

General tools for media literacy

The following observations can serve as general tools for more critical consumption of media:

- **Media construct our culture.** Our perception of reality is shaped by the media we use to communicate with one another.
- **Media contain ideological and value messages.** Some of these messages are intended and some are unintended. Media messages often target specific groups, and they can be positive or negative. They can be intentionally obvious (texts) or intentionally hidden (subtexts).
- **Media use identifiable techniques.** TV commercials, for example, are very carefully constructed to influence our attitudes and behavior, using identifiable persuasion techniques. Flattery, repetition, fear, humor, powerful words and sexual images are especially common and effective techniques of media persuasion.
- **Individuals construct their own meanings from media.** Although media makers attempt to convey specific messages, people receive and interpret them differently. All meanings and interpretations should be respected.
- **The human brain processes moving images in a different manner than text.** TV images move at 30 frames per second. The information they transmit often bypasses the analytic brain and triggers emotions and memory in the unconscious and reactive parts of the brain. Only a small proportion surfaces in consciousness.
- **Media is most powerful when it operates at an emotional level.** Most fiction seeks to engage our hearts as well as our minds. Advertisements take this further, and seek to transfer feelings from an emotionally-charged symbol to a product. Most ads tell us nothing truly useful about the product except its name and appearance.
- **Filmic techniques and techno-effects enhance the emotional impact of media.** Camera angles, framing, reaction shots, quick cuts, lighting tricks, computer graphics, music, sound effects and other techniques are used to reinforce the messages in the script.
- **Most media are controlled by commercial interests.** In the United States, the marketplace largely determines what we see on television, what we hear on the radio, what we read in newspapers or magazines. As we use media, we should always be alert to the commercial self-interest of most media makers. As global media monopolies grow and corporate interests become harder to identify, asking questions becomes even more important.

- **Media construct fantasy worlds.** While fantasy can be pleasurable and entertaining, it can also be harmful. Movies, TV shows and pop songs sometimes inspire people to engage in dangerous behaviors. Advertising constructs a fantasy world where all problems can be solved with a purchase. Successful individuals are able to recognize fantasy and constructively integrate it with reality.
- **Media messages can be decoded.** By “deconstructing” media, we can identify the techniques of persuasion being used and recognize how media makers are trying to influence us.
- **Media literate individuals are active consumers of media.** Many forms of media – especially television – seek to create passive, yet impulsive, consumers. Media literate individuals attempt to consume media with a critical eye, evaluating sources, intended purposes, techniques, and deeper meanings.