there has also been no real overall improvement in the learning outcomes of students in OECD countries, even though expenditure on schooling rose by more than 15% over the past decade alone (Schleiche, 2018).*

This statement also leads to how students are receiving and understanding information as supplied by online resources which also contributes to perceived knowledge, but not necessarily critical or reliable sources. With algorithms, artificial intelligence, and the digital spread of information, it is important for media literacy education to exist in order to build on navigation and processing skills, but also an understanding of how information is constructed, sourced, presented, and the method of delivery, which can be ambiguous. This teaching would help students think for themselves, participate as citizens in their country, and hopefully not be deceived by false claims which are easily transmitted via social media as well as other media forms.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the audience who will be receiving media literacy education and who will provide media literacy education. For example, will media literacy education be provided to the general public in libraries, community centers, or in schools and colleges? Also, who will be the trainers or instructors? Professional development in media literacy education must be provided for educators. Too often we ask educators to take on tasks in educating students for which they are not trained adequately. The same would be true for trainers in community, business, or non-profit settings. As someone who would be educating others, one must acknowledge who they are in the media that they consume. The acknowledgment of one's own biases must be a part of the work and training before we can move forward into the community.

In conclusion, media literacy education combines knowledge, reflection, and action; promotes educational equity; and prepares new generations to be socially responsible members of a multicultural society. Media literacy education is an imperative for the citizenship of the world if we are to find our way out of the vast rifts that manifests in divisive language, hostile sentiments, and politicized agendas. As is evident from the last several years, much is at stake if people are unable to discern the truth in an (dis)information-saturated world from daily public health issues to political strife, which will impact democratic nations to even peaceful diplomatic global exchanges to culture wars, and even further impact individual's personal and professional lives. Media literacy education is an effective and viable response to many of these issues.



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21st Century Skills is an initiative led by the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB) that brings together public and private sector stakeholders. The initiative strengthens learning ecosystems to equip Latin American and Caribbean citizens with transversal skills.

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