
UNIT 14 MEDIA LITERACY

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14.0 INTRODUCTION

We have discussed in the previous unit that the globalised media environment and unlimited avenues for information generation and dissemination have led to most people falling under the category of media audiences and being influenced by it. We begin our interaction with media at a very early age and the relationship strengthens as years go by. New media and messages make an inroad into our everyday existence and leave an imprint on our minds.

McLuhan's famous adage, 'Medium is the message' clearly emphasised the role of the medium in comprehending the message. We come across various media sending forth messages – some complimentary and some contradictory. In such a scenario, it is easy for us to get into the habit of imbibing the messages without comprehending them. We face, what is commonly termed as 'Information overload'.

The information we receive through the vast network of disseminating media; appears to be simple, and easy to understand. It caters to all the areas of interest, entertainment, news, current affairs etc. It comes to us in our spoken language that we recognise both linguistically and cognitively. The reality, however, is that the media uses a complex audio-visual 'language' which has its own grammar. The language of word, pictures, moving pictures and music can be used to express many-layered concepts and ideas about the world. It can also be used to create false ideas and notions as everything may not be obvious at first. The images fly by the mind's eye and stay on in the deep recesses of our mind. If we wish to be able to navigate our lives through this multi-media culture, we need to be fluent in 'reading' and 'writing' the language of images and sounds just as we have always been able to 'read' and 'write' the printed language.

The all encompassing prevalence of media makes it imperative that we learn the language of media and learn how to derive meaning out of all its messages. Just as computer education became necessary to be a part of the literate world, media literacy is now equally important.

14.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- define media literacy;
- describe the process of media literacy;
- outline the core concepts of media literacy;
- evaluate the credibility of information;
- explain the power of visual images; and
- and critically analyse media messages

14.2 MEDIA LITERACY: CONCEPT AND DEFINITION

Media literacy involves learning to access, analyse, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms (Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute, 1992). The definition lays stress on creating media messages, which is only one aspect of media literacy. We need to understand media literacy as a wholesome education which is more about helping audiences of different age groups become competent, critical and literate in all media forms so that they are able to make meaning of all that they see or hear, rather than letting the medium control their thinking.

Media literacy empowers you to understand the media, the rationale of media, the reasons for messages, the implication of visual images and the economics of the media industry. You will be capable of not only finding the answers to your questions from the media but also raise pertinent questions when required. Thus, you will not get carried away by the images of real or imaginary world that are put before you by the media.

Media literacy also helps you understand your surroundings. It helps you make more informed decisions, as you are able to see the hidden meanings behind the messages. In brief, media literacy makes you a more discerning user of media outputs.

14.2.1 Need for Media Literacy

The first and most important requirement for a healthy democracy is to have enlightened electorate. Media literacy creates educated electorates, who are able to see through the campaign strategies and are capable of critically evaluating manifestoes and election speeches. The other important reasons for media literacy are:

Influence of media on our daily life: You must have observed that even little toddlers and small children are addicted to mediated communication all day. For some of our children, television acts as a baby sitter and internet as a friend. In such a situation, it is important that children should also be media literate and understand that Tom and Jerry are only cartoons and in real life one can get hurt if one runs like them!

Media shapes our perception of the world: If we watch too much of a certain type of programme, we start to believe that the society is just like that. Media literacy frees us from the stereotypes created by the images projected at us.

Media is urban and elite oriented, but the society is not: In our real lives, we have to work hard for a living and in our films and television serials; life is depicted to be very rosy. A media literate person will not feel frustrated at this situation and will understand that real life is different from what is depicted. Thus, media literacy helps us to see the difference.

Technology changes the look of the world every day: Media products flood the market and change the way people read, talk, write and understand. A media literate person is able to follow the media as per his/her individual requirement and is not led by the diktats of the market.

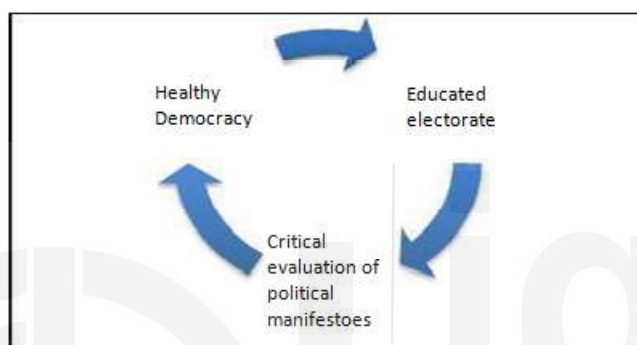


Fig. 14.1 Importance of Media Literacy in Democracy

14.2.2 Functions of Media Literacy

Media literacy as an area of education, must explore the nature and influence of media and media messages in our culture. As far as our culture is concerned, media no longer only influences it; but is already a part of it. From mobile phones, cameras, computers, laptops, internet, newspapers, television to cinema, all the products of media are part of our everyday life and hence our culture. Media literacy therefore helps us understand our culture.

Media literacy does not intend to create critiques of media systems or the society who are forever looking for political agendas, stereotypes or misrepresentations; it however, does intend to create a media consumer who is capable of taking wise decisions and is not unintentionally influenced by media.

Media literacy does not function as a means to criticise the media and find faults with all the messages as it would amount to taking a very narrow dimension to this vast field. However, it involves critically analysing the media only when you have thoroughly understood the meaning behind the messages.

Although some experts believe that media literacy is the knowledge of media production - it is not. Creating media products is a very specialised aspect of media literacy which actually begins from understanding media messages and systems.

Media literacy aims to help you look at the media experience from multiple perspectives, which would include your own educated opinion about media messages. Media literacy does NOT tell you to not interact with the media. It only teaches you to interact carefully, think critically and understand intelligently.

14.3 PROCESS OF MEDIA LITERACY

In order to understand the process of media literacy it will be useful to revisit the famous Model of Communication Process given by the political scientist Harold Lasswell (1948) who defined an act of communication in terms of the following questions:

- Who (Communicator)
- Says What (Message)
- In Which Channel (Medium)
- To Whom (Receiver)
- With what effect? (Effect)

According to Lasswell there are three functions for communication:

1. Surveillance of the environment;
2. Correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment; and
3. Transmission of social heritage from one generation to next.

Lasswell model suggests that a media message flows in a multicultural society with multiple audiences through various channels. Understanding media is also about understanding different players in the system of mediated communication. Each of the entities outlined by Lasswell can be understood in terms of media, messages and audiences.

‘**Who**’ or the Communicator is the savvy individual or media organisation who can use the media systems to send forth their messages.

‘**What**’ is the message that is being sent forth by the medium - it is influenced by many factors and may not be error free.

Channel refers to the medium being used. Each medium has its own characteristics and the nature of the message changes.

‘**To Whom**’ refers to the consumers of media products and

‘**With what effect**’ implies the repercussion of the message.

The process is not as simple as it appears; so let us understand it in the context of Media Literacy. The process of Media Literacy begins with the audience - the consumers of media products. When we become media literate, we start to collect relevant and useful information and comprehend its meaning effectively. We gather and interpret information, appreciate the good and the bad, and become media savvy. Given below are the ways in which this process is carried out:

- Each message is understood independently and in relationship with others. The message may come from any media. This is understood as ‘deconstruction of message’.
- After deconstruction the messages are analysed in their context and presentation - this is called ‘decoding’.
- Messages are now ‘read’ in the real sense.

The above process will also help you to look at the messages coming from the media with a new perspective.

- Biases and prejudices can be recognized and treated likewise; We can read between the lines;
- The intent of the sender becomes clear;
- The media and media channels are understood from the messages they send forth and also how they do it;
- We understand the ideology of a media organisation that brings out these messages; and
- We understand our society better.

The fact that you have learnt how to ‘read’ the media messages will also help you to ‘write’ in a better format. You will be able to organize your thoughts, draft your text, add images and/or sounds, edit, and present the final message.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Notes: 1) Use the space below for your answer.

2) Compare your answers with those ones given at the end of this Unit.

1) Explain the term Media Literacy.

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2) Why do we need to become media literates?

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3) Describe the process of Media Literacy.

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14.4 CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA LITERACY

The core concept of media literacy challenges the premise of mere consumption of media messages. It postulates that if we do not ask questions about media messages and media products we will not be able to distinguish between beneficial and harmful messages. In our language classes, we are taught to differentiate between a poetry, essay, letter, note, memo, and article. Does a common newspaper reader know the difference between a news story and a feature article or main news and paid news? If we knew the difference we would know which is factual and which contains elements of storytelling.

According to the Centre for Media Literacy (2003), the five core concepts of media literacy are:

1. All media messages are ‘constructed’;
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules;
3. Different people experience the same media message differently;
4. Media have embedded values and points of view; and
5. Most media messages are organised to gain power. Let us understand this through a diagram

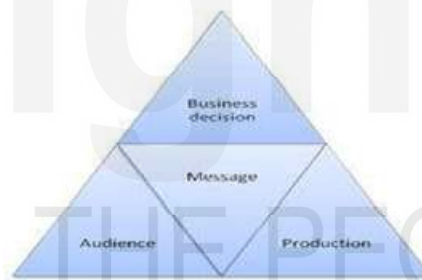


Fig 14.2 Core Concepts

Business decisions	:	Profit making, Market acceptability, Image enhancement
Message	:	Based on stereotypes, crossing several barriers
Audience	:	Accept or reject message as per their knowledge and interest levels
Production	:	Visuals, sound, dialogues and other imagery used to create a perfect, believable message for the audience.

We will try to understand each concept one by one.

14.4.1 Media Messages are ‘Constructed’

Whenever we receive any message from any of our media, we need to realize the fact that the message has been designed by somebody for us. We tend to believe that the news being shown is the most important event of the day and that is why it is on television. Let us look at the same situation in another way.

The world is full of people, all of them are engaged in doing something in their lives but only some actions of some people become news. Some actions are told to the rest of the world because some people in some organisations think that the

action was important. Are you able to understand where this whole series of thought is leading? This means that ‘news’ is different from the ‘event’. An event has to be worthy of becoming news and for this it goes through a process of news selection and gathering by a news organisation. It should therefore have specific qualities to qualify as news. Once it qualifies, the reporter narrates the event in his/her words to the audience. Thus by the time, an event becomes news, it has gone through a lot of additions and subtractions.

Let us further understand this with a diagram:

A limited number of events from all the events in the world

Selected by reporters on the basis of news values

Written inverted pyramid giving clear priorities Elements of interest added to it, such as photos, tables, graphs, line drawing, etc. in newspapers and audio visual clips, peoples bytes on TV. This is done on the basis of availability and understanding of the reporter

Appears as a news story in our media

Audience/readers believes it as the most important event of the day

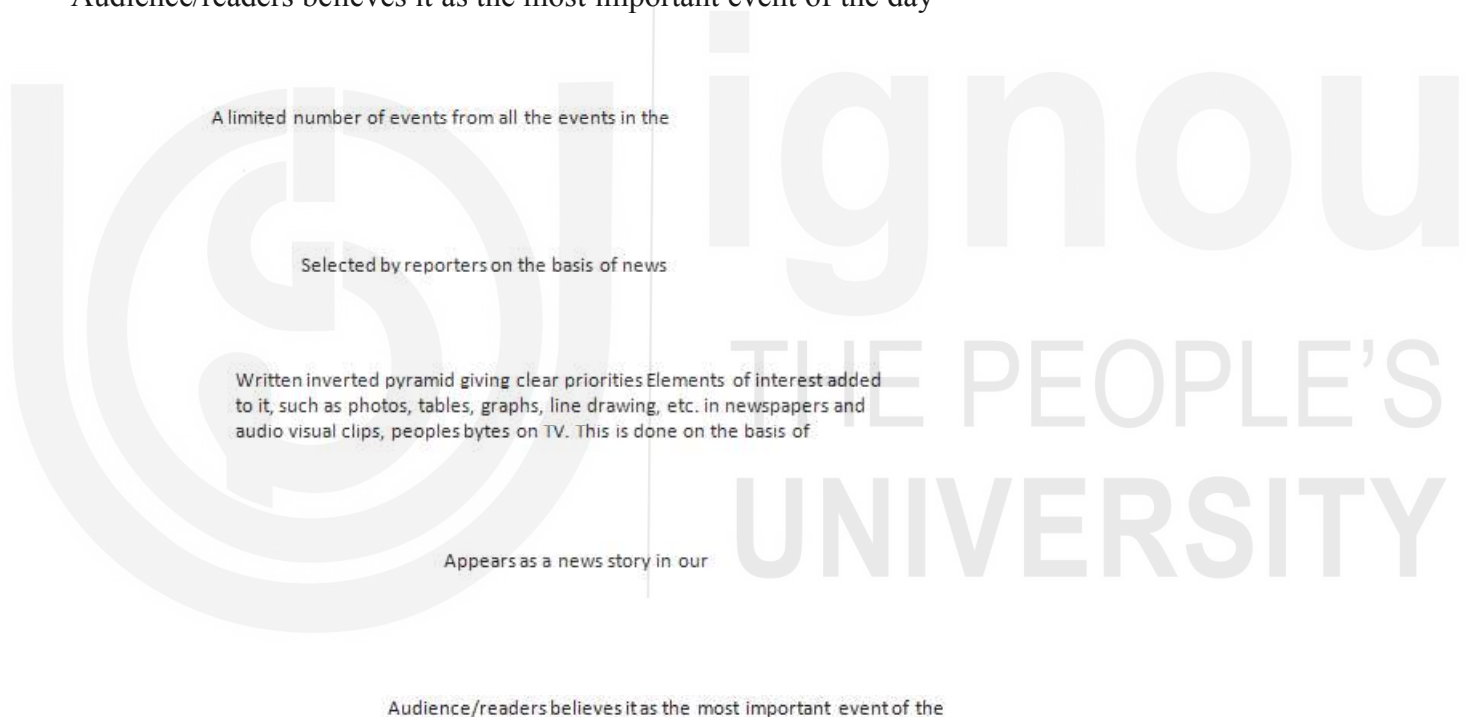


Figure 14. 3 News is a ‘constructed’ narrative

From this diagram it is clear that news is a narrative prepared by the media persons for the audience. We do not get to know about the events that were rejected. If this can happen to the most factual section of our media messages, imagine how much ‘construction’ goes into preparing fiction? Will you be able to consume media messages with an understanding that ‘All media messages are ‘constructed?’

14.4.2 Media Messages are Constructed Using Creative Language

Each of these media messages are a combination of many elements. These elements have their own way of saying things and no message is narrated in

isolation. Let us try to understand with the help of the same example that we used to illustrate the first point.

A news story on television is a narrative of the events as we have already seen. This comes to us along with the use of multimedia elements. These elements are moving pictures (video) and sound (audio). If the news is about a train accident, the camera hovers over the crying face of a victim, it takes a close up of tear filled eyes, a mother carrying a crying child on her shoulders, dead bodies visible at a distance, the reporter comes and goes but the camera relays the pictures of grief.

The camera acts as our eye - it decides what we should see. The cameraperson's judgment at the site of the accident gives shape to the enormity of damage and anguish. We see the world through the eye of the camera. In addition to the video is the audio. The sound adds its own pathos to the scene. Sorrowful music is played to make the scene come alive, but in real life no music is played when we are sad. The music in messages gives us the cue to laugh or cry and the medium tells us that this is a sad story and you should feel bad. The surprising aspect is that we start to feel just as the media tells us to. This means that we get caught in the mood created by the medium and start understanding the world from its point of view. If we could understand the language of the medium we would not be so naïve and yet be able to appreciate the message.

14.4.3 Different People Experience the Same Media Message Differently

Do all of us understand the messages sent out by the media in the same manner or do different people react differently? The reality is that each individual understands the media messages on the basis of his/her own uniqueness. When we understand media messages, we see them through the prism of perception. Our level of interest, previous knowledge, stereotypes in our heads, values and culture all play a part in understanding the message. The message therefore is not just constructed by the sender but is also reconstructed by the receiver.

14.4.4 Media have Embedded Values

We have seen that media messages are parts of reality constructed by media persons, but are the messages totally free of bias? Let us try to understand the process of news creation before it is served to us.

The news gathering process involves

- The reporter gets a list of events.
- S/he decides to attend one.
- S/he reaches the venue and searches out the person from whom s/he can get to know more about the event.
- S/he talks to few persons about the event.
- S/he takes note of the ongoing activity and returns to office. S/he writes the story.
- That is why, it is important to understand that media are always viewpoint oriented even when they are trying to be objective.

14.4.5 Messages are Organised to Gain Power

In the previous units we have discussed at length that media is a big business. In fact, it is a sector of economy and big media houses control everything that goes into the media. A business person would go into the business of media to gain in terms of finances and power. If a media house gets the audience to tune into its programmes day after day, it can sell space/time to the advertisers at a good rate and make profit. The media house can also tailor messages to suit a certain political ideology, philosophy, lifestyle or image. This way, in a democratic country mass media messages can be used to tilt the power equation towards the highest bidder.

A well-informed user of media will apply discretion and power of judgment while exposing him/herself and dear ones to these messages. S/he will critically evaluate the messages while watching or listening to them and gauge their credibility. The best way to analyse media messages is through the use of the Media Triangle, which focuses on Text, Production and Audience.

With the help of this framework we will try to understand the questions to ask while analysing a newspaper story or a magazine article.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Notes: 1) Use the space below for your answer.

2) Compare your answers with those ones given at the end of this Unit.

1. What are the five core concepts of media literacy?

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2. Who decides the content and treatment that is to be given to media messages? How is this decision making done?

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2) Who benefits from the message?

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14.5 EVALUATION OF THE CREDIBILITY OF INFORMATION

Having understood the market dynamics of mass media let us try to evaluate media messages coming from different sources. The process of evaluation would comprise understanding the background of the message, the medium used for its dissemination, interpretations arising from it, intentions and purpose.

When we watch a TV programme, we are so engrossed in the story telling technique and the powerful narrative created by the visuals and the audio that we do not care much about the deeper meaning that might have been intentionally or unintentionally being formed in our minds. This deeper meaning will eventually rest in our memory bank in the form of stereotypes. In our effort at media literacy, we should stop and check. Let us together analyse a popular film Sholay which most of us have seen at some point of time.

- Notice the characters. How are they dressed? Do they tell you anything from their clothes? The colours chosen? The way they speak? The hairstyle? Are you able to identify a definite effort that has gone into creating the characters in order to make them believable?
- Now, turn off the sound and watch the characters again. Do they seem similar to what they were last time? Are they less effective?
- Now, turn off the video and listen to the sound. Are you able to imagine the character from the background score? Are you able to recognise the accents in their voices? Are you able to 'see the film in your mind'?
- Have you been able to see the effort put in by the film maker with the help of so many other people in creating an ambience and atmosphere for you? He has succeeded in making you believe that these are real people leading real lives.

Try this exercise with an advertisement, a news cast, a news story and you will be able to see the layers of meaning. While watching TV or a film it may not be possible to conduct this type of analysis but after some time, it becomes a habit and the mind is able to understand the messages as narratives and not 'real'.

Base rate and Exemplar

Most news stories can be categorized under two categories: Base rate and Exemplar. Base rate comprises of all the information that is verifiable and specific. It could be data, illustrations, sometimes actual percentages and sometimes generalizations such as 'lots', 'many' etc. In contrast, exemplar is episodic information that describes causes, importance and consequences of a problem with an individualistic perspective. These are stories. (Potter, 2004)

Studies have found that audience like to believe the exemplars more than the base rate. When they read the news stories they understand the narrative from their own perspective and relate them to their personal lives.

Example: Exemplar about Accident/Fire News Fire claims City heart hotel

City loses heritage structure

City heart hotel, the oldest building in Shanbag, was reduced to ashes in a fire mishap last night. No loss of life or injury is reported. One of the proprietors Mr. Hari Gupta, 64, made a miraculous escape from his first-floor office by jumping out of a window.

The fire is believed to have started at about 9.00 p.m., when many customers were finishing dinner. It is suspected to have originated in the kitchen on the ground floor. The two storey building with a timbered frontage was engulfed in flames almost immediately. The cause of the fire is not known.

Talking to the press, the Divisional Officer R. Sinha, who commanded the rescue operations, said “The building was already burning fiercely by the time we arrived. It was a pretty desperate situation.” The fire control operation proved to be difficult because of narrow streets and presence of onlookers. The fire department was assisted by the police and auxiliary firemen to clear the street and carry out the fire fighting operation.

City heart hotel in Main market was built in 1825 and was fairly unique in the Shanbag area because of its historic appearance. It had recently been purchased by brothers, Mr. Hari Gupta and Mr. Ravi Gupta. None of them was available for comment.

With the loss of City heart hotel, Shanbag has lost not only its oldest building but also a famous tourist destination.

This is the 5th incident of fire in the city this month. Approximately goods worth Rs. 5 Crores have been lost in this fire.

The facts in the story are divided into Base rate and Exemplars:

Base Rate

- a) Age of proprietor: 64
- b) Time of the start of fire: 9.00 pm
- c) The year of establishing of the hotel: 1825
- d) Place of origin of fire: Kitchen
- e) Number of floors of the building: 2
- f) Type of facade: Timberage frontage
- g) Number of fire incident: 5th
- h) Loss estimate: Rs 5 Crores

Exemplar

- a) Timber frontage is a risky material to use for façade. All owners of houses with timber frontage will be worried
- b) All those who dined in the hotel in the past will remember their experiences
- c) Neighbouring building owners will be worried about the safety of their buildings.
- d) Other hotels will worry about their fire safety measures.

A look at the above data clearly depicts the parts of the news story that will be remembered by the readers. Try this method with some other media messages, films, advertisements, television serials etc. and you will find yourself recalling the exemplars more than the base rate.

14.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you were exposed to look at media messages as a constructed phenomenon purposely created to influence us in many ways. It was explained that since we live in a mediated environment, we need to understand media better and educate ourselves on the methods in which these messages are created and used.

The meaning of media literacy, its need, purpose and process was explained. Media Literacy was defined as education which helps audiences of different age groups become competent, critical and literate in all media forms. The five core concepts of media literacy were examined to help you to evaluate the credibility of information from different sources. The deconstruction of a media message was explained - how emotions are deliberately created for us with a lot of effort by experts. The difference between base rates and exemplars in the media messages was described and how you can create your own messages using a variety of media tools explained.

We hope that the discussion will enable you to navigate through the media messages and access information from a variety of sources. You will be able to analyse and explore how messages are “constructed” in any of the media (print, verbal, visual or multi-media) and evaluate media’s explicit and implicit messages with your own interpretations.

14.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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14.8 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1. Media literacy helps audiences of different age groups become competent, critical and literate in all media forms so that they are able to make meaning of all that they see or hear rather than letting the medium control their thinking. Media literacy empowers us to understand the media, the reasons for messages, the economy of media, the implication of visual images.

We are capable of not only finding the answers to our questions but also raise pertinent questions when required. We will not get carried away by the images of real or imaginary world that are put before us by the media. We will not only

be able to distinguish between fact and fiction but also between half truths and lies.

2. There is a need for us to become media literate for the following reasons:
 - a) The first and most important requirement for a healthy democracy is to have enlightened electorate. Media literacy creates educated electorates, who are able to see through the campaign strategies and are capable of critically evaluating manifestoes and election speeches.
 - b) Media literacy reduces the influence of media on our daily life. As even little toddlers and small children are addicted to mediated communication all day, it is important that children should also be media literate and understand that Tom and Jerry are only cartoons and in real life one can get hurt if one runs like them.
 - c) Media literacy helps us understand the world better and free us from the stereotypes created by the images projected at us.
 - d) Media is urban and elite oriented but the society is not. Media literacy for a living and in our films and television serials; life seems to be very rosy. A media literate person will not feel frustrated at this situation and understand that real life is different from what is depicted.
 - e) Technology changes the look of the world every day. Media products flood the market and change the way people read, talk, write and understand. A media literate person is able to follow the media as per one's individual requirement and is not led by the diktats of the market.
3. The process of Media Literacy begins with the audience. We are the consumers of media products. When we become media literate, we start to collect relevant and useful information and comprehend its meaning effectively. This process is carried out in the following manner:
 - Each message is understood independently and in relationship with others. The message may come from any media. This is understood as deconstruction.
 - After deconstruction the messages are analysed in their context and presentation. This is called Decoding.
 - Messages have both base rates and exemplars and a media literate person can discern the difference between the two.
 - Messages are now 'read' in the real sense.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1. Five Core Concepts of media literacy are:
 - All media messages are 'constructed.'
 - Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
 - Different people experience the same media message differently.
 - Media have embedded values and points of view.
 - Most media messages are organised to gain power.
2. At different points of time the content and treatment is decided by various stakeholders in media business. The decision making is done at the individual and organisational level keeping in mind the profits. However, some decisions

are taken at a level which lies in the sub conscious mind in the form of stereotypes and biases. These decisions are not just taken by the creator of media messages but also the receivers of the same.

3. The benefits gained from the media messages are not only in terms of financial gain. All the participants of the media message process will gain from the messages if they understood how to read, understand and create media messages. The public gains when it is media literate and is able to distinguish between the real and the contrived. It also gains when it can see through propaganda, publicity, advertisement, and storytelling. Private interests are limited to media owners at the financial level but at the personal level each participant gains through one's ability to give and take media messages. Media houses gain in terms of finances and also in terms of power. If a media house is able to get the audience to tune into its programmes day after day, it is able to sell space to the advertisers at a good rate and make profit. The media house can also tailor messages to suit a certain political ideology, a life philosophy, a lifestyle or an image. This way, in a democratic country mass media messages can be used to tilt the power equation towards the highest bidder.



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