

Reading the Media That Read You: The Imperative of Including Media Literacy in General Studies Education

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- That the mass media are an important institution in contemporary society cannot be overemphasized.

- They have the capacity to affect society positively and negatively in the sphere of governance, economy and social cohesion.

For example:

- Independent media help in improving governance and reducing corruption.

- They, contribute to economic stability and efficiency and prompting positive social change.

- The media provide information to citizens thereby allowing them to participate in the decisions and debates that affect their lives.

- The media also play the very important role of monitoring in a democracy, thereby enabling citizens to hold their governments and elected officials accountable and consequently helping to achieve better policy implementation.

The media often disseminate factual and useful information, **but unfortunately, Lies, Misinformation and One-sided reporting** are also found in the contents that they produce and propagate.

While the media can simply serve as virtual companion or provide escapist entertainment, they sometimes also **Influence or Persuade** people.

Consequently: People need to know whether what they are being told is **accurate and objective, or based on partisan opinions.**

In view of the crucial role that the media play as educators, entertainers, informers and watchdogs, how influential they are in society cannot be overemphasized.

Hence the need for a specially designed education that will help teach people to differentiate between information dissemination and consent manufacture.

“The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfill this role requires systematic propaganda. In countries where the levers of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over the media, often supplemented by official censorship, makes it clear that the media serve the ends of a dominant elite”.

Herman and Chomsky (1988)

Media literacy:

- Defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms (Wikiversity, 2016).
- 21st century approach to education, which provides a framework for accessing, analyzing, evaluating and creating messages in a variety of forms, ranging from video to print to the Internet, thereby building an understanding of the role of media in society as well as the essential skills of inquiry and self expression required of citizens of a democracy (Thoman and Jolls, 2005, cited in Wikiversity, 2016).
- Media literacy skills enable individuals to separate fact from fiction, recognize when the whole story is not being told and resist exaggerated claims by message sponsors.
- Media literacy also enables people take informed decisions.
- A set of critical skills, which are unnatural or non-instinctive. They are skills that have to be acquired, learned.

So:

A functionalist interpretation of the role of media literacy would suggest that it focuses on helping learners develop the **skills** necessary to understand the nature of mass media, the techniques that they use and the impact of these techniques on society (Ministry of Education Ontario, 1997, cited in Wikiversity, 2016).

All the definitions, presuppose that media literacy is a learning approach. It is also a lifelong learning process.

What are Literacies?

Horton (2007) identified six basic types of literacy which he identified as the “survival literacies”, namely:

1. The core or basic literacy of reading, writing, oracy and numeracy
2. Computer literacy
3. Media Literacy
4. Distance Education and E-Learning
5. Cultural Literacy
6. Information Literacy

- All the literacy types are related and are impossible to acquire without the basic literacy of reading and writing.
- Apparently, the use of literacy as a term here shows its proliferation across many spheres and its application in connection with many things.
- This multi-literacy approach suggests that literacy cannot be confined to skill acquisition or mastery of practices alone, but also to the ability to take “a theoretical distance from what has been learned, account for its social and cultural location, critique and extend it” (Buckingham, 2007).
- The notion of literacy here goes beyond reading and writing. Literacy here involves analysis, evaluation and critical reflection.

Most relevant to the current discussion are two of the literacies:

1. Media literacy and 2. Information literacy.

Information literacy is often discussed in connection with **Media literacy** because of the obvious, symbiotic, relationship between the two.

Media literacy is used interchangeably with media education. Media education is the process by which people become media literate.

Horton (2007) defines information literacy as:

“The set of skills, attitudes and knowledge necessary to know when information is needed to help solve a problem or make a decision; how to articulate that information need in searchable terms and language, how to then search efficiently for the information, retrieve it, interpret and understand it; organize it, evaluate its credibility and authenticity, assess its relevance, communicate it to others if necessary, then utilize it to accomplish bottom-line purposes.”

Media Literacy, according to Moeller (2009)

“Is about access to information: enabling citizens to use their rights of process of governing and to help all voices be heard”. Wally (1996) says media literacy “seeks to empower citizens and transform their passive relationship to media into an active, critical engagement capable of challenging the traditions and structures of a privatized, commercial media culture, and finding new avenues of citizen speech and discourse”.

Whether it is called Media Literacy or Media and Information Literacy, the idea is about **taking control**.

It is about having a much clearer perspective to see the border between the **real world and the world manufactured by the media**.

“It is about the ability to navigate better in the media world to get useful experiences and information without becoming distracted by harmful things and to do this one needs the essential building blocks of personal locus, knowledge structures and skills” (Potter, 2008).

Theoretical Bases of Media Literacy

Media literacy programs over the years have relied on seven different theoretical bases, depending on the influence attributed to the media as either being all powerful or minimally powerful. The seven major theoretical approaches that have been used include:

- The stimulus-response (S-R) model.
- The uses and gratification model (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1973) .
- Cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorelli, 1994; Gerbner, 1998)
- The agenda setting theory (McCombs and Shaw,1972)

These four approaches were seen essentially as American. Piette and Giroux (1998) also outlined three other approaches considered to be European. These are:

The critical perspective

The classical semiotic approach

The cultural studies approach.

The critical approach assumes the media to be all powerful, ideologically laden and used by the ruling class to impose repressive ideologies onto the mind of the masses. It assumes a passive audience and a powerful media. UNESCO's approach to media literacy advocacy is influenced by this view (Shilder, 2017).

The Media and What they do

The term media is very common in everyday use. Vaguely, to most people, it means newspapers, radio, television and, lately, the Internet. The media mediate, they are “go-betweens”, intermediaries or mediators that “either transmit or produce an effect between an individual and the world” (Hassan, 2004). Also, the indissoluble connection of media and technology produces media technologies, which have a powerful effect on how we perceive the world and derive meaning from it (Hassan, 2004).

For the media to play its role - inform citizens (surveillance or monitoring function), educate, provide a platform for public discourse, give publicity to government and political institutions and serve as channel for advocacy of viewpoints, it is presumed that the audience is sufficiently educated and knowledgeable to make rational and effective use of the information circulating in the public sphere (McNair, 2011).

A few Considerations

It is not easy to delineate between the real world and the media world because there are many dimensions through which people determine what is real and what is fantasy. If children view the world through the magic window dimension of the media and see a simplistic, naïve picture of the world, adults are not better off, because old age does not amount to ability to get rid of misperceptions. People view the world through multiple dimensions, which often have to do with their assessment of whether what was portrayed in the media could actually happen as portrayed (Potter, 2008)

People will go beyond the magic window considerations and also judge the reality of media messages along the dimensions of social utility (whether they believe they can use the information portrayed in their own lives) and identity judgment (how much they identify or how close they feel with the portrayed character).

People make judgment on any one of the three dimensions independent of the other two (Potter (2008), citing Dorr (1981), Hawkings, (1977) and Potter (1986).

The important conclusion is that people need to know that processing media messages is not as simple as it may look. The border between the real world and media world is not always clear for everyone to see. There is need to understand the process so as to avoid the harmful consequences of uninformed decisions.

Why Media Literacy or Media Education?

- The imperative of being media literate has become more apparent in this age of religious radicalization, extremism, terrorism and racism.
- It has been established that extremist propaganda has shifted from the public space to more private spaces, such as homes, clubs, laptops and mobile phones (Ahmed, 2017). Extremist organizations now propagate radicalism, hatred and other vices through propaganda videos that are made available to target audience (recruits and followers) online. Exposing extremist ideas and ideologies, however, is just one of the reasons why media should be used, or their content consumed, critically, especially for the young and naïve mind.
- There are several other reasons which may apply to both young and old. Among such reasons, according to Potter (2008), is that **the mass media process is an economic game, involving the consumer, the advertisers, the media companies and the media employees.**

Mass Media Process as An Economic Game:

In this economic game the media consumers bring their time and money in exchange for information and entertainment, while advertisers bring their money to acquire media space and time to present their products and ideas. The media businesses bring money, messages and audiences to compete for talents, who produce messages that are then presented to the audiences, which they accumulate over time as something valuable to sell to advertisers. The last group is the employees, who bring to the game their talent and time. The bottom line is that all players want to maximize the value of their investment. For the individual, the value to be derived is satisfaction.

Audience Strategy:

“Audiences want to increase the value of their exposure by searching for more useful information and entertainment while reducing their costs” (Potter, 2008).

Media Industry Strategy:

The media industry follows the profit maximizing strategy. They construct their audiences and try to reduce risk. The audience in turn can follow the default strategy of continually and habitually exposing themselves to maximum media content and allowing themselves to be conditioned by sticking to the same kind of content year in year out because it is easier for and of insignificant cost to them. On the other hand, the audience can adopt the media literacy strategy, which involves demanding for higher value in return for their invested resources

Adopting the default strategy or the media literacy strategy depends on an individual's **Personal locus**, that is, one's energy and plan, drive and goals.

Conscious efforts must be made to shape this locus and the more one actively engages this locus the more media literate one becomes.

Also important in becoming media literate are two other loci;

1. **The knowledge structures** (organized information in ones memory)
2. **Skills** (tools that are developed through practice, i.e. analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis and abstraction).

Individuals need knowledge structures with a good deal of information about media industries, media messages, media effects, the real world and one's self (Potter, 2004 cited in Martens, 2010).

A number of techniques for increasing personal media literacy (Potter 2008):

Strengthening personal locus,

Focusing on usefulness as a goal,

Developing accurate awareness of personal exposure

Examining your one's mental codes

Acquiring a broad base of useful knowledge, etc.

Conclusion

As individuals, we expose ourselves to media because we want messages that we cannot get in real life because we simply cannot get all the messages we want in real life by ourselves and because it costs far less to get the messages from the media. Media messages producers know the audience wants their reality to be made more exciting than it actually is. So fiction stories are made with fantastic characters and sets while news stories are presented with more attention paid to the anomalies, the unusual, the absurdity, the sensational thereof.

All media messages are presented in a way to retain the appearance of a high degree of reality but are one step removed from reality (Potter, 2008). Therefore, we must continually decide how media messages reflect true reality and how the differences may affect our beliefs about reality. To do this effectively, we must be media literate. The imperative of including media literacy in the general studies program is underlined by the need to lay a foundation for critical analysis of media content at the tertiary level, when learners can be challenged to take a critical look at issues and when they can freely and coherently express their views on issues.

THANK YOU