

Critical Media Literacy Concepts

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Goal

- These slides are intended to help apply the Association for Media Literacy's 8 Key Concepts in a critical way.
- These are intended for secondary educators seeking to help students develop a deep understanding of the media as an object of study, rather than just developing informational/textual literacy.

Concept 1
All Media Are Constructions

News items and other forms of media are human creations—people write and produce the news.

After watching the news, it is easy to believe that you have learned the most important news of the day. However, what you have actually learned is what a group of people (journalists, producers, editors, anchors) decided to focus on.

People in media make decisions for a variety of reasons, and not all of those reasons relate to the “newsworthiness” of a particular story.



This concept raises the following questions:

- How do you think editors and publishers determine the front-page story (or the lead story in a broadcast)? Do you think newsworthiness is the only factor? What other factors do you think might be relevant?
- What did the author or producer of this news story choose to leave out? Why was it left out?
- How might someone else have told this story differently?

Concept 2 The Media Construct Reality

One common expression is that someone or something is “being tried in the court of public opinion.” This means that whatever facts or ideas are being presented and highlighted by the media are impacting the way that people view the issue.

Another common saying, that “perception is reality,” points to the ways our understanding of reality becomes our reality.

This concept is best applied to the media as a whole, rather than to specific news or media items. Taken together, newspapers, television, social media, radio, and other media platforms tell us what is important.

This concept
raises the
following
questions:

- What important stories is the media not paying attention to? Why is the media focusing on the stories and issues that it is focusing on?
- How does the media portray national elections in the United States? Is the focus on policies and issues, personalities, or the electoral process? Or something else?
- How does the media shape what we view as most urgent or pressing?

Concept 3

Audiences Negotiate Meaning in Media

Not everyone reads the same story in the same way. Some people scan headlines, photos, and captions; others read the full story.

Our individual beliefs and biases also make us more accepting of certain views and arguments and less receptive to others.

This concept can play out at the level of an individual news story, but it is even more apparent when it comes to how an individual interacts with the media as a whole.

Audiences can determine where they get their news.

This concept
raises the
following
questions:

- Why might two people reach different conclusions after reading/viewing the same news item?
- How does the amount of choice in the media contribute to or detract from our ability (as a nation) to discuss and make decisions about important issues?
- Should citizens seek a variety of news sources? Why do people not do this?

Concept 4

Media Have Commercial Implications

- Quite simply, if no one buys what a news outlet is selling, advertisers will not pay for space and the news outlet will disappear.
- There are so many outlets available online that some websites use seemingly manipulative headlines to lure browsers to their site.
- It is important for students to think about how these commercial implications shape the ways that stories are presented, and also how these implications determine which stories are not presented at all.
- This concept also plays out in the choice of what is considered to be a top story or breaking news. Images that are eye-catching—a fire, a car crash, a high-speed police chase—often lead local news broadcasts because they attract viewers.

This concept raises the following questions:

- What advertising do you see connected to this news item or media outlet?
- How do you think commercial and advertising concerns shape what the media as a whole chooses to cover?
- Do some media sources seem more beholden to advertisers than others?

Concept 5
Media Contain Ideological
and Value Messages

- All articles, news items, blogs, and editorials do more than report facts and information. They also contain value messages about how the world works and how it should work.
- Example: Business news focuses on Wall Street and large financial institutions rather than on small businesses, working conditions, or income inequality. This shapes the way that consumers view what is important in the economy and economic decision-making.
- It is important to note that we often use the word “ideology” to claim that *someone else’s* worldview is misguided. However, we all have ideologies—shortcut theories about how the world does and should work—even though we may not think of them as ideologies.

This concept raises the following questions:

- What are the taken-for-granted assumptions or ideas embedded in an article or news item?
- Do some outlets, when viewed as a whole, seem to support one ideological position over another?
- Why is it easier to spot ideologies with which we disagree than those with which we agree?

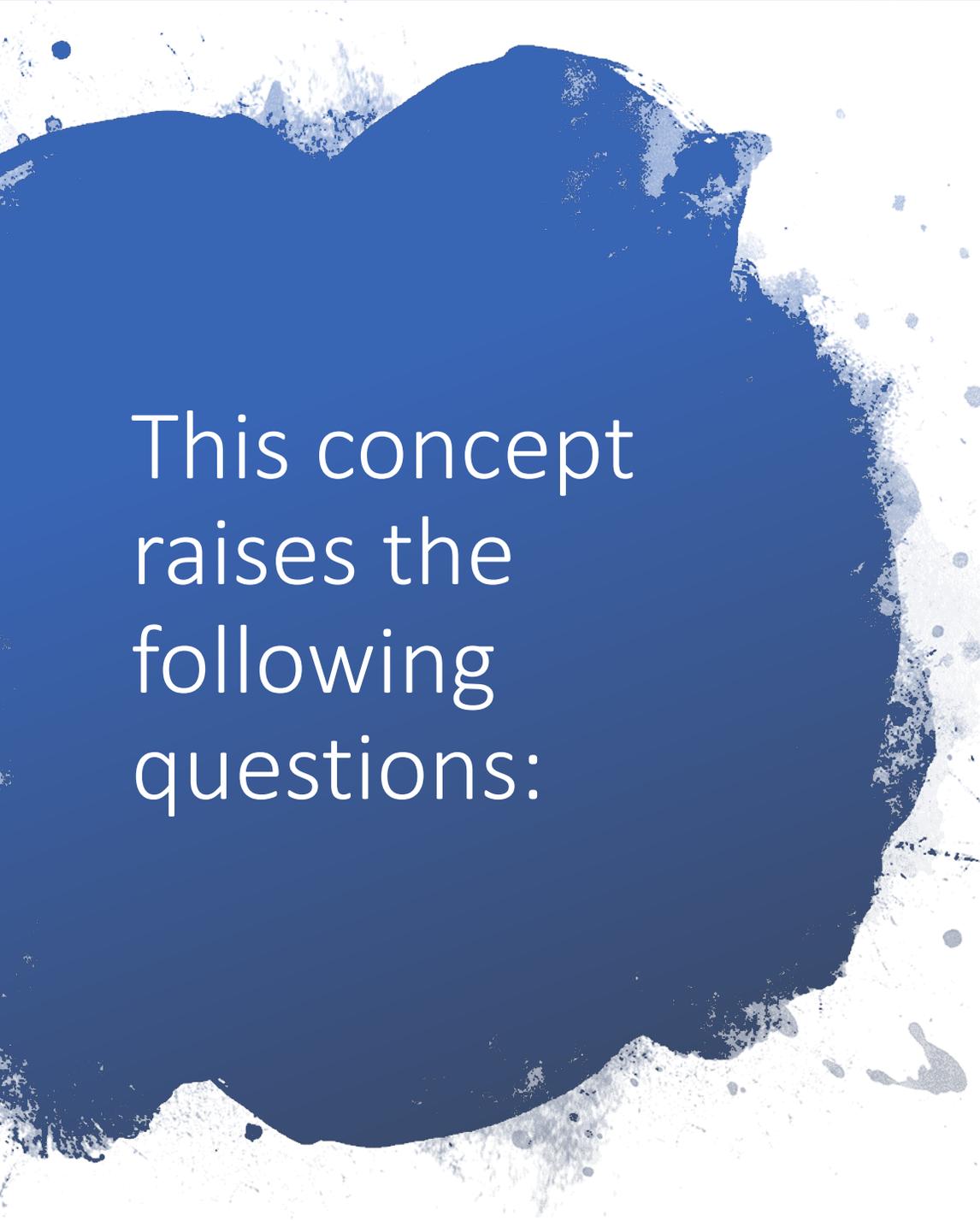
Concept 6

Media Have Social and Political Implications

Media messages are often taken at face value; readers and viewers learn what happened or what is going on.

However, there are many ways—both large and small—that we can identify the political and social implications of media.

For example, the mainstream media is widely considered to have failed during the months leading up to the Iraq War, for not sufficiently scrutinizing the statements made by political leaders.



This concept
raises the
following
questions:

- How does the media shape my understanding of what is worth paying attention to?
- How does a specific news item make me think or feel about the people/group being covered?
- Who is the author of this news item trusting or believing, and should I believe those sources?
- How can I tell which sources to believe?

Concept 7: Form
and Content Are Closely Related
in the Media

- Perhaps nowhere is this concept more obvious than in the way the meaning of the term “breaking news” has changed in recent decades.
- The concept of breaking news was developed by the Associated Press in 1906 as a way to alert editors and publishers that a piece of news was of such significance that they should interrupt their printing schedule to ensure that the information was included in the next edition of the newspaper.
- However, 24-hour cable news networks—and now social media—use the term so frequently that many people no longer pay attention to it. The 24-hour cable news networks need to attract viewers in order to charge companies for advertising space.

This concept raises the following questions:

- Why did the authors/editors choose to portray this story this way? How might it have been different if it was presented in another form?
- How are the same stories covered by television, radio, newspapers, and social media? Are those differences important?
- Does one form of media (evening news, 24-hour television news, newspaper, radio) seem better at covering certain types of stories than others?

Concept 8
Each Medium Has
Unique Aesthetic Form

- The aesthetic form of a medium is the visual way in which the medium conveys information about what is important and worthy of attention.
- In newspapers, for example, stories that are on the front page are considered to be the most important or the most likely to attract readers (or both).
- On television news, we are used to seeing an anchor in the center of the screen with some text at the bottom, as well as images or footage relating to the story over the shoulder of the anchor.
- Knowledge of these forms can help individuals interrogate news items and critically “read” them.

This concept
raises the
following
questions:

- What trends do you notice in the way that this medium (local television news, national evening news, a national newspaper, a local newspaper) displays the news? What is on the screen or page?
- How does the way that news is displayed impact the viewer/reader?

Some resources

- We have free resources, including teaching materials and a current issues blog @ <https://www.closeup.org/for-educators/overview/>
- The Teaching for Democracy Alliance is a coalition of non-partisan civic education organizations, like Close Up, that promote teaching about elections and voting. Find our resources here @ <http://www.teachingfordemocracy.org>
- Mismatch is a tool for allowing students in different parts of the country to engage in face-to-face, facilitated discussions and dialogue online. Find out more @ <https://www.closeup.org/for-educators/virtual-engagement-mismatch/>

Acknowledgement

- These 8 concepts were articulated by the Association for Media Literacy and can be found in their original form here: <https://aml.ca/resources/eight-key-concepts-media-literacy/>
 - This reframing is intended to focus particularly on the U.S. media landscape and is intended for secondary teachers and students.
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