Defining Critical Media Literacy

By [Allison Butler](#)

'**Media literacy**' is defined in a variety of ways. Most commonly it is used as an 'umbrella term' that encompasses the analysis of mass-media and pop-culture, digital or technology platform analysis, and civic engagement and social justice action.

Sometimes the terms "media literacy" and "media education" are used interchangeably. The leading global scholar in children's media cultures, [David Buckingham](#), sees them as two separate actions that are related to each other. He defines:

- Media literacy as "the knowledge, skills and competencies that are required in order to use and interpret media" (2003, p.36).
- Media education as "the process of teaching and learning about the media" and media literacy as "the outcome – the knowledge and skills learners acquire" (2003, p.4).

Interpretation, or evaluation, is a key component of any media literacy work. [Sonia Livingstone](#), of the London School of Economics, notes that "Evaluation is crucial to literacy: imagine the world wide web user who cannot distinguish dated, biased, or exploitative sources, unable to select intelligently when overwhelmed by an abundance of information and services" ([2004, p. 5](#)). In media literacy work, interpretation, or evaluation, is the process by which students and teachers dig through their already-existing knowledge in order to share information with each other and build new knowledge.

In the United States, media literacy is defined as "hands-on and experiential, democratic (the teacher is researcher and facilitator) and process-driven. Stressing as it does critical thinking, it is inquiry-based. Touching as it does on the welter of issues and experiences of daily life, it is interdisciplinary and cross-curricular" (Aufderheide,

1993, p. 2). The student of media literacy learns how to access, analyze, and produce a variety of media texts (Aufderheide, 1993).

What is Critical Media Literacy?

In this eBook, we have chosen to add the qualifier 'critical' to our use of term, media literacy. ***Critical* media literacy** encourages analysis of the dominant ideology and an interrogation of the means of production. It is rooted in social justice (Kellner & Share, 2007) and explores the "behind the scenes" of ownership, production, and distribution. Critical media literacy is an inquiry into power, especially the power of the media industries and how they determine the stories and messages to which we are the audience.

There are (at least!) Three Ways to Apply the Term 'Critical'

Critical analysis: Approach a text from a distance and eliminate the emotional response, while exploring *why* there is an emotional response. Critical analysis is a clinical approach (asking questions). As part of the interpretation/evaluation process, it involves self-reflection: What do I know/believe and how do I know it/why do I believe it?

Media literacy is critical: Six corporations control 90% of all mainstream media in America ([Lutz, 2012](#); Phillips, 2018). Teens report spending more than 7 hours a day on screen-based entertainment media outside of school time (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010; [Rideout & Robb, 2019](#)). More than 90% of U.S. teenagers' self-report smartphone ownership/access (Anderson & Jiang 2018). Based on quantity of time alone, young people deserve to have formal study of the media in order to better understand what they are spending so much time on.

Critical media literacy: It is a process of continuous critical inquiry, diving deeply into questions of ownership, production, and distribution: What is known about the text? How is this known? What is the context for understanding the text?

Sometimes in media literacy work, the ***question* is more important than the *answer.*** The question is an invitation for students and teachers to work together, to share knowledge, and to build collaborative understandings. Because so much of media analysis is about interpretation, there may not be one absolute answer. In many of the lessons, you will see discussion questions posed without corresponding answers or information; please use this as an opportunity to generate shared knowledge with students and, if further questions arise, to check for additional resources.

Concepts of Media Literacy

In 2003, and updated in 2007, David Buckingham codified the concepts of media literacy. The concepts are flexible and can be adapted to multiple media. The following are the basic outlines of each concept:

- *Production:* Media texts are consciously manufactured. Addressing production asks questions about how the media are constructed and for what purpose. It is important to explore the 'invisible' commercialization of digital media and global role of advertising, promotion, and sponsorship.
- *Language:* Visual and spoken languages communicate meaning; familiar codes and conventions make meaning clear. Digital literacy also looks at digital rhetoric, especially website design and links.
- *Representation:* Events are made into stories which invite audiences to see the world in one way and not in others. This concept explores authority, reliability, and bias and looks at whose stories are told and whose are ignored.
- *Audience:* Who is engaging with what texts and how are people targeted? This concept looks at how users access sites, how they are guided through sites, and the role of users' data gathering (2003, pp.53-67; 2007, pp.155-156).

[Apply the Concepts/Engaging Media Literacy: News and Information Evaluation](#)

Critical Media Literacy Guides

A key component to critical media literacy is critical inquiry. Much of the work of critical media literacy is to ask questions of the media texts that we make use of and study. Critical media literacy focuses on both the content of the media (that is, what we watch, read, or listen

to) and, possibly more important, on the power behind the construction of the content (that is, the ownership, production, and distribution of media texts). Critical media literacy pays close attention to the interrogation of power: What media are the object of our study and how did they come to be?

Our [Critical Media Literacy Guides](#) provides some foundational questions for a variety of media, including social media, websites, news & newspapers, movies, television, images, and advertisements. The questions focus both on the forward-facing content as well as the behind-the-scenes of each medium. The questions address both representation of the power of construction and of distribution. The questions are intentionally broad - they will best be used to begin the process of analysis. The questions are designed with popular culture texts in mind and can be used with historic and contemporary media, and for a variety of local, national, independent, and corporate media. The questions are not focused on a particular text or content, so they are adaptable and can be used as a guide for multiple media, over time.

References

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- Aufderheide, P (1993). *Media literacy: A report of the national leadership conference on media literacy.* Queenstown, MD: The Aspen Institute.
- Buckingham, D. (2003). *Media education: Literacy, learning and contemporary culture.* London: Polity Press.
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- Kellner, D. and Share, J. (2007). Critical media literacy,

democracy, and the reconstruction of education. In Macedo, D. and Steinberg, S. (Eds.), *Media literacy: A reader*, pp.3-23. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

- Phillips, P. (2018). *Giants: The global power elite.* New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.
- Rideout, V., and Robb, M. B. (2019). [The Common Sense census: Media use by tweens and teens, 2019](#). San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.

Additional Resources

Popular press coverage on social media & fighting fake news:

- [Fighting Fake News](#)
- [Teaching kids news literacy could be a matter of life and death](#)
- [How Does "Fake" News Become News?](#)
- [Facebook 'danger to public health' warns report](#)
- [Critical Media Project](#)

**Scholarly works that introduce and apply media literacy:**

- Buckingham, D. (2003). *Media education: Literacy, learning and contemporary culture*. London, England: Polity Press.
- Buckingham, D. (2007). *Beyond technology: Children's learning in the age of digital culture.* London, England: Polity Press.
- Buckingham, D. (2019). *The media education manifesto*. London, England: Polity Press.

Scholarly work with news analysis component:

- Higdon, N. (2020). *The anatomy of fake news: A critical news literacy education*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Young adult work on how to make sense of fake news:

- Otis, C.L. (2020). *True or false: A C.I.A. analyst's guide to spotting fake news*. New York, NY: Feiwel and Friends.
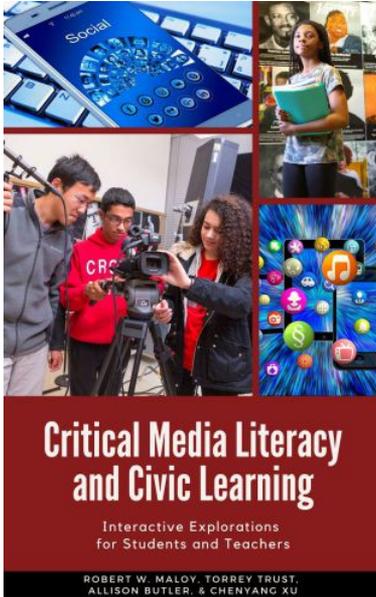
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