Critical Media Literacy

Coursebook

Oak Meadow

Table of Contents

PART III: Taking Action

Appendix

Introduction

Media is all around us. In fact, modern life is inundated with media. *Critical Media Literacy* is about learning how to critically engage with, and make sense of, the media. This course will help you develop analytic tools you can use to examine its content, intent, context, and subtext. You'll explore the media in context and look at how the content and technology of the media fit into (or conflict with) the larger society in which it operates. Media, in its various forms, exist on a global stage, but this course is primarily focused on media produced in the United States. While the United States is not the only producer of media, it is the largest producer and exporter of media around the globe.

How and why do media texts target certain groups of people? How do media fit into your life and the lives of others? How do media shape people's perceptions regarding race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, ability, the environment, and politics? In this course, you will focus on *what* you know and *how* you know it and learned it. As you explore how the media operates in society, you will gain the tools of critical media literacy that will allow you to make more informed choices as an active audience. Throughout the course, in various ways, you will be asked questions—and ask your own questions— about how you relate to the media you consume.

Critical media literacy is grounded in social activism because it is inherently about making change. When you study media critically and learn how the media industries operate in the world, you may feel compelled to make changes in your personal viewing, reading, and listening habits. Once you begin paying closer attention to media, you may see change happening within your family and community, fueled by your discussions about what you are learning. Or change may happen within the context of the wider world as you support media that carries a proactive message and boycott media that spreads negative, overly violent, or otherwise harmful messages. Of course, you can do well in this course without making any changes in your own life, but information is provided for ways to make changes if you choose to do so. By learning to be a critical scholar, you can develop greater, multidimensional awareness about media and become a more active audience and independent thinker.

We wish you a challenging and insightful experience in this course!

Course Materials

This coursebook contains all the instructions and assignments for this course. In addition to this coursebook, the following texts are used in this course:

- *The Media and Me: A Guide to Critical Media Literacy for Young People* (Project Censored and the Media Revolution Collective, 2022)
- *The Anatomy of Fake News: A Critical News Literacy Education* (Higdon, 2020)

Note: **Internet access is required for this course.**

This course uses many online resources. Most of the video and film selections are optional; viewing them will deepen your understanding and experience of the course.

How the Course Is Set Up

In this single-semester course, there are 18 lessons, each designed to be completed in one week (working approximately one hour per day).

Each lesson begins with a short introduction that gives you some necessary background information on the topic. You are encouraged to read the entire lesson—the introduction and all the assignments—before you begin work. This gives you a sense of what you will be accomplishing and helps you organize your time more effectively. When you begin work, make sure to address all the elements of an assignment; many pose multiple questions or require you to follow several steps.

In some of the lessons, you will find creative projects. Even if you don't think you're very creative, you will be expected to do these activities. Your work will be assessed on the expression of your ideas and its relevance to the assignment prompt rather than on artistic merit. Working creatively with the material lets you express yourself while demonstrating your awareness of significant elements of critical media literacy and how they are interrelated.

In each lesson, you will find the following sections to guide your studies and enhance your understanding of the material.

An **Assignment Checklist** is included at the beginning of each lesson so you can see at a glance what is included, and check off assignments as you complete each one. Assignments are fully explained in the lesson.

Learning Objectives outline the main goals of the lesson.

A **Lesson Introduction** provides information and puts the lesson's concepts and topics into a real-world context.

Vocabulary to Know, Understand, and Use highlights key words and phrases that you will be expected to understand and use in your responses.

Reading assignments are detailed at the beginning of each lesson and are required.

Viewing selections include TV shows, films, documentaries, interviews, and videos. You are not required to watch these, but they will enhance your experience and understanding.

Discussion: What Do You Think? boxes include prompts for you to ponder and discuss with your family and friends. You are expected to engage in these discussions, as sharing ideas with others will further expand your understanding of the topics. There is nothing written to submit for the discussion questions.

A **Digital Footprint Journal** will help you track and examine your media use. This semester-long project will begin in lesson 1 and conclude in lesson 16.

Writing Assignments are designed to help you solidify key concepts, think deeper about the material, and make important connections by applying your knowledge and your analysis skills.

Activities provide a variety of ways to explore the topics you are studying.

Share Your Work provides reminders and information for students who are working with and submitting work to a teacher.

This course is designed for independent learning, so hopefully you will find it easy to navigate. However, it is assumed you will have an adult supervising your work and providing consistent support and feedback. This adult—who may be a parent, tutor, or teacher—is the one to whom you should turn if you have questions about your assignments or how to get the most out of this course. We will refer to this person as "your teacher" throughout this course. If you have a question about your work, please ask them for help!

Evaluating Online Resources

This course makes use of technology and the vast resources found online. You'll have plenty of opportunities to do online research, and you are encouraged to find additional videos, images, and articles about any of the topics you find interesting. The best way to learn is to follow your interests in any given subject. In addition to online resources, you'll also find valuable resources in print at your local library, which is an excellent place to view a wide variety of publications.

An important part of the work of media literacy is asking questions and seeking information from reputable sources. Use the following questions as a guideline when evaluating sources:

- For digital sources, is the website URL clear and concise?

- For print sources, is the publication information clear? For instance, when and where was it published, and by whom? Can the publisher be verified as legitimate?

- Does the information have a named author? Is it possible to learn more about the author?

- Is the motivation for sharing the information clear? For instance, is it a news article about a current event? Is it an editorial or opinion piece? Is it meant to inform, entertain, or influence opinion?

- Does the author make their research and evidence transparent by citing their sources?

Academic Expectations

You are expected to do your work with integrity and engagement. Your work should be original and give an authentic sense of your thoughts and opinions, rather than what you think the teacher reviewing your work wants to hear. When you use other sources, you are required to cite them accurately. Plagiarism, whether accidental or intentional, is a serious matter.

The appendix contains important material that you will need to read and incorporate into your work throughout the year. Take some time to familiarize yourself with the resources in the appendix. You will find information about original work guidelines, tips on how to avoid accidental plagiarism, and details on citing sources and images.

Please remember to stay in touch with your teacher and share your comments, ideas, questions, and challenges. Reach out if you need support or guidance. Your teacher is eager to help you.

A Note About the Workload

Students vary greatly in terms of reading speed, reading comprehension, and writing ability. Some may find the reading in this course takes longer than expected; others may find the writing assignments or activities take a great deal of time. In general, you can expect to spend about five hours on each weekly lesson. If you need more time to complete the work, discuss with your teacher how you might modify some lessons to focus on fewer assignments or skip activities in some lessons to spend more time on other assignments. Modifications like these will allow you to produce work of a higher quality. Each lesson in this course can be customized to suit your needs.

Keep an eye on the workload as you progress through the course. Make adjustments so you have time for meaningful learning experiences rather than rushing to try to get everything done. Remember to consult with your teacher before making adjustments to the workload.

PART I: Making Sense of the Media

> *"Media literacy is not just important, it's absolutely critical. It's going to make the difference between whether kids are a tool of the mass media or whether the mass media is a tool for kids to use."*
>
> **Linda Ellerbee, American journalist**

Times Square in New York City is packed with media messages, each produced with an intentional purpose and audience in mind. (Image credit: Matthew Mendoza)

Lesson 1

What Is Critical Media Literacy?

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Articulate your current level of knowledge of media content and industries.
- Explore the structure and organization of social media sites.
- Analyze the content and tone of internet search results.

Lesson Introduction

Media Literacy and Critical Media Literacy

Media is the plural of **medium**, a means of conveying information from sender to receiver. **Literacy** is the ability to read and write. Therefore, broadly, **media literacy** is the ability to read and write content conveyed by the media. In more specific terms, *media literacy* refers to the ability to access, analyze, and produce a variety of media texts. This includes visual media such as TV, photography, and film; print media such as newspapers, magazines, and books; audio media such as the radio and music; and all of the above in digital format such as social media and podcasts.

Critical media literacy draws from the foundational definition of media literacy—to be able to access, analyze, and produce a variety of media—and expands on it to include an interrogation of power. Critical media literacy is concerned with the behind-the-scenes work of the media, including ownership, production, and distribution. It explores how the form and content of our mainstream and independent media came to be. When working in critical media literacy, we engage in a process of continuous critical inquiry, asking ourselves and others not just what we know, but also how we know it. In this course, we will study what is beneath the surface of our media so we can understand its processes more thoroughly.

In a media studies context, the word **text** includes not only written words, but also visual or audio messages, and it encompasses everything from books, magazines, TV, and billboards to the logos on our clothes, emojis we use in social media posts, songs we hear, and animated pop-ups we see when viewing a YouTube video or playing a mobile game. Pretty much anything that sends a message can be thought of as a media text.

When media studies began, it focused on radio, TV, film, print, music, and video games. Now, these media are joined by the internet, social media, digital/mobile technologies, smartphones, and multi-modal media that make use of multiple technologies to share their message. These technologies will inevitably grow and evolve into new forms of media in the future. As this course was being developed, the corporation that runs Facebook changed its name to Meta; maybe by the time you start this course, that company will have morphed into something else. And maybe by the time you complete this course, there will be a new social media outlet on the horizon. Technologies advance, expand, and contract. A key thing to consider is that nothing remains static.

Key Concepts in Critical Media Literacy

The foundation for analysis in this course comes from David Buckingham's concepts presented in *Media Education: Literacy, Learning, and Contemporary Culture*. Buckingham, a global leader in media literacy, identifies the following four key concepts:

> **Production:** All media texts are consciously manufactured for a specific purpose.

> **Language:** All media use a combination of languages (such as text, images, graphics, and sound) to communicate meaning and help us make sense of the media message.

> **Representation:** Media production involves selecting and combining moments to make stories and create characters. Representation invites us to see the world in particular ways.

> **Audiences:** All media texts are made for an audience. To study the audience is to study our role as media producers and consumers.

We will unpack each of these concepts to find out how it works and what it means. Most of the assignments in the course are grounded in these concepts, and they will be woven into how we make sense of all the material. We will look "behind the scenes" of our media choices to see who owns, produces, and distributes the media we watch, read, and listen to. While media content is incredibly important, why this content was made and how it gets to us warrants close examination as well.

Critical media literacy is a lens we can use to learn more about the world and our place in it. If confronted with something we see as problematic, critical media literacy also gives us the tools to make a change.

Vocabulary to Know, Understand, and Use

Make sure you understand the meaning of the following terms because they are fundamental to your studies, and you will want to be able to use them with accuracy and relevance. Many words have multiple meanings based on the context; the definitions provided focus on how the terms relate to media literacy.

Media: technological processes that facilitate communication between the sender of a message and the receiver of that message; refers to content, platforms, and the institutions that control the production and distribution of content.

Medium: the form or structure messages take; singular form of *media*.

Media literacy: the ability to access, analyze, and produce a variety of media.

Critical media literacy: critical analysis of media, including ownership, production, and distribution, in order to understand its processes more thoroughly.

Text: media messages in written, visual, or audio format.

Digital footprint: information collected about an individual's online activity, including data regarding media viewed (what and for how long), emails sent, social media posts created and viewed, links clicked, etc.

There is a glossary in the appendix of *The Media and Me* that includes many more important terms you will encounter in this course. You are encouraged to refer to it as necessary.

Reading

Read the following sections in *The Media and Me.*

- Introduction, "Looking Beneath the Surface"

- Chapter 1, "What Are Media?"

As you read the text, you will see callout boxes; you are not required to do this work, but looking them over may enhance your experience in this course.

Viewing

Watch the following video for an overview of media literacy:

> "Introduction to Media Literacy: Crash Course Media Literacy #1"

> youtube.com/watch?v=AD7N-1Mj-DU

Pay particular attention to the concepts of coding and decoding.

Watch the following video to gain an understanding of the history of media literacy:

> "History of Media Literacy, Part 1: Crash Course Media Literacy #2"

> youtube.com/watch?v=oXf0F4GYzWQ

Pay attention to the techniques and motivations of yellow journalism.

🧠 Discussion: What Do You Think?

The media have the potential to occupy so much of our daily lives, so discussion questions are offered as opportunities for you (and your family and friends) to think more about your media use and interactions with the media. By discussing issues, expressing your opinion, and listening to the opinions of others, you will come to a clearer and more in-depth understanding of the topics in each lesson.

Read the discussion questions, and then use one or more to start a conversation with someone, such as a friend, another student, a parent, or another adult; if possible, vary your choice of discussion partners throughout the course so you can benefit from a wide variety of perspectives. You may have to explain some media literacy terms or concepts during your discussions so that others are able to fully participate in the conversation.

Take the time to think carefully about these questions, express yourself honestly, and listen with respect to the opinions and experiences of others. The questions can start the conversation, but feel free to let it veer off into related topics as well. Remember, a discussion is a back-and-forth exchange of ideas. You aren't trying to sway anyone's opinion. You might find your ideas validated or challenged; you might hear new perspectives on the topic; or you might find new ways to think about what you know. The goal is to explore your own thoughts, share them, and be open to the ideas of others.

The discussion questions for this lesson focus on the concepts of **audiences** and **production** by asking you to reflect on your own understanding of social media as well as on how the sites are constructed.

Social media sites—specifically Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok—dominate the headlines. Their popularity will most likely rise and fall, as happens with most media and technologies

---

when they become well known or widespread. With that in mind, discuss the following questions:

- What is your relationship to social media?

- If you are a social media user, how do the sites or platforms you use make you feel?

- Is your social media use (or its absence) part of your real-life relationships?

- As a new student of critical media literacy, what do you think is important to learn about social media?

Note: There is no written element for discussion prompts.

Digital Footprint Journal

Any digital media use builds a **digital footprint**, which is like a trail of data you leave behind that shows every place you visited online and what you did there. The more we use digital media, the more data is gathered about us.

In this lesson, you will begin keeping a journal of observations about your digital footprint. Your journal may start as a list of videos you view, sites you visit, or things you post; over the course of the semester, it will grow into evidence that your footprint is being used to learn about your preferences and alter the content to which you are exposed.

Here are some things you might note in your digital footprint journal:

- When you conduct an online search, what types of sites come up for you? What type of content is prioritized in the search?

- After you do a search, make a purchase on a digital site, post on social media, or watch a video, what pop-up advertisements appear?

- Do you notice the pop-ups changing depending on your online activity?

- When you visit a site, what other sites are advertised? Do they seem related to the site's content or to your own interests, preferences, or online activities?

- Do you notice suggestions for videos, products, websites, etc., that seem specially targeted to what you like or do? What information do they appear to know (or assume) about you?

You will need to include information about your online activity to put your observations in context. For instance, were you listening to music online when an announcement about a local music festival popped up? Were you shopping for clothing when you noticed an ad for jewelry, shoes, or luggage? You don't have to document every site you visit or action you take online, but make note of your general activity—watching a movie, scanning funny cat memes, scrolling through social media, finding sources for a research report, listening to NPR, etc. Whenever documenting online search results, make sure to note what search words you used.

Below is an example of how you might organize your digital footprint journal and compile your data. In this format, you'll list your media activities and then choose several to focus on more in depth.

Sept. 9:

- Online searches (entertainment; trip planning)

- Messaging (Snapchat, Instagram, texting)

- Streaming TV

- Research for science project

- FaceTime

- Music streaming

- Music videos

Date	Activity/Context	Results	Pop-ups/Suggestions
Sept. 9	Search: "roller coasters"	Thumbnail pics of rides at Six Flags, Hersheypark, Carowinds, and Tivoli Gardens Three YouTube videos of rides at Six Flags and Hersheypark Four "People also ask" questions Wikipedia page Images for roller coasters "Top stories" with four headlines (one negative "Guest Sent to ER Bleeding" and three about new rides) Travel Channel article "World's Coolest Roller Coasters" Rcdb.com, Roller Coaster Database Busch Gardens Samperia.com Hershypark	

Date	Activity/Context	Results	Pop-ups/Suggestions
Sept. 9	Search: "Directions to Cape Cod"	Google map Four "People also ask" questions Visit-massachusetts.com Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce Waze.com Nps.gov, Cape Cod National Seashore Images Mapquest.com CapeCodCommission.org CapeCodderResort.com	
Sept. 12	Streaming movie on Amazon Prime	Episodes (with image and description for each) More purchase options	"Create a Watch Party to watch and chat with others"

This is just one way you might structure your digital footprint journal. The format is up to you. For example, you can use bulleted lists to note what you observe based on your actions, you can write your thoughts in a few sentences, or you can create a flow chart that highlights the connections you see, using different colors to show how your actions relate to certain content targeted at you. Your journal is a way for you to document your growing understanding and awareness of the behind-the-scenes media processes and efforts to influence your behavior or opinions. You may find yourself refining your format as you begin collecting more data. You will be sharing your digital footprint journal with your teacher at several points throughout the course, so you should consider using a format that is easy to share.

This journal is a major long-term project that you will be adding to continuously throughout this course. You will find reminders in each lesson, but you are encouraged to add to your digital footprint journal at any time, based on your own online media use. For the first half of the course, you will be documenting your observations, and then in lesson 10, you will begin constructing a way to present the information you've collected. You can look ahead to lesson 10 to see the instructions for the final project if you would like to have it in mind as you collect data and record your observations. Your digital footprint journal final project will be due at the end of lesson 16.

In this lesson, you will decide on a format and begin collecting data in your journal. Activities A and B are a good place to begin, but you are also encouraged to collect data anytime you go online.

Writing Assignments

This written assignment focuses on the concept of **audiences** by having you reflect on your own media use. As with all assignments in this course, read the entire assignment before beginning.

1. Your first written assignment is a freewrite. Freewriting is similar to brainstorming, but in written form. Start by writing the following two questions at the top of the page:

    • What do you think you know about the media?

    • Why do you think you know it?

    Then, begin writing your thoughts as they come to you. You don't have to try to organize your thoughts; just start writing as you think about the prompts. If you get stuck, read the questions again to focus your thoughts. Keep writing for at least five minutes. Your goal is to produce about two pages of freewriting on the topic.

    Feel free to start off as broad as you want. For instance, you could write about what you know about media such as radio, TV, film, music, video games, news (print and broadcast), and social media. Then, focus on specific examples to support your ideas. Or you could write about what you know about a specific text, media outlet, or technology. Make sure to address how you came to know it or why you think your knowledge is accurate.

    We'll come back to this freewrite at the end of the course, so make sure to keep it available.

Activities

These activities are focused on the concepts of **audiences** and **production**, through their focus on self-reflection and the construction of media sites.

Complete both of the following activities:

• Activity A: News Coverage of Social Media

• Activity B: Defunct Social Media Site

Read through the entire activity before you begin each one.

Activity A: News Coverage of Social Media

1. Do an online search for news and current events stories related to social media. You can choose a particular media site or focus more generally on the business of social media.

    Before clicking on anything, review your search results. Does the wording of the results skew positive or negative?

    (Note: This may be your first entry in your digital footprint journal, so have your journal handy to write down your observations. Make sure to note what search words you used whenever documenting online search results.)

2. What sources are in the top 10 results? Write these down, but don't click on them as that may change your search results when you go back to them. Note the titles and the first part of the URL, such as *businessnewsdaily.com*, *forbes.com*, or *marketinginsidergroup.com*. (You don't have to include *http://* or *www*.)

3. At first glance, do the language and sources match your worldview? Please explain your answer using specific examples from your search.

4. What search engine did you use?

5. What search words did you use?

6. Take a screenshot of your results. Share the screenshot with your teacher when you submit your work for this activity.

Activity B: Defunct Social Media Site

1. Choose a discontinued ("dead") social media site, such as MySpace, Friendster, Vine, Ping, Path, Google+, etc. Try to choose one you never used and know little or nothing about.

2. Do some research about the site: What was its purpose? Who owned the site? How was it accessed? Why is it no longer in service?

   (Remember to pause before clicking on anything to record your observations in your digital foot-print journal. You will be reminded of this a few times to help you get into the habit of it.)

3. Begin reading and taking notes from at least three sources to build your knowledge about this site. Your notes do not have to be in complete sentences. Use your own words as much as possible when taking notes. Make sure to use quotation marks and cite the title and/or author if you are copying information directly from a source.

   Compile your notes and a list of your sources to share with your teacher. Include a full citation for each source. (Refer to the appendix for information on how to cite sources.)

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share your work with your teacher for feedback. You can use the checklist below to help organize your work.

- A copy of your digital footprint journal

- Writing assignment (freewrite on your knowledge of media)

- Activity A: News Coverage of Social Media

- Activity B: Defunct Social Media Site

Your teacher will let you know the best way to submit your work. At any time in the course, if you are unable to complete the assignments or activities as written, please contact your teacher to arrange alternative methods for completion.

If you have any questions about the lesson content, assignments, or submission methods, let your teacher know.

Lesson

2

Understanding the Mass Media

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Collect data on your own media habits.

- Develop an understanding of how your media experience is constructed through a combination of intentional choice and unintended exposure.

Lesson Introduction

Media and Mass Media

The development of the media in the early twenty-first century is marked by change. The media-saturated world you live in is dramatically different from the mediated world of your parents and is a foreign language compared to the media world of your grandparents. In addition, the media of the first ten years of the twenty-first century may feel ancient and old-fashioned compared to the media of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

We are surrounded by the media, both by choice and by happenstance. However, despite the changing quantity and quality of media, for the most part, we continue to do the same thing with our media that past generations did. For example, if we watch a movie via a digital streaming app on our smartphone, we are doing the same thing as if we were watching a movie on TV or at a movie theater. When we scroll through Instagram to catch up on pages we follow and people we like, we practice traditional literacy skills: reading and writing messages and news. The technology may be new, but the work is very similar to what we've been doing for generations.

Media is the form or structure a message takes, such as the following:

- Print: books, magazines, billboards, newspapers, etc.

- Audio: radio, live music events, sports broadcasting, etc.

- Visual: video, film, art, etc.

Media can also refer to the technology used to deliver a message, such as the following:

- Publishing: newspapers, magazines, books, etc.

- Digital sound recordings: CDs, audiobooks, etc.

- Video recordings: television, commercials, music videos, etc.

- Internet: blogs, websites, search engines, etc.

Or media can refer to the content any of these forms or technologies.

The word *media* is often used in the singular form, referring to media as a single entity (for example, "The media is often controlled by big corporations"). You'll also see it used in the plural form (for example, "Media are targeted at specific audiences"). Think of the plural form as meaning "media sources" or "media messages" and that will help it make sense. Finally, "media" generally refers to content while "the media" refers to the platforms and outlets that produce and distribute the content.

Media is a fluid word and a fluid concept!

Mass media refers to forms of media that can be used to relay messages to a large number of people. Some media are multimodal; that is, they are at least two forms simultaneously. For example, you may read a news article from a newspaper on a digital platform on an app on your phone. Streaming video and audio services are possible because of web platform technologies.

The twenty-first century marked the greatest shift in the quantity and quality of media with the largest period of growth in technology so far. It marked the solidification of how we use our various media and how the media enters our public and private spheres. However, when the twenty-first century is history, we might see that it was a century with even more growth in media production and consumption. Traditionally, families, schools, businesses, and religious organizations have helped define who we are as individuals and members of society. The media are important socializing agents as well. Even as they change and adapt, at their core, the media help us understand and make sense of the world (though that sense-making may be deeply problematic).

Media are so familiar and so intimately a part of daily life for so many people that we may take them for granted as always available. Have you ever had a power outage in your home? You might have turned on light switches out of habit because you are so used to having power available. Or maybe you tried to connect to the internet to find out when the power would be restored. You may spend most of your time with digital, mobile media and, in so doing, may forget that pen and paper is also a type of media. One of our overarching tasks in this course is to pause and recognize how regularly we take the media for granted, and to closely examine the effect this automatic acceptance of media has on our lives.

Media are available 24/7, and how we choose to interact with them is partially up to us and partially determined by the media companies. Have you ever stopped to think about how your media experience has been carefully constructed by someone else? What are the goals and motivations of those behind your media experience?

As of the publication of this course, about six companies control 90 percent of the mainstream media in the United States. While it might feel like we have endless options from which to choose—so many social media sites, mobile apps, streaming video and music services, and much more—when we look closely at ownership (a key tenet of critical media literacy), we see that our choices are limited in intentional ways.

The mainstream media in the United States is organized through concentration and conglomeration.

> **Concentration** is where fewer and fewer parent companies own more and more media outlets; what we might view as competing texts are often owned by the same parent company (and their symbiotic relationship is highly functional).

> **Conglomeration** is where media companies are subsumed into much larger corporations, which appear diverse in their interests but can be traced to a scant number of conglomerates.

Our job as global citizens of the twenty-first century is to learn from our past and our present to make more sense of who we are and where we are headed, both as individuals and as a global human culture.

Vocabulary to Know, Understand, and Use

Concentration: when fewer companies or outlets own a greater quantity of sources.

Conglomeration: the process of a large corporation buying smaller businesses and absorbing them into the larger parent company.

Mass media: media messages relayed to a large audience.

Reading

Read chapter 2, "Critical Thinking," in *The Media and Me.*

Viewing

Watch the following video to deepen your understanding of the history of media literacy:

> "History of Media Literacy, Part 2: Crash Course Media Literacy #3"

> youtube.com/watch?v=9iUjvNtgWAs

Pay particular attention to the concept and forms of protectionism and McCluhan's idea that "We shape our tools and then our tools shape us."

🧠 Discussion: What Do You Think?

Read the discussion questions below, and then use them to start a conversation with one or more people. Try to vary your choice of discussion partners throughout the course so you can benefit from a wide variety of perspectives. Take the time to explain any media literacy terms or concepts that are unfamiliar to your discussion partners.

Aim to express yourself honestly and listen with respect to the opinions and experiences of others. Use the questions to start the conversation, but let it evolve naturally as you share ideas. Remember, you aren't trying to sway anyone's opinion. The goal is to explore your own thoughts, share them, and be open to the ideas of others.

The discussion questions focus on the concept of **audiences** because they are about how you make sense of your own media use.

Much of our time with media is spent multitasking because we often use more than one medium at a time. For example, we may be scrolling through social media while watching a movie. With that in mind, discuss the following questions:

- What are your thoughts on multitasking?

- Do you feel that you can or cannot pay close attention to a particular text when you are also engaging with another text?

- Do you think the media industries are aware that audiences are multitasking?

- What makes you think that the media industries are (or are not) aware of audience behavior?

Digital Footprint Journal

When completing the activity in this lesson ("Media Connection"), remember to take notes in your digital footprint journal. Add any insights or thoughts about your media exposure during the week as well, whenever you happen to be online. Plan to add several new entries each week.

Keep in mind that your journal is not simply a list of the videos you view or things you post, but rather it is evidence that your footprint is being used to alter the content you are exposed to.

Here are some things you might note in your digital footprint journal:

- When you conduct an online search, what search words do you use? What types of sites come up? What type of content is prioritized in the search?

- What pop-up advertisements do you see after you do a search, make an online purchase, post on social media, or watch a video? Do you notice the pop-ups changing depending on your online activity?

- When you visit a site, what other sites are advertised? Do you notice suggestions for videos, products, websites, etc., that seem specially targeted to what you like or do? What information do they appear to know (or assume) about you?

Remember to include enough information about your online activity to put your media observations in context. This is the largest project in this course, and you are expected to put a significant amount of effort into it.

As you get used to using your digital footprint journal, feel free to change the format if the one you originally set up isn't working well for you. Talk to your teacher if you need help with ideas for other formatting options. You will be sharing your journal with your teacher at the end of this lesson. Feel free to share the whole thing or only the new content.

Writing Assignments

1. Drawing from the discussion questions, reflect on your own multitasking habits, including media multitasking. Do you text while watching TV? Scroll TikTok or Instagram while doing homework?

   Write a reflection essay on your role as a media multitasker. What do you multitask? Are there certain activities where you prioritize monotasking? Is there anything about your media use that you'd like to change? Why or why not?

Activities

Complete the following activity, which, with its emphasis on self-reflection, focuses on the concept of **audiences**.

Activity: Media Connection

1. For 24 hours, document all media you are exposed to, both by choice and by happenstance. Look closely at the wide range of media you experience. Document your exposure as objectively as possible, using the following questions as guidelines:

   - What was the source of the media exposure?

   - Did you actively seek out the media, or was it put in front of you without your active participation?

   - What was the content?

   - How much of your attention did it require?

   - How much time did you spend on each media exposure? How much energy?

You may find it easiest to create a simple chart to record this data, noting the time of day along with the rest of the information.

2. Afterward, write one or two paragraphs summarizing your exposure and your thoughts about it. Address both the media you chose to interact with and that which you experienced by happenstance without your active participation. Were there any surprises?

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share your work with your teacher for feedback. You can use the checklist below to help organize your work.

- A copy of your digital footprint journal (or only the entries from this week)

- Writing assignment (two-page reflection on your role as a media multitasker)

- Activity: Media Connection

If you have any questions about the lesson content, assignments, or submission methods, contact your teacher.

Lesson

6

"Fake News"

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Identify differences between news and "fake news."

- Compare news coverage of competing media outlets and identify techniques used to influence opinion.

- Compare a personal sense of self with a media message regarding self-image.

Lesson Introduction

Feeling Informed Is Not *Being* Informed

Immediately after the contentious 2016 U.S. presidential election, "**fake news**" became part of our regular vocabulary. In *The Anatomy of Fake News*, Nolan Higdon points out that part of the problem with our understanding (or, more precisely, misunderstanding) of **news** is that we do not have the tools to distinguish "real" (that is, accurate) news from "fake" (deliberately inaccurate) news. Higdon observes that "Fake news is not new. What is new is the amount of fake news being consumed and legitimized" (4). Fake news is often an effective tactic to get audiences to believe a certain inaccurate or highly biased version of an event. A tricky thing about fake news is that there is no agreed-upon definition. For the purposes of this class, we will draw from Higdon's observation that fake news is "printed, digital, aural, or visual news (with the intention of dishonesty)" (3).

An important distinction to be made is that fake news from a news organization is usually intended to fool the audience through dishonesty. **Satire** and **parody**—using humor and exaggeration to drive home a point—are often used in news commentary, but the intent is to bring the audience in on the joke, using dishonesty as a shared message to reveal a larger truth. An example might be someone saying "The senator thinks it's a good idea to lower taxes for the wealthiest people. Why stop there? Let's eliminate taxes for the rich altogether. What a good idea!" We understand that this person is

using exaggeration to make a point, and what they are really saying is that lowering (or eliminating) taxes for the wealthy is a terrible idea.

As audiences, we know satire and parody aren't true because we participate in the joke. There is no intent to mislead or misinform; in fact, the author wants the audience to understand the true message. Fake news wants to deliberately mislead the audience by tricking them into believing an inaccurate message.

Critical media literacy is concerned with fake news in part because news is how we are invited to learn about what is happening in our communities, our nation, and the world. If we are misinformed or lied to, we run the risk of *feeling* informed rather than *being* informed. Fake news can help construct a population that does not ask questions and can increase political and social divisions between people. One way it does this is by repeating information that is patently false. This is one technique that is used to mislead people—the more we hear something, the more we are likely to believe it is true. This contributes to a false sense of security that is built on half-truths or outright lies. This is one reason why critical media literacy focuses on the ownership, production, and distribution of media. By learning about who owns media sources, we can get a better understanding of the motivations behind their actions.

Vocabulary to Know, Understand, and Use

Fake news: false or misleading information that deliberately uses dishonesty to sway opinion or influence actions.

News: fact-based reporting used to inform an audience.

Satire: using exaggeration, sarcasm, or irony to humorously highlight or reveal a message, action, or untruth.

Parody: exaggerated imitation for comic effect, often used to bring attention to dishonesty or incompetence.

Reading

In *The Anatomy of Fake News*, read the following chapter:

- Chapter 2, "The Faux Estate: A Brief History of Fake News in America"

Viewing

Watch the following video clip of comedian Stephen Colbert discussing language and politics:

> "The Colbert Report: The Word—Truthiness"

> www.cc.com/video/63ite2/the-colbert-report-the-word-truthiness

Then, watch this interview with Nolan Higdon (the author of *The Anatomy of Fake News* and one of the authors of *The Media and Me*):

> "Weaponizing Fake News"

> youtube.com/watch?v=3Y4Ac-musP4

🧠 Discussion: What Do You Think?

This discussion touches on the concept of **audiences** because of its focus on self-reflection, and the concepts of **language** and **representation** for the stories being told by the news.

- Are you a regular news watcher or reader? Why or why not?

- What value do you see in paying attention to news and current events? If you do not see any value in it, why not?

- What is your primary source of news?

- In your own news sources, do you notice any bias?

- Do news organizations pay attention to and construct stories about topics that are of interest to you?

- How are people with whom you identify portrayed in news media? Do you notice differences in how various news media organizations portray your identity group(s)?

Digital Footprint Journal

Continue to add to your digital footprint journal. When you access the two videos in the viewing section, you'll have a good opportunity to record new data as well as when you are doing the two activities in this lesson. Aim for at least two new journal entries per week.

You will share your journal with your teacher at the end of this lesson.

Activities

Complete both of the following activities:

- Activity A: Making Sense of the News

- Activity B: Revisit Your "Self and Media" Map

These activities focus on the concept of **production** because of your construction, and the concepts of **language** and **representation** because of how the story is told and what it reveals about yourself and the media.

Activity A: Making Sense of the News

1. Think of a current events topic that is of interest to you, then do a news search to see how the mainstream press is covering the story. Analyze the topic from multiple news outlets, ideally ones from different positions, such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* or the *Washington Post* and the *Federalist*. Choose at least two articles about the topic.

2. Deconstruct each story using the following prompts:

   - Write down the author's name and their credentials (if you can find them).

   - Describe the use of images (if any), including their size, placement, content, and apparent intent.

   - State the article's position on the issue.

   - Identify specific word choices (including the headline and any section headings) that express the article's position, especially ones intended to provoke an emotional response in the reader.

   - Note any sources that were used or cited (including unsubstantiated claims, such as "Researchers found . . ." without specifying the researchers or study by name).

   - Notice what leads you to trust or mistrust the article's coverage of the issue.

3. Look to see what organization or person owns the news outlet or website where the article was published. Do this for each of the articles you deconstruct. If you cannot access the full story, that's okay. But if there is a paywall blocking your access, how much would you have to pay to access the story?

4. Using all the data you have collected, create a news map that visually represents the different ways the story is represented. This map can be a creative visualization of how different news organizations tell the same story, or it can be a collage or a digital slide presentation.

   Remember, your work will be evaluated based on its content rather than on your creative or artistic skills. Focus on the message you are trying to convey. What did you discover about how and why one issue is reported in different ways?

5. Write an "artist's statement" that describes what your news map reveals about how a story is told through different styles of news coverage. Share any discoveries or thoughts you have on the experience.

6. Share your deconstruction notes, news map, artist's statement, and links to the original articles with your teacher.

Activity B: Revisit Your "Self and Media" Map

1. In this activity, you will begin to analyze your "Self and Media" map. Take special note of where there are overlaps between your concept of self and the media's messages about self. Where are there disconnects?

    Think about what you have learned so far about media techniques, purposes, and motivations. Consider how the media is trying to influence you. What do these messages want you to believe or do? Apply the critical media literacy skills you've learned to look behind the message to how and why media messages related to self-image are constructed and the power they have to influence behavior and opinion.

    Keep all that in mind as you study your "Self and Media" map and examine what it exposes. Your map is a media message you are constructing. What story does it tell?

2. Add text and/or graphics to your map to show what it reveals about yourself, the media, and the relationship between the two. What does it show you about how and why the media might influence the way you feel about yourself? You can highlight the connection between media and self either visually or by incorporating explanatory text.

3. Several more times in the course, you will be adding to and analyzing your "Self and Media" map. Keep it intact and store it where you can easily retrieve it later.

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share your work with your teacher for feedback. You can use the checklist below to help organize your work.

*   Digital footprint journal

*   Activity A: Making Sense of the News (including deconstruction notes, news map, artist's statement, and links to the original articles)

*   Activity B: Revisit Your "Self and Media" Map

If you have any questions about the lesson content, assignments, or submission methods, contact your teacher.

Lesson 14

Media Portrayals of Ability

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Identify how ability and disability are represented in media.

- Analyze the message in your own media construction.

Lesson Introduction

Ability and Disability in the Media

About 26 percent of the population in the United States has some type of physical or neurological disability, whereas only about 3.5 percent of mainstream media feature characters with some sort of physical or **neurotypical** disability. This is a large gap between how we really live and how that is represented in mainstream media.

Often, when we see a person with a physical or neurological disability in the media, the point of the narrative is for that person to overcome their disability. These characters are often represented as sad, in need of fixing, or as a sidekick for an able-bodied friend or family member. Sometimes we see characters fake a disability as a way to get ahead, cultivating the idea that disability is a way to game the system. While rare, some media represent people with disabilities in a positive light, promoting the idea that these people do not need to be fixed and that their differing abilities have valuable and worthwhile qualities.

As we learned with representations of race, gender, and sexuality, part of the history of mainstream media representation includes characters with disabilities being played by actors without the corresponding disability. This may be necessary and ethical in some cases—for example, if there is a movie made about a person with a debilitating disability, someone with that disability may not be able to

☐ Read the lesson introduction.

☐ Read a section of chapter 4 in *The Media and Me.*

☐ Complete the viewing assignment.

☐ Use the discussion prompts to start a conversation.

☐ Continue working on your digital footprint final project.

☐ Complete the writing assignments.

☐ Activity: Analyze Your "Self and Media" Map

give consent for the work expected to act the part. However, in many cases, it may be entirely ethical and feasible for a person with a disability to represent their position.

In this lesson, we'll explore how ability is represented (or ignored) in the media.

Vocabulary to Know, Understand, and Use

Neurotypical: neurological patterns that are the norm or present in the majority of a population.

Reading

In *The Media and Me,* read the following section of chapter 4:

- "Assessing Ability"

Viewing

You might like to watch a few episodes from one or more of the following series to see examples of how a character with disabilities is integrated into the story line.

- *Glee* (2009–2015)

- *Superstore* (2015–2021)

- *Atypical* (2017–2021)

Discussion: What Do You Think?

Use the discussion questions below to further explore the lesson topics through thoughtful discussion with others.

- Before this lesson, how aware were you of media presentations of ability and disability?

- What are your thoughts about it now?

- Based on your learning of the multiple components of identity that we've explored, what are your thoughts on the responsibility of media to construct accurate representations of various identity components?

Digital Footprint Journal

1. Complete the rough draft of your essay. It should be three to five pages, be well organized, and have all the elements you want to include. It does not need to be edited or proofread at this stage, but it should be written in complete sentences and have all the information.

   You will share your rough draft with your teacher for feedback at the end of this lesson.

2. Continue constructing the visual elements of your final project. If you would like feedback or want to discuss any elements of your project, let your teacher know.

Writing Assignments

1. Choose a media text (story, TV show, film, etc.) that includes or focuses on a person with a disability. Do some research on that character: Are they based on a real person? Is the character played by an actor with a corresponding disability? How is the disability represented? Is it key to the narrative, or is it part of the background (not the main focus of the story)?

   Write a review (one or two pages) discussing how the media text presents ability and disability.

2. Based on your understanding of the four key concepts of media literacy (production, language, representation, and audiences), what concepts were the focus of this lesson's discussion, writing assignment, and activity? Provide a brief justification for your choices.

Activities

Complete the following activity.

Activity: Analyze Your "Self and Media" Map

1. Return to your "Self and Media" map to add images and mementos that focus on how socioeconomic class and ability/disability are represented in your own life and the media. This map is a personal reflection, so feel free to express yourself in any way you feel comfortable.

2. Add text and/or graphics to reveal or emphasize patterns or key discoveries about the connection or disconnect between yourself and media representations of self. This is the last time you will be adding to your map, so include any final pieces you feel are missing.

3. After you've completed your map, step back and view it as a whole. What does it tell you? What media message have you constructed about how media representations of self and your own self-image align and collide?

   Write a narrative of the story your map tells about self and media. Highlight the key elements or revelations your map communicates. Do you feel your messages and identities are clear? Reflect

on how it felt to express yourself authentically and how it felt to see how media represents different aspects of your sense of self.

Write at least one page and make specific references to images and mementos included in your map.

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share your work with your teacher for feedback. You can use the checklist below to help organize your work.

- Digital footprint final project (rough draft of your essay)

- Writing assignments

- Activity: Analyze Your "Self and Media" Map

If you have any questions about the lesson content, assignments, or submission methods, contact your teacher.

Appendix