What is Media Literacy?

Inquire: Recognizing Ads in your Life

Overview

Do you ever notice how many ads you see in a day? Or even in an hour? In today's media landscape, you see ads all the time, to the point where you might not even notice them. This lesson will talk about this first by teaching you what media literacy is. Then, you will learn about media bias and cognitive dissonance. Finally, you will learn what impact media literacy can have in your daily life.

Big Question: What is media literacy?

Watch: When Advertisements Attack!

When you go to the movies, when do you see advertisements? There are ads before the previews, and the previews are also ads. So, ads run all the way up until the movie starts. However, you may not realize that because we are so exposed to advertising, we ignore it happening in the movies themselves. When your favorite superhero wears Nike shoes, that's an advertisement. As ads become more prevalent, learning to recognize them becomes more crucial. The ability to identify advertisements and critically consider their effects is called media literacy.

This lesson will provide you with a foundation of media literacy skills and what they try to accomplish. You will understand what it means to identify bias within a media source. You will learn about cognitive dissonance and schema: the Lego blocks that help us understand the world. Most important is to grasp how media literacy can impact your daily life. The goal of media literacy is to make you aware of advertising around you so you can critically think about the information you receive on any given topic.

Media literacy might seem like a skill without any practical application to your life, but it is more helpful than you might realize. How do you decide where to go for dinner? Do you think about what sounds good? Do you ever consider commercials you saw for a restaurant? What happens when you are watching TV and a food commercial comes on? Does the commercial ever make you want to go get dinner right away? The influence of ads changes how we act every day. Media literacy helps you understand the influence and make informed decisions.
Overview
We live in a world full of media, and fuller still of media messages. You can't turn on the television, radio, or your phone without seeing an advertisement for something. No matter what you do, you are exposed to media messages in your life. Figuring out how to interpret those messages and how to make decisions based on a large amount of conflicting information is a skill. The skill is called media literacy, and this lesson will focus on what media bias is, what cognitive dissonance is, and what impact media literacy has on your life.

What is Media Literacy?
Media literacy refers to critical thinking skills that allow people to evaluate and create responsible media. Responsible media is any communication message that does not make unethical attempts to inform or persuade an audience. Messages that provide proper context, do not lie, and offer alternative viewpoints are what we consider to be ethical messages.

It's important to take a moment to define media. Media is the plural of medium. A medium is any channel that a message gets sent through. Television is a medium. The Internet is a medium. A classroom lecture is a medium. Often, when we hear the word media we think of things like CNN or Fox News, and while these are both media, they aren't a special kind of media, nor are they the only types of messages that get to claim the title of media.

Media literacy is a skill that many people have to some degree but may be unaware of. Any time you ask questions of a message, such as who funded it or what the message is promoting, you are engaged in media literacy practice.

What is Media Bias?
Media bias is the skew or perceived skew that a message has. Generally, we think of these biases as political. For example, a democratic news source could have a democrat skew. This is an example of media bias, sure, but media bias isn’t only limited to politics. Any message can contain a bias. Media bias is often viewed as a negative thing, but it is simply unavoidable. All messages bring with them certain assumptions because of the senders’ backgrounds. Bias isn’t something we should eliminate or avoid. We simply need to be aware of it. This is especially true when a message comes from two different sources with different biases. If they are saying the same thing, you can generally accept that information as credible. If they have opposite biases and say opposite things, it becomes important to look at the context of the message. For instance, if a message says you can reduce your interest rate, while another says you can never reduce your interest, these are opposing messages. But, the context of the message matters! In this example, they are talking about different things. Interest and interest rates might seem similar, or even the same, but they aren’t. The context matters to help determine how the source’s bias has changed the presentation of the information.

What is Cognitive Dissonance?
Cognitive dissonance is when we expect one thing to happen, but something else happens altogether. We have schema — mental building blocks of information that help make sense of the world around us — that tell us what to expect. Think of these like you might think of Legos. We learn things, and expect
those things to be true. We build on what we have learned based on schema. It is like Legos being built into a structure. When we expect something to happen one way, but it happens differently, our schema quickly try to adapt to connect what we know to what happened.

Cognitive dissonance happens when we are unable to make sense of something because it goes against what we thought we knew. For example, if you always get a certain brand of hard candy when you visit your grandparents, and it’s been that way for years, you come to expect that. But, if you go one time and get a Tootsie Roll instead, you won’t know how to react. This is an exceptionally small example of cognitive dissonance. In this instance, you might not even notice anything is wrong. We sometimes handle dissonance by ignoring it, changing our expectations, or rejecting what happened and leaving the situation altogether.

Impacts of Media Literacy

Media literacy is a skill allowing us to be thoughtful consumers of media. When you watch a food commercial, what happens? Do you get hungry? Does your mouth water? Do you want to go out and get a burger? Or maybe you want to go to your kitchen and grab a snack? Do you ever notice these things happening? These are all benign impacts of media influence. More often than not, they aren’t harmful, but they do happen! Media influence happens at varying degrees depending on the message being sent. Media literacy is meant to make you aware of the sheer amount of messages you are exposed to daily, and of the influence they have on how you act. It doesn’t mean you should live a hermit life never interacting with anyone. Instead, media literacy gives you the tools to confidently make a decision based on information that proves its worth, rather than making a decision because of good advertising tactics.

Reflect Poll: The Purpose of Ads

What do you think ads primarily try to do?
- Sell products
- Sell lifestyles

Expand: What do Ads Sell

Overview

A primary question media literacy hopes to answer is, “What do ads sell?” This section will explain two of the answers media literacy scholars have found. The first is rather obvious — ads sell products. The second one is arguably more important — ads sell lifestyles.

Ads Sell Products

This one is a no-brainer. A television commercial for a car is obviously selling that car. A fast-food chain’s commercial will try to sell you the newest burger they’ve come up with. Ads are a primary way for companies to tell us what things they offer. But, ads take a surface level view. They don’t consider anything except the product. They don’t account for the context of the ad, or anything other than the product’s name, price, and availability. While not wrong, this view of advertising is shallow and incomplete.
Ads Sell a Lifestyle

A truck commercial mentions the truck, but what else? Patriotism? Toughness? Manliness? These attributes are part of the lifestyle the ad says you can achieve by buying a product. Gone are the days of buying products just for practical use. We have entered an age where products are used to gain social status, and that's part of the purpose of an advertisement in the modern era. You aren't only meant to want the product; you are meant to want the lifestyle that product endorses. The product becomes an object declaring your values to the world. In this sense, everything takes on a deeper meaning. The goal of media literacy is to help you understand the values a product brings along with it. It isn't necessarily bad that products are associated with values, but it is something you should be aware of. Media literacy skills help you do so.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A Crash Course video providing an in-depth look at media literacy skills
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AD7N-1Mj-DU

A video explaining media literacy
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIaRw5R6Da4

An article explaining why media literacy is important to learn
- Link to resource: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/news-and-media-literacy/what-is-media-literacy-and-why-is-it-important

Lesson Glossary

**media literacy**: critical thinking skills allow people to evaluate and create responsible media

**medium**: any channel through which a message gets sent

**media bias**: the skew or perceived skew that a message has

**cognitive dissonance**: when we expect one thing to happen but something else altogether happens

**schema**: mental building blocks of information that help make sense of the world around us

Check Your Knowledge

1. Media bias only happens with political messages.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Schema are how we make sense of the world.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Any channel used to send messages is media.
   a. True
   b. False