

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

©2003 Center for Media Literacy

www.medialit.org/

For many more models in media education, see www.media-awareness.ca/