

The Pillars of Media Literacy and the Dynamics of Media Representation

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Media literacy is the key to navigating the vast sea of information that surrounds us. This is the second article in the series produced together with the Baltic Media Centre of Excellence, where we remind you of the very basics of media literacy. In this article, you'll find a concise recap on what the five core concepts of media literacy are, as well as a more detailed explanation why representation matters.



Media literacy is an ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in different ways. As this short description suggests – it demands having many skills both from the reader (or consumer, if you will), and the creator of media texts.

Decode Narratives to Empower Yourself

The title of this section might sound a bit obvious to some, yet it is true. Media texts, from news articles to advertisements, shape our perception. Our ability to think critically and analyze everything we encounter in the media, whether it's the front page of a newspaper or a TikTok video on the 'For You' feed, is what guards us from deception and manipulation, thus allowing us to form a more informed opinion. Here, we are revisiting the fundamental concepts that form the core of media literacy.

Decoding Messages: When encountering a media text, think about the layers of it, and try to define the intended audience. Check if the author has been named. Ask yourself – what methods have been employed to convey a certain message? What are the values beneath this message? Whose viewpoint is portrayed? This initial exploration serves as the foundation for decoding the narratives that subtly influence us on a daily basis.

Authorship and the Point of View: Who is the author of this message? Even if you don't know the answer to this question, you should ask it nevertheless – no matter how objective one might strive to be, the creators' background shapes the narrative. Now think: what beliefs influence the authors' perspective? Whose viewpoint is the author using as a lens? Understanding

authorship and used point of view helps to unmask hidden perspectives that can subtly influence the message.

Representation: Representation matters. Period. As previously mentioned, media texts shape our perception. Thus, ‘How is the “group X” portrayed in this content that I’m watching right now?’ is a relevant question to ask yourself. Remember to always dig deeper – seek for cues of stereotypes, and always assess the accuracy and fairness of media representations. Embracing diversity and abolishing stereotypes allows us to foster a more inclusive media landscape.

Who is this for? When creating any kind of content, the author mostly has their preferred audience in mind. What is the target audience? Analyze the text to see if you can pinpoint any assumptions about the audience the author has subtly embedded. It’s crucial to understand it, as the interpretations, as well as impact across different groups, might diverge greatly.

Last but not Least – the Impact: We all know the power of media. But we do not always think of it when actively consuming media content. Therefore, we should all train ourselves to ask these questions more often: What influences can the media exert? How would this content make someone feel? What would be their reaction? How could these reactions influence their life? It might seem rather easy in theory, but the ability to follow the five core concepts of media literacy, is actually critical knowledge. This understanding equips you to analyze texts, unmask authorship, challenge representation, pinpoint audiences, and understand media influence, and that, taken all

together, allows you to make informed decisions in a world saturated with information.

Breaking Barriers: The Impact of Diverse Media Representation

It's no exaggeration to say that media representations shape our perception of diverse identities. It also plays a primary role in challenging stereotypes, fostering empathy, and promoting equality.

Accurate and fair representation can be a catalyst and the building blocks for a more inclusive society. This is an easy example, but still – consider the impact of featuring a range of characters from different backgrounds in mainstream films. It has not always been like that! History of the media is also a history of no representation of different marginalized groups. Surely, we've come a long way, and representation today has the power to challenge existing stereotypes, as well as reproduce and illustrate narratives that resonate with broader audiences and that include previously marginalized or underrepresented groups.

Beyond surface-level observations, representation has a potential to become a transformative agent, fostering empathy and understanding. When there are individuals with diverse experiences portrayed, the audience steps into unfamiliar shoes, at best trying to delve into a deeper understanding of perspectives that may differ from their own.

Media representation can have a transformative impact. Positive representation helps to tear down prejudices and discrimination. By nurturing understanding and empathy, it acts as a catalyst for societal change.

However, unfair and inaccurate representation can lead to negative outcomes. Misrepresentation or just plain tokenism of diverse characters can lead to the rise or legitimization of previously existing stereotypes. Lack of authenticity and nuanced portrayals reinforce existing biases and does not allow deeper understanding of different experiences. If the creators force themselves into crafting exclusively positive representations, it can lead to oversimplification of the diverse narratives, resulting in a story that has been diluted and which does not convey the experience of the (mis)represented group. When media is deliberately shaped to genuinely reflect the world, the society has a chance to become more inclusive. Representation also means recognition. This means that anyone, despite their background, should be seen and heard.

Why is it important?

Understanding the five core concepts of media literacy allows us to decode messages, and critically assess any information we encounter, including how different groups are represented. These skills are crucial to navigate today's digital media landscape. One should always remember that media representation matters. It is not just a phrase. It has a real impact on real people. Breaking barriers and embracing fair portrayals contribute to a more inclusive society, fostering empathy and challenging stereotypes.