CONFLUX

JOURNAL OF EDUCATION

Volume 1, Issue 7, December 2013

A PEER REVIEWED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

MEDIA LITERACY – FUNCTIONALITY AND PEDAGOGY

Albert Abraham

INTRODUCTION

By nature, human beings are 'beings in communication'. The very attribute of humankind - 'social being' - is meaningless in a non communicating environment. Communication played a vital role in the transition process of human kind to the modernity. Humanity developed not in isolation, but in communion – sharing of ideas, knowledge, technology and skills. The emergence of diverse media platforms in the last millennium facilitated the communication processes with immense vigour and enormous possibilities. But in course of time, the institutionalization of media became extremely complex. It perpetuated inequality in the media economy and magnified the information/knowledge divide. The lopsided and discriminatory socio-political and economic scenarios worsened the situation. This fact reiterates the need to re-comprehend and demystify the present day media and communication practices. As Galician (2004) observed we need to disillusion ourselevs and our media. Media literacy intends to do away the historically set inequalities by enabling the individuals to be active meaning makers of the media contents.

Media literacy is also an extension of the mainstream discourse on literacy. The very purpose of literacy movements is to make the individuals capable of exploring the best use of knowledge and skills available. In the pursuit of knowledge and skills, apart from the formal education and extension activities, media act as feasible input mechanisms in the lives of individuals especially adults. Even within the frameworks of formal education, media and communication technologies are inevitable and irresistible tools to achieve its goals. Media literacy skills people to have control over their media environment and to make use of media to become informed and empowered citizens.   Being literate in a media age requires critical thinking skills that empower us as we make decisions, whether in the classroom, the living room, the workplace, the boardroom, or the voting booth.

UNDERSTANDING MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy is a repertoire of competencies that enable people to analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a wide variety of media formats. There is a growing sense that the role of media for individuals and for society is problematic – but not beyond people's control. Many scholars feel that our current understanding of the role of media for individuals and society is sufficient so that action can and should be taken. The English speaking nations initiated the media literacy ventures in the last decade of the previous century and later other European countries also joined the bandwagon. UNESCO has played an important role in supporting and universalizing media and information literacy by encouraging the development of national information and media literacy policies.

Alan Rubin offered three definitions of media literacy: 1) the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages; 2) knowledge about how media function in society; 3) understanding cultural, economic, political and technological constraints on the creation, production and transmission of messages. Media literacy represents a necessary, inevitable, and realistic response to the complex, ever-changing electronic environment and communication cornucopia that surround us. All these definitions emphasize specific knowledge, awareness and rationality - that is cognitive processing of messages. Media literacy is about understanding the sources and technologies of communication, the codes that are used, the messages that are produced and the selection, interpretation and impact of those messages.

Media literacy is a field of study, a pedagogy and also a movement. Media literacy is a field of study as media systems can be systematically identified and analyzed, and the systematic exploration of a system at work is the foundational characteristic of a field. Media literacy demands "systems thinking" and interdisciplinary study. It's a pedagogy because the basics of media literacy provide a framework and teaching/learning strategy applicable all arenas of life. People can use the concepts to help teach themselves individually on a lifelong basis, or to help teach and share with others, using a common vocabulary and understanding of the concepts. Thereby the opinion leaders who are instrumental in the dissemination of information from media are

Albert Abraham is Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass communication, Indraprastha College for Women and Research Scholar, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Delhi.

empowered and skilled with an inquiry driven pedagogy. Media literacy is a movement since everyone in society has a stake in it. Media literacy is fundamental to having informed and enlightened citizens in a democracy.

Communication scholars William Christ and W. James Potter offer an additional overview of media literacy: "Most conceptualizations of media literacy include the following elements – Media are constructed and construct reality; Media have commercial implications, media have ideological and political implications, form and content are related in reach medium, each of which has a unique aesthetic, codes and conventions and receivers negotiate meaning in media.

The media literacy movements are based on insights derived from many different sources.

- Audience members are indeed active, but they are not necessarily aware of what they do with media.

- The audience's needs, opportunities and choices are constrained by access to media and media content.

- Media content can implicitly and explicitly provide a guide for action.

- People must realistically assess how their interaction with media texts can determine the purposes that interaction can serve for them in their environments.

- People having differing levels of cognitive processing ability and this can radically affect how they use media and what they are able to get from media.

Two Views of Media literacy

Mass Communication scholar Art Silverblatt provided one of the first systematic efforts to place media literacy in audience and culture centered theory and frame it as a skill that must and can be improved. His core argument parallels a point made earlier. "The traditional definition of literacy applies only to print: having knowledge of letters; instructed and learned. However the principal channels of media now include print photography, film, radio and television. In light of the emergence of these other channels of mass communication, this definition of literacy must be expanded" he identified five elements of media literacy.

1. An awareness of the impact of the media on the individual and society.

2. An understanding of the process of mass communication

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

4. An awareness of media content as a "text" that provides insight into our contemporary culture and ourselves.

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

Potter (1998) takes a slightly different approach, describing several foundational or bedrock ideas supporting media literacy.

1. Media literacy is a continuum, not a category. "Media literacy is not a categorical condition like being a high school graduate or being an American… Media literacy is best regarded as a continuum in which there are degrees… there is always room for improvement."

2. Media literacy needs to be developed. "As we reach higher levels of maturation, intellectually, emotionally, and morally we are able to perceive more in media messages… in order to deliver on that potential"

3. Media literacy is multi dimensional. Potter identifies four dimensions of media literacy. Each operates on a continuum. In other words, we interact with media messages in four ways, and we do so with varying levels of awareness and skill:

    a. The cognitive domain refers to mental processes and thinking

    b. The emotional domain is the dimension of feeling.

    c.   The aesthetic domain refers to the ability to enjoy, understand and appreciate media content from an artistic point of view.

    d.   The moral domain refers to the ability to infer the values underlying the messages

4. The purpose of media literacy is to give us more control over our interpretations. "All media messages are interpretations. A key to media literacy is not to engage in the impossible quest for truthful or objective messages. They don't exist".

MEDIA LITERACY OBJECTIVES

Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA) identifies the following key objectives of media literacy.

1. Media Literacy Education requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create.

2. Media Literacy Education expands the concept of literacy (i.e., reading and writing) to include all forms of media.

3. Media Literacy Education builds and reinforces skills for learners of all ages. Like literacy, those skills necessitate integrated, interactive, and repeated practice.

4. Media Literacy Education develops informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society.

5. Media Literacy Education recognizes that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization.

6. Media Literacy Education affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.

COMPREHENDING THE MEDIA GAME: A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

Communications scientists and researchers from virtually all disciplines that study how people and group communicate to survive and prosper have long understood that as humans moved from preliterate or oral, culture to literate culture, they assumed greater control over their environments and lives. With writing came the ability to communicate across time and space. Radio, Television and the recent New Media technology further enhance this potential.

In each media/ communication package there are five elements – sender, message, medium, receiver and feedback. The ABC of media literacy is to differentiate these basic communication elements from a media narrative. It leads to the deeper and critical understanding of media in the given context and enables the individuals to make a value judgment.

David Buckingham (2004) has come up with four key concepts that "provide a theoretical framework which can be applied to the whole range of contemporary media and to 'older' media as well: Production, Language, Representation, and Audience." These concepts help the individuals to critically evaluate and situate a media narrative in the context and to accept or reject or re/deconstruct it.

Production:

Production involves the recognition that media texts are consciously made either by individuals or by groups of people often for commercial profit. This means recognizing the economic interests that are at stake in media production, and the ways in which profits are generated.

Language:

Every medium has its own combination of languages that it uses to communicate meaning. Media languages involve "paradigmatic choices" and "syntagmatic combinations". By analyzing these languages, one can come to a better understanding of how meanings are created.

Representation:

The media offers viewers a facilitated outlook of the world and they re-represent reality. Media production involves selecting and combining incidents, making events into stories, and creating characters. Media representations allow viewers to see the world in some particular ways and not others. Media representations presuppose certain questions: Is this text intended to be realistic and truthful? Do media texts support particular views or ideology? How do media represent particular social groups and realties? And are the stereotypic representations accurate?

Audience:

Understanding the audience means looking at how demographic audiences are targeted and measured, and how media are circulated and distributed throughout. It means looking at different ways in which individuals use, interpret, and respond to media.

Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1988) point out five filters of media – funding, source (of the contents), advertisements, flak (negative response to media) and ideology. In a propagandist era of media practices, such filters determine the contents and the framework of media. Universal media literacy can be an irresistible compulsion for the media organizations to shed out such filters.

MEDIA LITERACY – AN EMPOWERMENT TOOL

The invention of the movable type printing press in the mid – 1400s infinitely expanded the importance and reach of the written word, and power began to shift from those who were born into it to those who could make the best use of communication. If literacy – traditionally understood to mean the ability to read and write – increase people's control over their environments and lives, it logically follows that an expanded literacy – one necessitated by a world in which so much 'reading' and 'writing' occurs in the mass media- should do the same i.e. communicate with others using the available media platforms.

Critical theorist Stuart Ewen (2000) writes: Historically links between literacy and democracy are inseparable from the notion of an informed populace, conversant with the issues that touch upon their lives, enabled with tools that allow them to participate actively in public deliberation and social change. Nineteenth century struggles for literacy and education were never limited to the ability to read. They were also about learning to write and thus about expanding the number and variety of voices heard in published interchanges and debates. He continues "For democracy to prevail, image making as a communicative activity must be undertaken by ordinary citizens as well".

Media literacy involves four interrelated concepts and empowers people with certain skill sets, which are instrumental for a fairer, representative and democratic media environment:

1. Media messages reflect the social, political, economic, and technological environment of the media system in which they are created. They either reinforce that environment - by perpetuating stereotypes, for example - or they challenge it. Hence the query to 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. The media system is unjust, and it perpetuates and strengthens injustice throughout society. 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. 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. Becoming an active agent for change in our media culture is a natural result of being media literate.

BASIC CONCEPTS OF MEDIA LITERACY

The pedagogical or procedural aspects of media literacy are drawn from the following assumptions, which can be observed in the modern media systems and messages.

a. *Media exercise impact on people's thoughts, perceptions and (de)construct cultures.* Our society and culture – even our perception of reality - is shaped by the information and images we receive via the media. In contrast to the past, for many people today, the most powerful storytellers are television, movies, music, video games, and the Internet and affect our thoughts, attitudes and actions.

b. *Media use the language of persuasion.* All media narratives claim to be telling the truth and persuade the audience to believe or do something.

c. *Media construct fantasy worlds.* Movies, TV shows, and music videos propagate fantasies sometimes inspire people to do things that are unwise, anti-social, or even dangerous. Media literacy helps people to recognize fantasy and constructively integrate it with reality.

d. *Media messages reflect the values and viewpoints of media makers and 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.

e. *Media messages contain "texts" and "subtexts.* The text is the actual words, pictures and sounds in a media message. The subtext is the hidden, signified and underlying meaning of the message.

f. *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.

g. *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.

h. *Media effects are subtle and 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.

i. *Media convey ideological and value messages.* Ideology and values are usually conveyed in the subtext. Two examples include news reports reinforcing assumptions about power and authority and advertisements promoting the values of a consumer society.

j. *Our media system reflects the power dynamics in our society and controlled by commercial interests.* 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.

k. *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. It reduces opportunities to participate in making decisions about our government and society.

l. *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.

m. *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.

n. *We can change or create 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.

o. *Media literate youth and adults can be media activists.* Media literacy helps people consume media with a critical eye, evaluating sources, intended purposes, persuasion techniques, and deeper meanings. Media literacy is a great foundation for advocacy and activism for a better media system.

THE PEDAGOGY OF MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy can be seen as contributing to an expanded conceptualization of literacy, treating mass media, popular culture and digital media as new types of 'texts' that require analysis and evaluation. By transforming the process of media consumption into an active and critical process, people gain greater awareness of the potential for misrepresentation and manipulation (especially through commercials and public relations techniques), and understand the role of mass media and participatory media in constructing views of reality.

Media literacy integrates theoretical and critical frameworks rising from constructivist learning theory, media studies and cultural studies. Media literacy campaigns often use an inquiry-based pedagogic model that encourages people to ask questions about what they watch, hear, and read. Media literacy education provides tools to help people critically analyze messages, offers opportunities for learners to broaden their experience of media, and helps them develop creative skills in making their own media messages. Critical analysis can include identifying author, purpose and point of view, examining construction techniques and genres, examining patterns of media representation, and detecting propaganda, censorship, and bias in news and public affairs programming.

Deconstructing Media Messages

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. It's better to call the pedagogy of media literacy, an enquiry based deconstruction. Deconstruction can expose the point of view of media makers, their values, and their biases. It can also uncover hidden meanings – intended or unintended.

Key concepts for deconstructing media include source - all media messages, audience – target groups, text- any piece of media is what you actually see and/or hear, subtext - individual interpretation of a media message/latent text subjected to subjective interpretation, persuasion techniques and point of view.

Basic Deconstruction Questions

1) Whose message is this? Who created or paid for it? Why?

2) Who is the "target audience"? What is their age, ethnicity, class, profession, interests, etc.? What are the clues (words, images, sounds, etc.)?

3) What is the "text" of the message? (What we actually see and/or hear?)

4) What is the "subtext" of the message? (What do you think is the hidden or unstated meaning?)

5) What technologies are used to produce and distribute media texts?

6) What "tools of persuasion" are used?

7) What part of the story is not being told? What part of the story is not being told? How and where could you get more information about the untold stories?

8) What positive messages are presented? What negative messages are presented?

9) What kind of lifestyle is presented and values are expressed?

10) What groups of people does this message empower? What groups does it disempower? How does this serve the media maker's interests?

PROMOTING MEDIA LITERACY

There are various efforts to promote critical media literacy. Now it is no more an exclusive realm of communication scientists and media scholars or practitioners. In many countries, media literacy is undertaken under the bigger umbrella of literacy initiatives. Media studies also became a mainstream discipline in academics and it may provide opportunities for the youth to develop a critical perspective on media. Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) collaborate together in sensitizing the adult population on media issues and even promote alternative media practices.

a.   Alternative Media

Producing a media or message system is no more a complicated affair now. Critical Media literacy efforts encourage people to have their own media – a message transmission/conveyance system. People who get the concrete knowledge and skills of the content generation as well as dissemination can collaborate with various stakeholders and development agencies to create their own media. The community media initiatives comprising of community radio, community video and community newspapers explore the scope alternative media practices. By ensuring participation and community ownership, such endeavours push for a 'counter media culture' – 'people's media'. Even the social networking sites provide enormous scope for countering the vested interests of mainstream media. They not only demystify the present media scenario, but make the people informed and active media followers/consumers. Democratization of media or media consumption is an outcome of universal media literacy.

b.   Creating Counter Ads

The audience can "talk back" to deceptive or harmful media messages by creating *counter-ads*. These are parodies of advertisements, delivering more truthful or constructive messages using the same persuasion techniques as real ads. 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. A counter-ad can also be created by drawing a new image, copying the design and layout of a real advertisement.

MEDIA LITERACY IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

The literacy rate of India is a big concern when the talks on media literacy are initiated. According to the census 2011, every one fourth of Indians are illiterate i.e. they lack the minimum skills to read, write and perform basic arithmetic. In such a situation the discourse on qualitative media consumption by the common people is seemingly absurd. Apart from a minor educated segment, people at large are prone to be the victims of manipulation and propaganda by media. Often people swallow the media narratives uncritically and the 'truth elements' of news or news based programmes are taken for granted.

India being a vibrant democracy must endorse critical media literacy as an affordable tool to empower the democratic activities in the country as well as to enable the citizens to take properly informed decisions in their day to day lives. Technically, in India, the universal campaigns for media literacy have to be initiated even though there are brilliant experiments of community based alternative media practices.

To promote media literacy in India the following initiatives can be undertaken:

1.   Push Media literacy along with the mainstream literacy endeavours by different stake holders at the national and regional levels.

2.   Incorporate Media Studies into the School Curriculum and Higher Education. There can be variety of optional courses related to Media, Journalism, Mass Communication, Film, Multimedia and Information and communication Technology (ICT).

3.   Promote community media initiatives like community radio, community video and community newspapers and encourage citizen journalism.

4. Democratization of the communication infrastructure for better accessibility and promotion of interactive communication systems in the public media sphere.

5. Collaboration with CBOs, NGOs, communication experts and other development agencies like UNESCO.

Interestingly, the government plans to control the overreach of media through regulation and licensing mechanisms. Such attempts are vehemently opposed by the media industry citing the violation of freedom of speech and expression, a fundamental right guaranteed by the constitution. But critical media literacy can restrict the manipulations by media and to ensure a quality driven media environment. If the media houses understand that the people are no more exploitable, they may be forced to restrain themselves with fair and ethical way of doing media. Here the collective strength of the enlightened citizenry revolutionize and transform the socio political and economic factors, which have been detrimental for their development aspirations.

CONCLUSION

Now media literacy is promoted by many different types of organizations, including educational, political, ethnic, religious, feminist and even health groups. They offer perspectives on the role of media in society and in individual lives. Media literacy education helps to develop critical thinking and active participation in our media culture. 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.

While media literacy does raise critical questions about the impact of media and technology, it is not an anti-media movement. Rather, it represents a coalition of concerned individuals and organizations, including educators, faith-based groups, health care-providers, and citizen and consumer groups, who seek a more enlightened way of understanding our media environment.

From a post positivist perspective, the best way to ensure functional use of media is to improve individuals' media-use skills. People need to develop their ability critically reflect on the purpose of media and media content serve for us. People need to able to decide which media to avoid and which media to use in ways that best serve our purposes. We citizens of democracy must make good and effective use of free press. This is what media literacy.

REFERENCES

Abraham, Albert. (2012).Media and Politics – Networking and Nexus. Indian Currents, XXIV (46): 26-29.

Abraham, Albert., Dubey, J. P. (2013). The Road to Literacy: A Reality Check. Indian Journal of Adult Education, 74(2): 73-84.

Baran, Stanley J. and Davis, Dennis K. (2012). Introduction to Mass Communication Theory, (Fifth Edition), New Delhi: CENGAGE Learning.

Christ, W.G., and W.J. Potter. (1998). Media Literacy, Media Education and the Academy. Journal of Communication, 48: 5-15.

Ewen, S. (2000). Memoirs of a Commodity Fetishist. Mass Communication and Society, 3: 439-452.

Galician, Mary-Lou, ed. (2004). Dis-illusioning Ourselves and Our Media: Media Literacy in the 21st Century, Part I: Strategies for Schools. American Behavioural Scientist, 48: 1-136.

Galician, Mary-Lou, ed. (2004). Dis-illusioning Ourselves and Our Media: Media Literacy in the 21st Century, Part II: Strategies for the General Public. American Behavioural Scientist, 48: 143-272.

Herman, E.S., and N. Chomsky. (1988). Manufacturing Consent. New York: Pantheon.

Potter, W.J. (1998). Media Literacy. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rubin, A.M., (1994). Media Usesand Effects: A uses and Gratification Perspective. In J.Bryant and D. Zillman, eds., Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Rubin, A.M., (1998). Editor's Note: Media Literacy. Journal of Communication,48:3-4.

Silverblatt, A. (1995). Media Literacy: Keys to Interpreting Media Message. Westport, CT: Prager.

http://www.medialit.org/voices-media-literacy-international-pioneers

http://namle.net/publications/media-literacy

http://ioewebserver.ioe.ac.uk/ioe/cms/get.asp?cid=4441&4441_0=4987 (Buckingham, David)

http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/ (Media Literacy Project)

www.AMLAinfo.org (Alliance for Media Literate America - ALMA)

******