

Part 3

**Taking part in politics:
participation through
communication**

Unit 8: Liberty

Debating in public

Why doesn't freedom (of speech) work without strict rules?

Unit 9: The media

Taking part in democracy through the media

The producers and users of media as gatekeepers and agenda setters

UNIT 8
LIBERTY
Upper secondary level

Debating in public
Why doesn't freedom (of speech)
work without strict rules?

8.1 What issues are interesting for us?

The students take part in planning the debate

8.2 Preparing for the debate

Key statements and debating strategies

8.3 We debate – we decide – we report

Debating and decision making in public

8.4 One debate – different perspectives

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Unit 8

Liberty

Debating in public

Why doesn't freedom (of speech) work without strict rules?

Introduction for teachers

Why doesn't freedom (of speech) work without strict rules?

To some readers, this question may seem strange. After all, freedom means we can say and do what we want. Democracy is a system for open, free societies. Strict rules remind us of something very different – authoritarian rule for example. So what is the message behind this question? Put briefly, freedom and equality are twins. We all enjoy rights of freedom, but we need equal chances to exercise them – and that is what rules are there for. In this unit, the students will experience the importance of this principle for taking part in democracy.

Why this unit focuses on debating

Citizens who take part in democracy will take part in discussions and debates, and in doing so, they exercise their human rights to free opinion and expression. Arguing in public is a skill that can be learned, so students need training in school. For this reason, the students train how to carry out a debate, and this unit is linked to the key concept of freedom. Freedom of speech and expression is particularly important here.

What the students do in the debating lesson

Eleven students take part in the debate. There are two debating teams of five students each, and a chairperson. The other students listen to the debate, but they play an active part too. Three tandem teams of students write a news story on the debate and report back to the class in the last lesson of the unit. The remaining students act as an audience, and their role is to assess the arguments, decide which party has finally convinced them, and vote on which side they support. As in politics, one side wins the majority of supporters.

What will the students learn in this unit?

The debate follows strict rules that make sure that each student receives a fair, equal share of speaking time. So the chairperson will interrupt students who want to speak longer than they are allowed to. But this rule is necessary, as it protects every speaker's right to free expression – but within a strict limit. This is why freedom doesn't work without strict rules (see the subtitle of this unit). Without this principle, no democratic system would work, nor would human rights mean much in people's lives.

What the teacher's task is in this unit

In this unit, a lot of time is given to the students to work on their own in order to train their skills of debating and observation, but also to take responsibility for what they do. Lessons 2-4 all begin with student inputs. When the students work on their own, the teacher acts like a coach: he/she watches the students to find out what they can do well, and which of their competences need more attention and training. He/she supports them if they ask for help, but should not give them the solutions to their tasks.

Competence development: links to other units in this volume

What does this table show?

The title of this manual, *Taking part in democracy*, focuses on the competences of the active citizen in democracy. This matrix shows the potential for synergy effects between the units in this manual. The matrix shows what competences are developed in unit 8 (the shaded row in the table). The strongly framed column shows the competences of political decision making and action – strongly framed because of their close links to taking part in democracy. The rows below indicate links to other units in this manual: what competences are developed in these units that support the students in unit 8?

How can this table be used?

Teachers can use this matrix as a tool for planning their EDC/HRE classes in different ways.

- This matrix helps teachers who have only a few lessons to devote to EDC/HRE: a teacher can select only this unit and omit the others, as he/she knows that some key competences are also developed, to a certain extent, in this unit – for example, analysis, reflexive use of the media, and responsibility.
- The matrix helps teachers make use of the synergy effects that help the students to be trained in important competences repeatedly, in different contexts that are linked in many ways. In this case the teacher selects and combines several units.

Units	Dimensions of competence development			Attitudes and values
	Political analysis and judgment	Methods and skills	Taking part in democracy Political decision making and action	
8 Liberty	Identifying key statements Linking and ranking arguments; making a choice Analysing the selective construction of reality by the media	Debating: making brief and clear statements Playing in a team Writing a news story	Making a decision by majority vote	Ethics of mutual recognition
2 Responsibility			Responsibility is even more important than rules to make democracy work (units 2 and 7)	
7 Equality	Analysing and solving the majority/minority issue			
5 Rules and law			Neutralising the potential of permanent conflict of interests by designing a framework of laws and rules	

6 Government and politics	Studying debates on agenda setting and political decision making		Identifying where citizens can intervene in political decision-making processes	
9 The media	Analysing the selective construction of reality by the media	Writing a news story	Reflexive use of information transmitted by the media	

UNIT 8: Liberty – debating in public

Why doesn't freedom (of speech) work without strict rules?

Lesson topic	Competence training/learning objectives	Student tasks	Materials and resources	Method
Lesson 1 What issues are interesting for us? <i>(3 weeks in advance)</i>	Taking responsibility. Criteria for selecting issues for a debate in class: political relevance, students' interests, links to student's understanding and experience.	The students brainstorm ideas and collect information on issues for the debate.	✍ Student handout 8.1. Information through the media. Records of personal experience and findings. Flipchart.	Work in tandem teams.
Lesson 2 Preparing for the debate	Participation: the students make a choice by vote. Methods and skills: team work.	The students prepare their roles for the debate.	✍ Student handouts 8.2–8.5, 9.1. Media information. A tabloid and quality paper, a youth magazine.	Group work, co-operative learning.
Lesson 3 We debate – we decide – we report	Speaking freely; arguing with an opponent; co-operating in a team. Observing and assessing an exchange of arguments.	The students take part in, or watch and listen to a debate. Follow-up tasks for the groups to prepare for the reflection lesson.	✍ Student handouts 8.2–8.5, 9.1.	Debate. Group work (vote). Debriefing.
Lesson 4 One debate – different perspectives	Analysing and judging a shared experience. Media construct our perception of reality. Rules secure equal opportunities to exercise rights of freedom.	The students compare news stories on the debate. The students reflect on their debating experience.	News stories written by students. 📄 Materials for teachers 9.1.	Presentations. Discussion.

Lesson 1

What issues are interesting for us?

The students take part in planning the debate

Please note: this lesson takes place three weeks in advance of the others

This matrix sums up the information a teacher needs to plan and deliver the lesson.	
Competence training refers directly to EDC/HRE.	
The learning objective indicates what students know and understand.	
The student task(s), together with the method, form the core element of the learning process.	
The materials checklist supports lesson preparation.	
The time budget gives a rough guideline for the teacher's time management.	
Competence training	Taking responsibility; selecting items and materials by applying a set of criteria.
Learning objective	Criteria for selecting issues for a debate in class: political relevance, students' interests, links to students' understanding and experience.
Student tasks	The students brainstorm ideas and collect information on issues for the debate.
Materials and resources	Information through the media. Records of personal experience and findings. Flipchart on the wall to display the students' suggestions, with checklist (names of students with a tick box). ✍ Student handout 8.1.
Method	Work in tandem teams.
Time budget	Getting the students involved. 15 min
	Introduction of the task. 10 min
	Work in tandem teams. 15 min
	Interval between lessons 1 and 2. 3 weeks

Information for the teacher: why this lesson takes place three weeks in advance

This lesson takes place three weeks in advance of the others to enable the students to prepare an input for the second lesson and to take part in planning the debate in lesson 3. This lesson serves as an **advance organiser**: the students acquire the information that they need for a task beforehand.

Taking part in planning lessons corresponds to taking part in the community. In all cases the active citizen is the informed citizen. Viewed from this perspective, the advance organiser in this unit demonstrates a general principle of participation in democracy.

The advance organiser requires a time span of approximately three weeks between the first and second lessons. (The teacher must therefore decide how to use the lessons within this interval.) The advance organiser consists of two phases:

Phase 1 (two weeks): the students work in tandem teams. At the end of phase 1, each team has worked out a suggestion for a debating issue that they think is interesting and suitable. They provide information material for the class (one page).

A deadline defines the date when phase 1 ends and phase 2 begins.

Phase 2 (one week): reading time. At the end of phase 2, every student knows all the suggested issues and has read all the materials. Each student has chosen an issue for the debate.

Time structure for the advance organiser

Lessons	Lesson 1		Lesson 2	
Student activities	Phase 1 The students work out their suggestion for a debating issue.		Phase 2 The students read the proposals. The class chooses an issue by vote.	
Time line	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	
Deadline →				

Lesson description

Preparations before the lesson

For step 1, line of debating: if necessary, the teacher has cleared the classroom for the debating exercise.

For step 2.3, instructions on the task: the teacher has attached two flipchart sheets to the wall in the classroom.

1. Getting the students involved

Preparation: the teacher marks a line on the floor with a piece of string, about five metres long. The students will need enough space to be able to stand on either side of this line, facing each other. If the classroom is too small or too crowded, this exercise can be done in the corridor.

The teacher asks the students to stand up and form a circle around the line. Then the teacher announces: “Every child should spend an additional year at school.”

The teacher asks the students to move to one side of the line – to the left, if they support the statement, to the right if they disagree. They spend a few minutes sharing their reasons and ideas.

Then the teacher asks the groups to exchange their arguments. There are a few rules to be observed:

1. The two sides take turns in presenting an argument.
2. The speakers must not be interrupted.
3. The speakers have 30 seconds to make their points.

The students then engage in an exchange of arguments that resembles a debate. After five minutes, or earlier if one side has run out of ideas, the teacher stops the debate and asks the students to return to their seats – ideally arranged in an open square to support communication.

2. Introduction of the task

2.1 Why debating is important for taking part in democracy

The teacher refers to the previous activity – it was a debate. Within a short time, many ideas and arguments were exchanged. The students may comment on their experience.

The teacher explains that the students should develop their debating skills, as many discussions in democratic settings are conducted in this way. Citizens enjoy the human rights to free opinion and expression, but they need debating skills to exercise them.

The teacher makes sure that the students understand and accept this definition of their training task.

2.2 Clarification: what makes a good issue for a debate?

The teacher refers to the topic – it was a good issue for a debate, as the students showed. What makes a good issue for a debate?

The teacher listens to the students’ ideas and suggestions, and sums them up in keywords on the blackboard or flipchart. It may be expected that they will largely correspond to the five criteria (3a-3e) on *≈* student handout 8.1.

The teacher explains that the forthcoming debate will be more interesting, and the students will be more successful if they carry out the debate on an issue of their choice. They therefore have the opportunity to choose an issue in the next lesson in three weeks time. Until then, they should develop suggestions for the issue the debate is to be held on. The class will make a choice in the second lesson.

The teacher distributes *see* student handout 8.1 and refers to the criteria the students have suggested and asks them to compare them with the criteria under 3a-3e on the handout. If the students and teacher agree to modify the list of criteria, they do so.

2.3 Task instructions: collecting the ideas on the flipchart

The teacher goes to the flipcharts on the wall and asks the students to read *see* student handout 8.1 while he/she draws the following layout:

What is a good issue for a debate?			
Everyday or school life	Social or cultural issues	Political issues	Other issues

After the students have read the handout, the teacher refers to the flipchart. The issue the students discussed at the beginning of the lesson was a political issue – how education should be organised in our country. But other issues are interesting too:

- Political issues;
- Social issues;
- Issues in school or everyday life;
- Other issues – for all other ideas.

The students can either draw on their personal experience or what they know about the current political agenda, or they can search for information.

At this point, the students should have some examples. The teacher encourages the students to come forward with their ideas. If this proves too difficult, the teacher can help with these examples:

- *Everyday or school life*: “Cars do more harm than good.”
- *Social or cultural issues*: “Television plays a positive role in society.”
(Or: the Internet, mobile phones, etc.)
- *Political issues*: “Women should be treated the same as men.”

2.4 Task instructions: observing the deadline

Finally the teacher explains why there is a deadline. To give everyone the chance to read the materials, a deadline is given – five school days before the first lesson is due. The students must understand that they will select the issue, but they must have read the materials beforehand. Otherwise a democratic vote cannot take place, as this has to be organised efficiently within the time available during the lesson. There will be no time during the lesson to read the materials.

The teacher tells the students where to deposit their note sheet and materials.

Finally he/she points out that it is important for the students to make up their minds which issue they would like hold the debate on.

3. Work in tandem teams

The students form tandem teams and work on their own, following the instructions given on the handout and during the lesson. They set their own homework.

Lesson 2

Preparing for the debate

Key statements and debating strategies

This matrix sums up the information a teacher needs to plan and deliver the lesson.

Competence training refers directly to EDC/HRE.

The learning objective indicates what students know and understand.

The student task(s), together with the method, form the core element of the learning process.

The materials checklist supports lesson preparation.

The time budget gives a rough guideline for the teacher's time management.

Competence training	Participation: the students make a choice by vote. Methods and skills: team work.	
Learning objective		
Student tasks	The students prepare their roles for the debate.	
Materials and resources	<p>☞ Student handouts 8.2-8.5, 9.1.</p> <p>Media information.</p> <p>A tabloid and quality paper, a youth magazine.</p>	
Method	Group work, co-operative learning.	
Time budget	1. The students choose an issue.	10 min
	2. Forming groups for the debate.	10 min
	3. Group work.	20 min

Information box

The unit consists of two student activities: 1. the students choose their debating issue and 2. the students form groups and prepare for the debate in their different roles: the two debating teams (the “affirmative”, or pro side, and the “negative”, or con side).

The main part of the lesson should be spent on preparing the debate. Therefore it is important to conduct the vote smoothly and efficiently.

For the news reporter groups, it is an exciting experience to see their story published by a real newspaper. The teacher may suggest this idea to the news reporter teams. If the students agree, the teacher decides with them how to approach a newspaper.

1. The students choose an issue

The teacher performs as chairperson in this first lesson sequence. First he/she thanks the students for producing so many interesting ideas. Then the teacher explains the procedure.

The students are expected to have read the ideas and materials produced by their fellow students, and to have made up their minds which issue they would like the debate to be held on. The voting procedure can be conducted by two students. One asks each student for their choice. The second notes the topics on a list on the board, marking those that have been named several times. Then the

topics are ranked, and by majority vote, the class makes a choice between the first three at the top of the ranking list. The topic chosen then becomes the issue for the debate.

2. Forming groups for the debate

The teacher announces that the students will now prepare for the debate. A debate follows certain rules, and the students form groups and teams that perform in different roles.

The students are given ✎ student handout 8.2 and read it in silence. They ask questions to clarify whatever needs further explanation, and (preferably) other students or the teacher provide the answers. The students should understand what role the different teams perform.

The students join one of the following teams. This table shows what groups take part in the debate and what handouts they need. The debating teams should have one additional member in reserve in case one team member is sick on the debating day.

The two chairpersons divide the tasks of conducting the debate and the audience's vote between them. If one chairperson is sick, the other takes over both parts.

Group	Number of members (+ reserve members)	✎ Student handout No.
Debating team No. 1 ("affirmative")	5 (+1)	8.3
Debating team No. 2 ("negative")	5 (+1)	8.3
First and second chairperson	2	8.2, 8.4, 8.5
Reporter teams (quality paper, tabloid paper, youth magazine)	3 x 2	8.6, 9.1
Audience	All remaining students	8.5

This can be done conveniently by creating columns on the blackboard or a couple of flipcharts. The students then enter their names under the group of their choice. If a group is overbooked, the teacher and the class decide jointly how to solve their problem. It is *theirs*, not the teacher's. Experience has shown that students are willing to co-operate, and the groups are formed quickly, with a satisfactory result for the students.

3. Preparations for the debate

The groups receive a copy of ✎ student handout 8.3 (debating teams), 8.4 (audience) or 8.5 (press teams). The groups spend the second half of the lesson planning their activity and can assign themselves a piece of homework if necessary. The teacher acts as observer and coach. As a coach, the teacher does not approach the groups, read their papers, or even participate in producing results. If the groups need any support, they approach the teacher. If not, they have the liberty and responsibility to work as they think right. Experience has shown that students appreciate the confidence that is placed in them, which works as a strong incentive and gives encouragement.

The teacher provides news reporters with a copy of their type of paper – tabloid paper, quality paper, or youth magazine. This will help them to imagine what kind of profile and reading audience their paper has, and what their news story should look like.

If at all possible, the teacher asks the students to arrange the tables and chairs for the debate as indicated in ✎ student handout 8.2 before the next lesson begins.

Lesson 3

We debate – we decide – we report

Debating and decision making in public

This matrix sums up the information a teacher needs to plan and deliver the lesson.

Competence training refers directly to EDC/HRE.

The learning objective indicates what students know and understand.

The student task(s), together with the method, form the core element of the learning process.

The materials checklist supports lesson preparation.

The time budget gives a rough guideline for the teacher's time management.

Competence training	Speaking freely; arguing with an opponent; co-operating in a team. Observing and assessing an exchange of arguments.
Learning objective	Related to the topic under discussion.
Student tasks	The students take part in, or watch and listen to a debate. Follow-up tasks for the groups to prepare for the reflection lesson.
Materials and resources	☞ Student handouts 8.2-8.5, 9.1.
Method	Debate, group work (vote), debriefing.
Time budget	1. The debate. 25 min
	2. The audience's vote. 10 min
	3. Homework: inputs for the reflection. 5 min

Information box

This lesson includes the key task of the whole unit, the debate. The extensive preparation in the previous lesson was intended to give the students the confidence to act out their roles.

The chairpersons are responsible for managing the debate and the audience's vote.

The teacher opens and concludes the lesson, and primarily acts as an observer.

The ☞ student handouts give the groups rules and instructions on how they are to perform their roles. This setting is typical for task-based learning: the lesson is highly structured through different tasks and strictly framed by the rules and schedule, while the teacher almost never takes the floor. But nevertheless, the learning objectives that the teacher has in mind are present throughout the lesson – even more so than in frontal instruction, as now the students have taken ownership.

Lesson description

✍ Student handout 8.4 (The role of the chairpersons) gives a detailed description of how the debate and the audience's vote take place. Therefore the description of these stages can be very brief.

1. The debate

The teacher announces the agenda of the lesson: the debate, followed by the audience's vote and a debriefing. If necessary, the teacher asks the students to arrange the tables and chairs in the seating order as indicated in ✍ student handout 8.2.

Then the first chairperson takes over. The students take their seats, as debating teams, chairperson, audience and press reporters. The teacher takes a seat in the audience, preferably in a back row. The students should not seek and establish eye contact with the teacher, but instead with each other. They perform in their roles, and the teacher listens.

2. The audience's vote

The second chairperson conducts the audience's discussion and the vote. The teacher leaves the audience here, and observes the students from a distance. While the students in the audience are discussing their vote, the debating teams and the news reporters listen.

After five minutes, the chairperson ends the discussion and conducts the vote. After the chairperson has concluded the vote, the teacher takes over.

3. Homework: inputs for the follow-up lesson (lesson 4)

The teacher thanks the chairpersons for managing the lion's share of the lesson. Then he/she thanks the students and the audience, and praises as he/she thinks appropriate. No critical comments should be made at this point. The fourth lesson gives an opportunity to give feedback and to reflect on the debating and voting lesson, and this is what the teacher tells the students.

He/she asks all the students with the exception of the news reporters to think about their feelings, impressions and views on the debating session and the follow-up discussion and vote, and to prepare a brief statement as input for the next lesson, addressing the following key questions:

1. State your opinion on the issue under debate. Explain what argument convinced you most in forming your opinion.
2. From your point of view, describe what effect the rules, in particular the one minute time limit, had on the debate.

The press reporter teams should not be given this task in addition to having to produce their news story. The teacher calls the six students to decide how the stories are to be disseminated – by displaying two or three copies on the wall, or by giving a handout to each student.

Lesson 4

One debate – different perspectives

The students reflect on the debate

This matrix sums up the information a teacher needs to plan and deliver the lesson.

Competence training refers directly to EDC/HRE.

The learning objective indicates what students know and understand.

The student task(s), together with the method, form the core element of the learning process.

The materials checklist supports lesson preparation.

The time budget gives a rough guideline for the teacher's time management.

Competence training	Analysing and judging a shared experience.	
Learning objectives	Media construct our perception of reality. Rules secure equal opportunities to exercise rights of freedom.	
Student tasks	The students compare news stories on the debate. The students reflect on their debating experience.	
Materials and resources	News stories written by students. 📄 Materials for teachers 9.1	
Method	Presentations. Discussion.	
Time budget	1. Three news reports with discussion.	15 min
	2. Reflection: how did the rules affect the debate?	15 min
	3. Debriefing.	10 min

Information box

The students reflect on the lesson from two perspectives, that of contents and that of the framework of rules. The students may be more interested in one aspect than the other, and the focus can be shifted accordingly, giving more time to one topic.

The debriefing gives the students the opportunity for some general feedback on the unit.

The students have prepared inputs that allow everyone to make a contribution during the lesson. Therefore the teacher can, and should, give a large share of speaking time to the students. The student inputs may be expected to last for the whole lesson (see the key questions for the student inputs). The teacher chairs the lesson, and gives brief inputs to sum up and structure the discussions.

Lesson description

Clarifying the agenda for the lesson

The teacher presents the agenda of the lesson, and points out that it corresponds to the key questions of the students' homework. If the students agree and make no suggestions to focus on one point in particular, the teacher introduces the first phase of the lesson.

1. Three news reports with discussion


The teacher announces that the three reporter teams will now present their news stories. The students have the task to listen and to compare, as the reporters' work for different types of newspapers. To compare the news stories, the students should be ready to take notes. The teacher clarifies the task by drawing a simple matrix on the board or flipchart:

News story	No. 1	No. 2	No. 3
Language			
...			
...			
...			
Judgment			

The teacher refers to the papers only by number, leaving it to the students to introduce their paper. Language is a possible feature by which to compare the stories, and the students are free to take note of what they notice. If they prefer one type of paper and news story, they should give reasons.

The teacher makes sure that the students have no more questions on their task and then gives the floor to the three press reporter teams. The press reporter teams read their stories in turn, without any discussion or comment between the stories.

Then the students give feedback. The teacher listens, and encourages the students to explain what criteria they used for comparing and judging the stories.

The teacher sums up the discussion by pointing out one key aspect: the three teams of press reporters attended the same debate, and yet the images they created for their reading audiences differ considerably. This shows that media transmit reality for all those who were not present at the event. But by transmitting reality, they construct it – selecting and highlighting some elements, omitting or paying less attention to others. The teacher can refer to selected details of the news stories or student inputs to support this point (see  materials for teachers 9.1).

2. Reflection: how did the rules affect the debate?

The teacher again asks for student inputs. The teacher listens, and so do the students. Some comments may be expected to be quite critical (the time limit is “undemocratic”, it does not allow free expression), and some students may support the rules.

During the discussion, the teacher can ask the critics among the students to consider what would happen if the time limit was lifted. They will realise that the debate would need longer, and the time budget of the lesson sets an absolute time limit, and therefore the rules have taken reality into account and distributed the available time fairly, admittedly in very small slices. The speakers should comment on how they coped with the time limit: did they manage to focus on key points?

3. Debriefing

Here the students give some general feedback.

The teacher should not attempt to justify his/her work in the face of criticism, nor to argue critical remarks away. As the students have had a very large share of activity and responsibility, both success and failure are theirs as much as the teacher's. The teacher should point this out if the students are not aware of it.

If the students enjoyed the debate, the teacher might suggest an extension in the form of a debating club. Here, some of the issues suggested by the students could be debated. Debating clubs are very common in English-speaking countries around the world, and also among teachers of English as a foreign language. The Internet offers a rich variety of excellent material for teachers and students interested in debating.

Materials for teachers 8.1

Why freedom depends on framing by rules and laws

Learning opportunities in this unit

Interdependence through scarcity of time

The most precious resource of teaching and learning, and in our lives generally, is time. As professionals, teachers must constantly answer the question on how the available time in class may best be used – and in interactive learning, the students take responsibility for this. The advance organiser in this unit will only work if the students accept their responsibility to use the time for reading each other's materials when it is there – before the first lesson. In the first lesson, no more than 10 minutes can be given to the four groups to choose an issue for the debate. If they have failed to read the materials in advance, the class will have one good idea less to choose from – this is an example of how we depend on each other (interdependence).

Strict rules protect liberty of speech

A debate must take place within a fixed amount of time. All speakers enjoy the same rights of free thought and free expression. The available speaking time must therefore be distributed fairly – which means equally, one minute per statement. It seems paradoxical that strict rules are necessary and useful to protect our liberty. The time limit works in two ways: our share of speaking time is guaranteed, and it is fair. On the other hand, it confines every speaker to a short time slot, and speakers must think carefully about what they want to say. They must focus on key arguments, leave out everything of minor importance, and make their point clearly and briefly.

Freedom and framing

The students' liberty of action and speech is framed, or limited and defined, in two ways. First, by the available learning time – the lessons are over after 40 minutes or so, and the debate must fit into one lesson and take no more than 20 minutes, as other things need to be done in that lesson as well. Second, the debating rules give each speaker a fair, but strictly limited time slot of one minute per statement. Framing has a structural dimension – time is scarce throughout our lives – and a political, man-made dimension: rules set frames without which we could not enjoy our liberties without violating the rights of others. Scarcity of time is not negotiable, but framing by rules is.

School is life

The dialectics of freedom and framing, rooted in the universal scarcity of time, occurs in school as it does in public life. Here, in a very literal sense indeed, school is life.

UNIT 9
THE MEDIA
Upper secondary level

Taking part in democracy through the media
The producers and users of media as gatekeepers
and agenda setters

9.1 We are the gatekeepers!

We decide what we want to read

9.2 and 9.3 We are the gatekeepers!

We decide what news the readers will be offered to choose from

9.4 Do we control the media – or do the media control us?

The media – an instrument of communication and of power

Unit 9

The media

Taking part in democracy through the media

Introduction for teachers

1. We take part in democracy through the media

Taking part in society and politics is, essentially, communicating with others – receiving and giving information through the media. Citizens who cannot communicate through the media cannot participate in society or in politics.

Media provide a multitude of modes of communication, and supply more information than ever before, but they also control what and how we communicate. We live in a media culture. Modern media-based and media-controlled communication poses a challenge for every individual.


On the one hand, the media offer fascinating opportunities for those citizens who have been educated in media literacy, and who can therefore handle media critically and deliberately, and can cope with the masses of information of very different types and quality.

On the other hand, media exclude from taking part all those who cannot afford to buy them, or who do not possess the skills to use them, or judge the quality of information.

2. Media literacy – a core competence in EDC/HRE

Media literacy is a, perhaps even *the* core competence in EDC/HRE. Teaching for human rights is directly linked to media literacy. The freedom of the media and the right of free access to information depend on the ability to exercise these rights. The unequal levels of media literacy in a society create a new dimension of unequal opportunities, and new forms of inclusion and exclusion.

This unit attempts to help the students to take one important step in developing media literacy. The students experience the construction of our image of reality through the media – as both the producer and the recipient of a media message. In different ways, both perform as gatekeepers and agenda setters, to the effect that our image of the world, and politics in particular, is based on, and shaped by media messages that come to our attention after having passed through two filters – the choices made by the producers and those made by us, the users of the media.

The unit focuses on one important aspect of media literacy: all media messages are constructed. There is a lot of potential for cross-curricular teaching, of language for example, to analyse the specific language used by the media (see  materials for teachers 9A – Learning what to look for, Nos 1 and 2).

3. Outline of the unit

This unit focuses on the question of how gatekeeping and agenda setting through the media takes place. The students experience both the perspectives of media users and media producers by acting them out.

Lesson 1: We are the gatekeepers! We decide what we want to read.

Lessons 2 and 3: We are the gatekeepers! We decide what news the readers will be offered to choose from.

Lesson 4: Do we control the media – or do the media control us? Reflection.

In the first lesson, the students become aware of their role as gatekeepers on their own behalf. They make a choice between two different newspapers, and select one set of information and reject another. In doing so, they exercise their human right of free access to and selection of information.

In the second and third lessons, the students engage in the key task, a small project in which they produce a wall newspaper. Now they act as gatekeepers again, but this time from the sending rather than the receiving end. They exercise the human right to a free, uncensored press.

In the fourth lesson, the students reflect on their choices and discuss the power of the media – both as an instrument of communication and of power. They also become aware of the strong constructivist element in our image of the world, shaped by both the producers and the recipients of information.

4. Constructivist learning and instruction

This unit gives the students the time and liberty for constructivist learning. In the particular context of the media, constructivist learning directly corresponds to the construction of media messages through the media. A media message is constructed by someone else, with a specific interest and strategic intent in mind (“telling or selling”), and by the user.

The teacher presents the concepts of gatekeeping, agenda setting, media culture, freedom of the media and free access to information through instruction, linking them to the context of constructivist learning (see box with key concepts below).

5. The choice of the medium

This unit focuses on a classic print medium, the newspaper, which is not the first choice for many young people. So why should the students read and produce newspapers in this unit?

1. The first reason is a pragmatic one. Studying newspapers and producing a simple wall newspaper requires resources that are available everywhere, and can be provided on a low budget.
2. From a didactic perspective, a simple example works better in teaching the students a piece of media literacy. By writing texts by hand, by cutting, pasting and drawing, the students come back to the roots of media production. But even in the production of a simple wall newspaper, the basic phenomenon of gatekeeping by the editors is already there, and so is the principle of constructing an image of reality through the message.

Of course, these basic aspects are present in all other media too – radio, TV, photography of all categories, the Internet-based modes of communication, SMS, etc. But all these media not only place higher demands on resources, and a more complex effort of media production, but also of media analysis, or deconstruction.

3. The newspaper-based approach follows the principle of the spiral curriculum in this EDC/HRE edition. The task that the students perform in this unit corresponds to that in unit 7 in volume III, *Living in democracy*, for lower secondary level. The difference between the units is the level of reflection that the students are capable of.

Key concepts

Gatekeeping

Only a small fraction of the information that is delivered daily to the news editors finally appears in print. The news editors filter out what cannot be reported. One criterion is whether this piece of information is newsworthy – is it relevant or interesting enough? Another is simply the space that is available. And a third criterion is what kind of balance the readers expect – between information and entertainment, between politics, business, sports, celebrity news, etc.


But the reader too filters out most of what the newspapers offer. We all know from experience that we usually pick out a handful of articles and stories, and finally discard the newspaper after having read 5–10% of what it offered.

This principle of gatekeeping also applies to other mass media – TV and radio, the Internet and books.


Agenda setting

The news editors strongly influence the political agenda. By bringing certain problems or scandals to the attention of the public, these issues are then discussed, and often policy makers must react in some way. Here again, the readers must play their part – how do they respond to the issues that are brought forward?

Media culture

We live in a media culture (see  materials for teachers 9A). In the past decade, Internet-based forms of communication and transfer of information have emerged, supplemented by mobile phone technology, both of which appeal particularly to the younger generation. In addition, the process of globalisation has supported the increasing predominance of the media. The media messages have shifted from text-based to image-based information, with a strong impact on communication and reading habits.

Free access to information and freedom of the press

European Convention on Human Rights, Article 10.1 (see  student handout 2.6)

“Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. ...”

See also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19 ( student handout 2.5).

Media producers and media users both exercise a fundamental human right. Censorship of these liberties makes the difference between dictatorships and democracies. These liberties and the technological revolution we have seen after the invention of the computer and the Internet, have given rise to the media culture we live in today. The experience is ambivalent, and typical for processes of modernisation: if we can handle the potential, we gain; if we cannot meet the demands, we lose. For this reason, media literacy is a key competence in EDC/HRE.

Competence development: links to other units in this volume

What this table shows

The title of this manual, *Taking part in democracy*, focuses on the competences of the active citizen in democracy. This matrix shows the potential for synergy effects between the units in this manual. The matrix shows what competences are developed in unit 9 (the shaded row in the table). The strongly framed column shows the competences of political decision making and action – strongly framed because of their close links to taking part in democracy. The rows below indicate links to other units in this manual: what competences are developed in these units that support the students in unit 9?

How this matrix can be used

Teachers can use this matrix as a tool for planning their EDC/HRE classes in different ways.

- The matrix makes teachers aware of synergy effects that help the students to be trained in important competences repeatedly, in different contexts that are linked in many ways.
- This matrix helps teachers who have only a few lessons to devote to EDC/HRE: a teacher can select only this unit and omit the others, as he/she knows that some key competences are also developed, to a certain extent, in this unit – for example, understanding the importance of media literacy, the exercise of basic liberties, and the tension between equality and liberty.

Units	Dimensions of competence development			Attitudes and values
	Political analysis and judgment	Methods and skills	Taking part in democracy Political decision making and action	
9 The media	We are taking part in democracy through media-based communication Producers and users of media perform as gatekeepers	Constructing and deconstructing media messages	Using media as a means of broadcasting our views and interests	Awareness of our dependence on a “second hand” perception of reality, particularly in politics
7 Equality	Equal opportunities to participate depend on media literacy			Awareness of information as a source of power
8 Liberty	Freedom of the media and free access to information		Gatekeeping and agenda setting: exercising human rights	Awareness of information as a means of controlling power and authority
3 Diversity and pluralism	The pluralism of opinions and interests is reflected by the media			
6 Government and politics	Agenda setting			

UNIT 9: The media – Taking part in democracy through the media

The producers and users of media as gatekeepers and agenda setters

Lesson topic	Competence training/learning objectives	Student tasks	Materials and resources	Method
Lesson 1 We are the gatekeepers! We decide what we want to read	As gatekeepers on their own behalf, the students become aware of their preferences for certain media and messages. Both producers and users of media act as gatekeepers.	The students reflect on their preferences for a particular newspaper.	Front pages from two different newspapers, issued on the same day. ✍ Student handouts 9.1–9.3, flipcharts, markers, scissors and glue. Collection of print media issues.	Plenary presentations and discussion. Lecture. Group work.
Lessons 2 and 3 We are the gatekeepers! We decide what news the readers will be offered to choose from	Co-operating in a team; making decisions, agreeing on objectives and a schedule. Team management and supervision. Media editors construct the news that shapes our perception of reality.	The students create their own wall newspaper. They compare their newspapers and the choices they made.	✍ Student handouts 9.2 and 9.3. Flipcharts, markers, scissors and glue. Print media of all kinds and categories.	Project work.
Lesson 4 Do we control the media – or do the media control us? Reflection	Reflecting on choices and their impact. The media are a powerful instrument of communication and control.	The students compare and reflect on their choices and decisions.	Display of wall newspapers. 📄 Materials for teachers 9A.	Reports, plenary discussion. Lecture.

Lesson 1

We are the gatekeepers!

We decide what we want to read

This matrix sums up the information a teacher needs to plan and deliver the lesson.

Competence training refers directly to EDC/HRE.

The learning objective indicates what students know and understand.

The student task(s), together with the method, form the core element of the learning process.

The materials checklist supports lesson preparation.

The time budget gives a rough guideline for the teacher's time management.

Competence training	As gatekeepers on their own behalf, the students become aware of their preferences for certain media and messages.
Learning objective	Both producers and users of media act as gatekeepers. The media construct our image of the world. They have the power to decide what we learn about (gatekeeping, agenda setting). But on the other hand, we, the media users, are gatekeepers on our own behalf. We choose or reject certain media, and we decide what messages we devote our attention to.
Student tasks	The students reflect on their preferences for a particular newspaper.
Materials and resources	Front pages from two different newspapers, issued on the same day. In large classes, two or three issues of the same front page should be available. ✍ Student handouts 9.1-9.3, flipcharts, markers, scissors and glue. Collection of print media issues.
Method	Plenary presentations and discussion. Lecture. Group work.
Time budget	Stage 1: The teacher introduces the concept of gatekeeping. 25 min
	Stage 2: The students plan their wall newspaper project. 15 min

Information box

As users, the students react to the differences in the media by preferring one and rejecting another. By means of their preferences, the students act as gatekeepers on their own behalf, and they are made aware of this.

Switching the perspective, the students realise that the editors too have defined priorities and made choices. Which choices, and for what reasons? With this question in mind, the students will embark on their project. They will find the answer by making the same kind of choices – understanding media by producing media. They embark on the key task of this unit.

The teacher's lecture is linked to the students' process of constructivist learning. The teacher introduces the concept of gatekeeping after the students have seen the evidence for it. On the other hand, the students apply the new concept in the subsequent project, as it provides the key questions of their task.

Lesson description

Preparation of the lesson

Three weeks before this unit is due to begin, the teacher asks the students to collect print media – newspapers, magazines, journals, advertising prospectuses, etc. It is important to collect photographs as well. The students are requested to bring their materials to the classroom for the first lesson of this unit.

Depending on the space available, the materials are sorted and laid out on tables in the classroom. The students will use these materials when working on their wall newspaper in lessons 2 and 3.

The teacher also collects newspapers and magazines. In preparing the first lesson, the teacher draws on the material to obtain pairs of front pages of different newspapers. The front pages for all groups should be from the same day to allow comparisons within the groups, and also comparison of their results in the plenary round. Each group should receive a pair of front pages from different newspapers. If the students can cope, front pages in foreign languages can also be included.

The website www.newseum.org offers PDF versions (A4 format) of current newspaper front pages from many European countries. If the teacher uses these, they should be copied for the students as handouts, rather than displaying them on the board (see step 1.1 below).

Stage 1: The teacher introduces the concept of gatekeeping

Step 1.1: The students show their preferences for a newspaper

The teacher attaches two front pages of newspapers to the blackboard. They form a pair of contrasts, for example:

- tabloid and quality paper;
- regional and national paper;
- papers representing different political standpoints, e.g. social democrat and neo-liberal.

If several copies of the same front page are available, they are displayed with sufficient space between them to give all students a good view. In big classes, this saves time.

The students come forward and study the two front pages in silence.

The teacher asks the students to assemble in front of the newspaper they prefer. The students form two groups, and if necessary a third that dislikes both papers. The students briefly exchange their views in groups and then give the reasons for their choices in the plenary round.

The teacher listens and facilitates the exchange of opinions, but does not comment on the students' statements or their choices.

Step 1.2: Instruction: the key concept of gatekeeping

The teacher gives a brief lecture to introduce the concept of gatekeeping and its double meaning. He/she links it to the context that the students have provided in step 1.1. As the students have just shown, we usually have very clear preferences for a certain paper, as newspapers differ considerably. We prefer one newspaper, and reject another. In everyday life, we may even prefer to use other media, such as TV or the Internet, as our source of information rather than a newspaper. In this very important respect, we act as gatekeepers. We decide what medium, and what messages through that medium, we give our attention to. The media depend on us – without our attention, their effort is in vain.

The teacher then switches the perspective: not only the readers act as gatekeepers, so do the editors of newspapers. They decide what we are offered to choose from. In this respect, we depend on the media – we only receive the information that they have selected.

The concept of gatekeeping therefore has two meanings: both the producers and users of media decide what messages are important. In politics, gatekeepers are also agenda setters.

Clearly the editors have also made choices – different ones, as the different front pages show. But for what reasons? The students will explore this question in the project that follows.

Stage 2: The students plan their wall newspaper project

✍ Student handouts 9.1-9.3

Step 2.1 The teacher instructs the students on their task

The students form groups of four to six and establish teams of editors. They spend the next two lessons on the production of a wall newspaper.

They will enact the gatekeeping role of editors, and deal with questions such as the following:

- What topics shall we include?
- What topic will we choose to be our eye-catcher, the lead story?
- What can we, or must we drop, as space is limited?

The students should be aware that these questions show what freedom of the press means in practice – enjoying the liberty, but also carrying the responsibility to solve some difficult problems.

The teacher then explains the technical side. The students may use up to two flipcharts. They write their articles by hand. They can search the print media collection for photographs or diagrams, and use the media at hand to obtain information. However, both their space and their time are limited. Their newspaper should be up for display at the end of the next lesson.

The students move their desks together to provide a surface large enough to lay out a flipchart.

Step 2.2 The students begin their project

As instructed by the teacher, the students begin reading the handouts. If time allows, they take the next steps.

Lessons 2 and 3

We are the gatekeepers!

We decide what news the readers will be offered to choose from

This matrix sums up the information a teacher needs to plan and deliver the lesson.

Competence training refers directly to EDC/HRE.

The learning objective indicates what students know and understand.

The student task(s), together with the method, form the core element of the learning process.

The materials checklist supports lesson preparation.

The time budget gives a rough guideline for the teacher's time management.

Competence training	Co-operating in a team; making decisions, agreeing on objectives and a schedule. Team management and supervision.
Learning objective	Media editors construct and control the news that shapes our perception of reality. As gatekeepers and agenda setters, the media exercise power in a subtle manner.
Student tasks	The students create their own wall newspaper. They compare their newspapers and the choices they made.
Materials and resources	☞ Student handouts 9.2 and 9.3; flipcharts, markers, scissors and glue. Print media of all kinds and categories.
Method	Project work.
Time budget	1. Project work: the students edit and produce a wall newspaper. 60 min
	2. The students read each other's newspapers. 20 min

Information box

The second and third lessons are devoted to the core of this unit, the project in which the students act as editors and produce their own newspaper. They will deal with the same questions – what topics and events to include and to omit, and discuss the criteria for the choices to be made. In addition, the task of producing a wall newspaper in one hour places high demands on the students' skills in planning their work and in time management.

The format of a wall newspaper is suggested here, as this works everywhere. The technical aspects of newspaper production are not important. The students can write their news stories by hand.

The production of a wall newspaper takes them back to the roots, as it were, and allows the students to focus on the essentials of editing and the choices involved.

In a setting of task-based learning, the teacher performs as an “assistant”, who supports the students if they need additional material, access to a computer, etc. He/she also observes the students to assess their level of skills and competence development. The teacher listens to the students' discussions and reads their wall newspapers while they are being written. This allows the teacher to prepare the brief, but important lecture in lesson 4.

Lesson description

Stage 1: The students edit and produce their newspaper

✍ Student handouts 9.1-9.3

The students work in groups. They assign the three tasks of chief editor, time manager and presenter to different team members.

They follow or adapt the working schedule suggested in ✍ student handout 9.3.

If there is an interval between lessons 2 and 3, the project material needs to be stored safely. The teacher and the students make arrangements as to who is responsible for this task.

Guided by ✍ student handout 9.3, the reporters prepare their presentations for the plenary session in lesson 4.

Stage 2: The students read each other's newspapers

Half way through the third lesson, the students display their newspapers in the classroom. The students are requested to read each other's newspapers before the next EDC/HRE lesson takes place.

Lesson 4

Do we control the media – or do the media control us?

The media – an instrument of communication and of power

This matrix sums up the information a teacher needs to plan and deliver the lesson.


Competence training refers directly to EDC/HRE.

The learning objective indicates what students know and understand.

The student task(s), together with the method, form the core element of the learning process.

The materials checklist supports lesson preparation.

The time budget gives a rough guideline for the teacher's time management.

Competence training	Reflecting on choices and their impact.
Learning objective	The media are a powerful instrument of communication and control.
Student tasks	The students compare and reflect on their choices and decisions.
Materials and resources	Display of wall newspapers.  Materials for teachers 9A.
Method	Reports, plenary discussion. Lecture.
Time budget	1. The students compare their choices and decisions. 15 min
	2. The students reflect on their construction of messages. 10 min
	3. Teacher's lecture: agenda setting, gatekeeping. 5 min
	4. Follow-up discussion. 10 min

Information box

The students reflect on their experience in this project. They do not read each other's newspapers for the sake of information, but focus on the decisions involved in selecting the topics and pictures – they explore the role of media as gatekeepers and agenda setters.

The reporters present the background information on the discussions in the teams, and the students compare and reflect on their experience.

The teacher adds the concepts – media as gatekeepers and agenda setters – in a brief lecture. This is an example of how constructivist learning is enriched by systematic instruction. The students' experience creates the context in which the teacher's instruction provides a new perspective and enables the students to understand their experience on a more advanced, abstract level of thinking and understanding.

Different options of extending this project and applying its insights are possible. These can be discussed at the end of the lesson.

Lesson description

The students are expected to have read each other's newspapers before this lesson.

Stage 1: The students explain and compare their choices

In turn, each presenter reports on the decisions made by their teams and explains the reasons behind them. Guided by the briefing notes (≈ student handout 9.3) the presenters should address the following points:

- choice of lead stories;
- what topics the team considered, and why certain topics were included or dropped;
- the choice of photographs;
- other points and issues of importance.

The presentations focus on the decisions of gatekeeping and agenda setting rather than the contents of the newspapers themselves. They provide the material that the teacher focuses on in his/her brief lecture, highlighting the shared experience of the teams by adding some key concepts of media literacy. In this way, constructivist learning sets the context for the delivery of conceptual knowledge through systematic, brief instruction.

Stage 2: The students reflect on their construction of messages

The teacher asks the students to compare the reasons for their teams' decisions.

- Can we identify any predominant criteria, e.g. newsworthiness?
- To what extent did we consider aspects of competition – e.g. by using eye-catchers?
- ...

The presenters' reports and the comparison of choices can give rise to a critical discussion. The students may problematise the strong influence of the media on what information we receive, or what we never hear about. The teacher chairs the discussion. As he/she will take the floor shortly, there is no need for the teacher to comment on the students' statements.

Stage 3: Teacher's lecture

Step 3.1 The basic lecture

📄 Materials for teachers 9A

As indicated above (see stage 1), the teacher links the points of this brief input to the context of the experience and questions that the students have created. This requires an element of flexibility in presenting the following key statements:

1. All media messages are constructed. One basic aspect of message construction is choosing a small set of information that is turned into stories, and omitting many other pieces of information. The students explored this aspect of message construction when they edited their newspapers.
2. By selecting and omitting information, news editors and producers in the media act as gatekeepers and agenda setters. They strongly influence public opinion and political decision making, and how we take part in democracy. To what extent this influence turns into control depends on whether we exercise our role of gatekeepers or not.

These two points are closely linked to the students' experience in this small project. The teacher can conclude the input here, as the points certainly provide enough food for thought, or can add further

points, depending on the students' interests and questions. In this case, the time frame may need to be extended.

Step 3.2 Extensions to the lecture

1. On the other hand, as commercial enterprises, the media compete with each other to attract our attention. Media producers take care to meet their audience's interests and expectations. Their commercial success depends on the choices of media users.
2. We depend on the media for our perception of the world. In this lesson, the students focused on a classic medium, the newspaper. However, new types of media have emerged, and we use them for different purposes. We still have the classic mass media (broadcast media) – magazines, newspapers, TV and radio – that we use mainly as sources of information and for entertainment. Then we have the new media based on the Internet (websites, e-mail, blogs, facebook-type networks, twitter), not forgetting SMS. We use these for many purposes, but particularly for communication with each other, and as the students will know best, the young generation is more familiar with these than their parents and most of their teachers.
3. Today, we live in a media culture. Society is a network of interaction between its members. Social interaction is, to a large extent, communication. Communication is supported, channelled and shaped by media, and the media messages not only reflect, but also refract reality.

Stage 4: Follow up discussion and conclusion of the unit

The students should have the opportunity to react to the teacher's lecture.

They may have comprehension questions, or they may problematise the power of mass media as gatekeepers and agenda setters.

The teacher finally raises the question whether and how to continue the project, for example by making one of the following suggestions:

- The wall newspapers could be displayed in school.
- The students could invite a professional journalist to visit the class. They could show him/her the newspapers, asking for feedback, and discuss the issue of gatekeeping.
- A team of editors could continue with this news project in school and produce a school (wall) newspaper.
- The students could report on the media that most strongly shape and influence public opinion.
- The students could stick to an issue that they have reported on and take action. Links to other units in this manual are possible.

Materials for teachers 9A **Skills and strategies for media education**

by Elizabeth Thoman

From the clock radio that wakes us up in the morning until we fall asleep watching the late night talk show, we are exposed to hundreds, even thousands of images and ideas not only from television but now also from newspaper headlines, magazine covers, movies, websites, photos, video games and billboards. Some are calling today's young people, *screenagers*.¹⁹

Until recently, few questioned the increasing dominance of media in our lives. Those who did were inclined to focus on content issues like the amount of sex and violence in television and movies. Some advocated censorship, while others simply urged families to turn the TV off. But the fact is, though you can turn off the set, unless you move to a mountaintop, you cannot escape today's media culture. Media no longer just influence our culture. They are our culture.

Media's pivotal role in our global culture is why media censorship will never work. What's needed, instead, is a major rethinking of media's role in all of our lives – a rethinking that recognizes the paradigm shift from a print culture to an image culture that has been evolving for the past 150 years since the invention of photography and the ability to separate an object or a likeness from a particular time and place and still remain real, visible and permanent.²⁰

For 500 years, we have valued the ability to read print in order to participate fully as informed citizens and educated adults in society. Today the family, the school and all community institutions, including the medical and health community, share the responsibility of preparing young people for living in a world of powerful images, words and sounds.²¹ Call it “media literacy.”

What is media literacy?

Just what it sounds like – the ability to interpret and create personal meaning from the hundreds, even thousands of verbal and visual symbols we take in everyday through television, radio, computers, newspapers and magazines, and of course advertising.

It's the ability to choose and select, the ability to challenge and question, the ability to be conscious about what's going on around you and not be passive and therefore, vulnerable.

**“We must prepare young people
for living in a world of powerful
images, words and sounds.”**

UNESCO, 1982

Media researchers now say that television and mass media have become so ingrained in our cultural milieu that we should no longer view the task of media education as providing “protection” against unwanted messages. Our goal must be to help people become competent, critical and literate in all media forms so that they control the interpretation of what they see or hear rather than letting the interpretation control them. Len Masterman, author of *Teaching the Media*, calls it “critical autonomy.”²²

Other definitions point out that media literacy is not so much a finite body of knowledge but rather a skill, a process, a way of thinking that, like reading comprehension, is always evolving. To become media literate is not to memorize facts or statistics about the media, but rather to raise the right

19. Rushkoff, Douglas, *Playing the Future: How Kids' Culture Can Teach Us to Thrive in an Age of Chaos*, 1996.

20. From the work of Stewart Ewen especially *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*, 1988.

21. From the Final Report, UNESCO International Symposium on Education of the Public in the Use of Mass Media, Grunwald, 1982.

22. Masterman, Len, *Teaching the Media*, 1989, chapter 2.

questions about what you are watching, reading or listening to.²³ At the heart of media literacy is the principle of inquiry.

Learning what to look for

What do kids (and adults, too) need to know about the media? Over the years, media educators have identified five ideas that everyone should know about media messages, whether the message comes packaged as a TV sitcom, a computer game, a music video, a magazine ad or a movie in the theatre.²⁴

1. All media messages are "constructed"

Whether we are watching the nightly news or passing a billboard on the street, the media message we experience was written by someone (or probably several people), pictures were taken and a creative designer put it all together. But this is more than a physical process. What happens is that whatever is "constructed" by just a few people then becomes "the way it is" for the rest of us. But as the audience, we don't get to see or hear the words, pictures or arrangements that were rejected. We only see, hear or read what was accepted.

Helping people understand how media is put together and what was left out as well as how the media shape what we know and understand about the world we live in is an important way of helping them navigate their lives in a global and technological society.

2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules

Each form of communication such as newspapers, TV game shows or horror movies has its own creative language: scary music heightens fear, camera close-ups convey intimacy, big headlines signal significance. Understanding the grammar, syntax and metaphor system of media language increases our appreciation and enjoyment of media experiences, as well as helps us to be less susceptible to manipulation. One of the best ways to understand how media is put together is to do just that – make your own personal video, create a website for your Scout troop, develop an ad campaign to alert kids to the dangers of smoking.

3. Different people experience the same media message differently

Because of each individual's age, upbringing and education, no two people see the same movie or hear the same song on the radio. Even parents and children do not see the same TV show! This concept turns the tables on the idea of TV viewers as just passive "couch potatoes." We may not be conscious of it but each of us, even toddlers, are constantly trying to "make sense" of what we see, hear or read. The more questions we can ask about what we are experiencing around us, the more alert we can be about accepting or rejecting messages. Research indicates that, over time, children of all ages can learn age-appropriate skills that give them a new set of glasses with which they can "read" their media culture.²⁵

4. Media are primarily businesses driven by a profit motive

Newspapers lay out their pages with ads first; the space remaining is devoted to news. Likewise, we all know that commercials are part and parcel of most TV watching. What many people do not know is that what's really being sold through television is not only the advertised products to the audience but also the audience to the advertisers!

23. From the mission statement of *Media&Values* magazine, published from 1977-93 by the Center for Media Literacy.

24. Adapted from media education documents from England and Canada. First published in the US as "Five Important Ideas to Teach Your Kids about TV," by Jay Davis *Media&Values* #52/53; Fall, 1990.

25. Hobbs, Renee, *Tuning in to Media: Literacy for the Information Age*, 1995 video, distributed by the Center for Media Literacy.

The real purpose of programs we watch on commercial TV, whether news or entertainment, is not just to entertain us but rather to create an audience (and put them in a receptive mood) so that the network or local station can sell time to sponsors to advertise their products in commercials. Every second counts! Sponsors pay for the time based on the number of people the station predicts will be watching. Sponsors also target their advertising message to specific kinds of viewers, for example, women 20-35 who spend money on the advertised products or children 2-7 who influence their parent's spending.

Maybe it's not the way we'd like it to be but, in truth, most media are provided to us, as researcher George Gerbner says, by private, global corporations with something to sell rather than by the family, church, school or even one's native country, with something to tell.²⁶

5. Media have embedded values and points of view

Media, because they are constructed, carry a subtext of who and what is important at least to the person or persons creating the construction. Media are also storytellers (even commercials tell a quick and simple story) and stories require characters, settings and a plot that has a beginning, middle and end. The choice of a character's age, gender or race mixed in with the lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors that are portrayed, the selection of a setting (urban? rural? affluent? poor?), and the actions and re-actions in the plot are just some of the ways that values become "embedded" in a TV show, movie or ad.

It is important to learn how to "read" all kinds of media messages in order to discover the points of view that are embedded in them. Only then can we judge whether to accept or reject these messages as we negotiate our way each day through our mediated environment.

Five basic questions can be asked about any media message

Learning what to ask

From these concepts flow a series of five basic questions²⁷ that can be asked about any media message. Note that each one could open up many layers of deeper questions:

1. Who created this message and why are they sending it?
2. What techniques are being used to attract my attention?
3. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in the message?
4. How might different people understand this message differently from me?
5. What is omitted from this message?

Usually the questioning process is applied to a specific media "text" – that is, an identifiable production or publication, or a part of one: an episode of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, an ad for Pepsi, an issue of *Seventeen* magazine, a billboard for Budweiser beer, photos and articles about a bank robbery on the front page of a newspaper, the Super Bowl telecast. (...)

Core questioning

To be a functioning adult in a mediated society, one needs to be able to distinguish between different media forms and know how to ask the basic questions and core concepts cited above. Although most adults today learned through literature classes to distinguish a poem from an essay, it's amazing how many people do not understand the difference between a daily newspaper and a supermarket tabloid.

26. Gerbner, George, "Television Violence and the Art of Asking the Wrong Question," in *The World & I: A Chronicle of our Changing Era*, July, 1994.

27. Thanks to Renée Hobbs for her work in articulating these core questions through her training and teaching.

Increasingly as information about national and world events is delivered to the public instantaneously via television and the Internet, individuals will need to know how to verify information themselves, how to check sources and how to compare and contrast different versions of the same information in order to detect bias or political “spin” control. (...)

Three Steps to Success: overview of an Effective Media Literacy Program

“Media Literacy” is a term that incorporates three interrelated approaches leading to the media empowerment of citizens of all ages:

The *first approach* is simply becoming aware of the importance of balancing or managing one’s media “diet” – helping children and families make healthy choices and manage the amount of time spent with television, videos, electronic games, films and various print media.

The *second approach* is teaching specific skills of critical viewing – learning to analyze and question what is in the frame, how it is constructed and what may have been left out. Skills of critical viewing are best learned through inquiry-based classes or interactive group activities as well as from creating and producing one’s own media messages.

The *third approach* – social, political and economic analysis – goes behind the frame (through which we see media images) to explore deeper issues of who produces the media we experience – and for what purpose? What is the impact of media in our culture and how do we approach issues such as media violence, racial stereotyping and consumerism?

Through inquiry, discussion and action projects, both adults and young people look at how each of us (and all of us together in society) take and make meaning from our media experiences and how the mass media drive our global consumer economy. This approach also can set the stage for various media advocacy efforts to challenge or redress public policies or corporate practices.

Although television and electronic media may seem to present the most compelling reasons for promoting media education in contemporary society, the principles and practices of media literacy are applicable to all media from television to T-shirts, from billboards to the Internet.

Abridged text

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