



Media Literacy: Awareness vs. Ignorance

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Introduction:

Do children know what they receive as information? Can they evaluate content? Are their parents and teachers helpful in selecting programming, or do they let young people judge for themselves what is suitable for reading, listening, watching or browsing?

Parents may imbue their children with values that reflect their own prejudices, preferences or dislikes. But they often fail to realize that the value system translates into how young people receive messages from various media – be they billboards, TV shows, radio music programs, flashy teen magazines or countless websites meant to lure them into linking to endless games, chat rooms, other useful or harmful sites and online shopping markets.

Subliminal messages tucked into programs may influence purchasing patterns. Conflict-filled episodes or video games could incite violence and lead to aggressive behavior. Even innocuous-seeming serials could traumatize young people into confusing fantasy with reality. All with the end result that an unsophisticated approach to the consumption of news, entertainment, and even the more popular “edutainment” may contribute to dysfunctional societies and individuals, or, at the very least, confusion about how to react to the cacophony of messages overloading our sensory circuits.

It may then be worthwhile exploring the realm of media literacy to help young people – and their parents, teachers, counselors – understand the impact of the media and how their values and views are shaped by them.

“What have the Arabs done for their children and what are their future plans?” asked a headline in the pan-Arab daily Al Hayat in January 2004. The article covering a UNICEF/Arab League conference on children’s rights in Tunis touched on key issues like youth in armed conflicts, the right to education, and numerous other matters.

But it said the conference fell short of living up to internationally acceptable standards in dealing with thorny issues, preferring instead to sweep “sensitive” matters like sexual abuse, child labor, domestic violence and female circumcision under the rug, as if they did not exist in the Arab world.

On a more positive note, UNICEF organized a conference in Brazil in April 2004 entitled “How UNICEF Uses the Power of the Media,” during which it sought to reinforce its previous efforts of creating partnerships with “innovative and powerful players in the broadcasting, publishing and Web industries,” according to its executive director Carol Bellamy.

The organizations she mentioned have worked with UNICEF in recent years by developing projects that have touched the lives of millions of children and adults around the world, she added.

Every December, for example, the International Children’s Day of Broadcasting provides an opportunity for all broadcasters around the world to “Tune in to Kids.” The broadcasters air quality programs for and about children and the children become part of the programming process, talk about their aspirations and share information with their peers, said a promotional booklet on the recent conference in Brazil.

UNICEF also offers broadcasters a wide range of professionally produced videotapes and animated public service announcements on significant themes/issues affecting children around the world to raise awareness, inspire individuals to action and even save lives.

It urges local and international broadcasters to support UNICEF in protecting and upholding the rights of children everywhere by being proactive in airing these announcements as widely and with as much frequency as possible.

These PSAs are available in different lengths and languages with an accompanying script that can be used “as is” or tailored to fit the needs of local community or broadcasting stations.

Which brings us to the question: Could better information and knowledge on how to obtain and process messages lead to more enlightened decisions, better choices, protection from harm and improved living conditions?

Very likely, but that involves a process of media literacy that requires **definition/identification and planning/implementation.**

Definition/Identification:

How do we define media literacy in the 21st Century?

The Center for Media Literacy in Canada suggests that media literacy is a 21st Century approach to education.

As such, it provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy also builds an understanding of media in society, as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy, it said.

Taking it a step further, the Center developed five core concepts to explain media literacy. They are listed as:

- All media messages are constructed.
- Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
- Different people experience the same message differently.
- Media have embedded values and points of view.
- Media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power.

So that should lead us to ask the following questions:

- Who created this message?
- What techniques are used to attract my attention?
- How might different people understand this differently from me?
- What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
- Why was this message sent?

If young people were to ask the same questions, the Center for Media Literacy adds these components:

- What is this? How is this put together?
- What do I see, hear, smell or taste? What do I like or dislike about this?
- What might other people feel or think about this? What do I feel and think about this?
- What does this tell me about how other people live and behave? Is anything or anyone left out?
- Is this trying to sell me something? Is this trying to tell me something?

Ithaca College in New York very creatively came up with something called “Project Look Sharp” through which it suggested 12 principles for incorporating media literacy into any curriculum.

In general, it advises teachers to rely on instructional videos, CDs, DVDs in classrooms using short segments and leaving the lights on to encourage active discussion. Teachers are also urged to pause frequently to ask questions, clarify terms and concepts or elaborate on a point made during the film.

“If possible, show short segments on the same topic from several different sources pointing out omissions and biases when appropriate,” the booklet said.

Then, when engaging in critical analysis of any media message, the booklet asks teachers to encourage students to consider:

1. Who is speaking and what is their purpose? Who produced or sponsored the message?
2. Who is the target audience, and how is the message specifically tailored to them?
3. What techniques are used to attract attention?
4. What values and lifestyles are promoted? What is communicated as good to be, or have, or do? What is not good to be, or have, or do?
5. What is implied without being specifically stated, especially about the credibility of the message?
6. What is left out of the message that might be important to know?

Planning/Implementation

How can media literacy be incorporated into curricula?

“Project Look Sharp’s” 12 principles suggest:

- Using media to practice general observation, critical thinking, analysis, perspective-taking and production skills.
- Using media to stimulate interest in a topic.
- Identifying ways in which students may already be familiar with a topic through media.
- Using media as a standard pedagogical tool.
- Identifying erroneous beliefs about a topic fostered by media content.
- Developing an awareness of issue of credibility and bias in the media.
- Comparing the ways different media present information about a topic.
- Analyzing the effect that specific media have had on a particular issue historically and/or across different cultures.
- Using media to build and practice specific curricular skills by using print components (books, newspapers, magazines) to practice reading and comprehension skills.
- Using media to express students’ opinions and illustrate their understanding of the world.
- Using media as an assessment tool.
- Using media to connect students to the community and work toward positive change.

The Internet:

Project Look Sharp also provides guidelines for examining the credibility of information on the Internet by suggesting browsers check out the authorship or sponsorship of content and their qualifications or reputations. The questions to ask would be:

Is there an author and is the page signed? Is the author qualified or reputable? Is the sponsor reputable? Who is the sponsor? Is there a link to the author's or sponsor's site? How else can you determine the origin of the information? Do links take you outside the site and are they related?

Another key factor is accuracy. So one needs to check for reliability and to cross-check sources. Typographical errors, spelling mistakes, bad grammar, incorrect data or biographies and references are usually easy to spot.

Objectivity should not be overlooked. So media literacy requires us to determine whether there is a minimum of bias in the information or if the Web page is meant to influence opinion. And what about advertising, notably ads linked to commercial sites selling products or services?

Currency of information is also important. It means we need to verify whether a page is dated – dates can be spotted at the top or bottom of a page – and how often it is updated. Are the links current, outdated or dead?

Is the page still under construction or is it complete? Is the material substantive or available in parts? Are there an index and a site map to help browsers?

Part of an implementation strategy for media literacy could include establishing ways to combat prejudice and providing tools for tolerance.

Combating prejudice in media literacy could be summarized as:

1. Being mindful of language used and avoiding stereotypical remarks often found in publications, in broadcast outlets and online.
2. Being knowledgeable and providing accurate information.
3. Complaining or petitioning when harmful comments, programs and materials are disseminated.
4. Working with school administrators to plan joint efforts in countering prejudice in schools, in the media or in the community.
5. Creating various materials and planning events to counter prejudice. Seeking media attention to cover such efforts.

Creating tools for tolerance could include:

1. Not buying items that promote or glorify violence.
2. Pointing out stereotypes and cultural or religious misinformation depicted in movies, TV shows, computer games and other media.
3. Gathering information about volunteer opportunities and letting children select projects for family participation.

4. Sponsoring conflict resolution teams and promoting their activities to the media.
5. Writing letters to editors of newspapers that ignore any segment of the community.
6. Creating websites, interactive or print materials for and by young people to share concerns and aspirations with their peers nationwide and across borders.

Recommendations:

If we are to succeed in formulating programs that foster media literacy for young people, we should become more sensitized ourselves and familiar with available resources in different formats.

UNICEF, for example, has a useful page called “Magic” that provides information on links and contacts about organizations concerned with children and young people. It’s available at <http://www.unicef.org/magic/contacts/general.html> and lists dozens of handy sites.

The Media Education Foundation is another interesting resource that ought to be consulted for data on media, gender and diversity, health, race, representation, commercialism and politics. It’s available at <http://mediaed.org>.

The Media Channel provides good information for teachers and a virtual media literacy classroom at <http://mediachannel.org> where browsers can read about advertising/marketing, consumerism, propaganda, privacy, representation, violence in news and entertainment, news, bias, public relations and ethics, to name a few topics.

One can easily find a gold mine of information by conducting an online search on the topic of media literacy. Unfortunately there aren’t adequate resources in Arabic. So perhaps someone ought to start producing them.

And how does one teach media literacy in an age of “edutainment?”

One can start by creating materials, organizing training workshops, planning media awareness events and organizing conferences on media literacy.

Given the growing concern among educators, parents, young people, community activists, religious authorities and others about the media and their impact, we can help school-age children:

- Understand words and concepts of media literacy
- Introduce the words and concepts of media literacy into the mainstream local culture
- Understand the impact of media
- Involve communities in addressing their issues to the media
- Develop media skills at the community and local levels.

The impact of a “media literate” society could also result in encouraging good governance and poverty reduction in under-developed areas and have a ripple effect by translating positive outcomes from the community and local levels into national level schemes.

According to Dr. Ann Hudock, Senior Advisor for Democracy and Governance at the Washington-based organization World Learning for International Development, many governments do not support free media, with people in developing countries tending to be unaware of the role of international financial institutions and poverty reduction processes.

The result, she said, is that without knowledge, citizens cannot adequately contribute to policy discussions, monitor their government, or even formulate informed opinions to convey to civil society organizations and political representatives.

Additionally, the media would be better served by providing coverage of news and creating entertainment that is suited to audience needs. Consumers of news and entertainment who can articulately and rationally convey their likes and dislikes are more credible interlocutors and more likely to succeed in their quest.

According to the Media Channel, in the 21st Century, the ability to understand, evaluate, access and use media is a form of literacy as important and basic as reading and writing.

Teaching media, it argues, can:

- Build critical thinking and questioning skills
- Support creative youth expression
- Inspire active, informed citizens
- Address issues of self-esteem and respect for others
- Engage students through the news, advertisements and pop culture that surround them.

Media Literacy in Action:

In conclusion, we should start projects with students in various Arab countries aimed at raising awareness about the media.

A typical program would incorporate:

- Identification of target audiences
- Organization of media literacy activities, such as “Media Weeks” in different regions of a country, talks, discussion groups, workshops and interactive presentations countrywide
- Development of media literacy toolkits for mothers and children, particularly in rural areas
- Organization of media literacy conferences grouping mothers, children, teachers, media practitioners, academics and others involved in the field.

- Evaluation of various phases of the project.

At the Arab Women's Media Forum in Abu Dhabi in 2002, I proposed creating an online news service for children, run by children - let's say ages 8-18 - under the guidance of adults. Its young reporters can reach out to others around the world and communicate their concerns and fears about the planet they all share.

There are no easy answers. But the sooner adults and young people begin tackling the complex issues of media literacy, the better positioned they will be to cope with any adverse effects of the plethora of messages bombarding them from every direction.

Thank you.

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