The Importance of Media Literacy

By Alexander M. Vaeth
Senior Publications and Digital Media Coordinator, American Gastroenterological Association.

“I am media literate.”

This may sound like a simple declaration that many of us would feel comfortable making if the subject of media literacy arises. However, with the increased proclamations of “Fake News” and information shared on social media after simply reading an article’s headline, perhaps this topic should be more widely discussed. So, I challenge you to change that declaration into a question: am I media literate?

Media literacy is a field of study that comprises and overlaps many different theories and subjects, from critical thinking and psychology to linguistics and ethics in technology. More practically defined by the National Association of Media Literacy Education as: the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of media and communication (Education, 2020). It can help us understand both the media we are consuming and our responsibilities in creating and disseminating information to the public.

As a consumer we are inundated with media from the time we wake-up until we close our eyes for the night. Think about your average day:

- You turn off your alarm and scroll through your Facebook or Twitter feed
- Skim through stories on your preferred news app or website over breakfast and coffee
- The radio or podcast you listen to on your morning commute
- Emails and messages from friends, family and coworkers
- Conversations with colleagues
- Billboards or signs on your route home
- Talks of work or school at the dinner table
- TV shows and commercials you watch in the evening
- The last few pages of the book or article you’re reading or the YouTube video you watch before falling asleep.

Overwhelming to think about it, isn’t it? These are all forms of media and they can lead to information overload either by direct or indirect exposure. Our minds take in more than 11 million pieces of information in an instant and we can only process around 40 of them at any given moment (Wilson, 2002). While Media Literacy cannot prevent this level of exposure, it can help you breakdown the incoming messages and make them easier to process.

Unfortunately, you can’t become media literate overnight. There are tools that can help you learn, but as with many skills it will take time to master. Once you do, it will feel like second nature to consider everything hidden within content you encounter.

In order to create and share content responsibly we must first understand how to become media literate as a consumer. There are a couple steps to becoming media literate as a reader. First, we must learn the keys to deconstructing incoming messages (Project, 2008). It’s important to remember that all media, TV shows, newspapers, radio, etc., are created by people for a purpose.

(Figure 1. These keys will help us unlock hidden meanings, whether they were intended or not.)

- **Source:** The source could be a writer, artist, photographer, blogger, scriptwriter or many other options. However, there are creators that are not specifically responsible for the message, such as advertising. The ad agency could be creating on behalf of a company or organization that paid for the ad.
- **Audience:** Most media messages are designed to reach specific groups of people; defined by age, gender, class, interest, and other factors. This is the target audience.
- **Text:** We’re accustomed to the word “text” meaning the written word. In Media Literacy, it’s what you see or hear, which can include written or spoken words, moving images, sounds, etc.
- **Subtext:** Subtext refers to your interpretation of the presented message. The text may suggest a certain point; however, each person will create their own
interpretation based on previous experiences, knowledge, opinions, and values. Therefore, it’s possible for two people to develop different interpretations of the same message.

- **Persuasion Techniques:** Creators use tactics to influence their audience. By defining the techniques being used, we’re more likely to overcome the influence and think for ourselves. (potentially some kind of graphic or table to explain a couple basic persuasion techniques?)

- **Point of View:** No one tells the whole story. Everyone tells part of it from their perspective. By using the keys of deconstruction, we can expose the values and biases of the creator and get to the true message.

Second, we must learn how to use the Media Literacy Checklist: access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act.

1. **Access:** How did you get the message? Was it from social media, or a forward from a friend? Consider how you accessed the information and remember that often published work is better than free information posted online.

2. **Analyze:** What did the message say and what is it really trying to tell you? Where did the information come from? Is it from reputable source and is there a second source that can back up the information?

3. **Evaluate:** Did you realize it was created by someone with a goal? What viewpoints are being presented or which are omitted? Are the images or words being used in order to trigger an emotion? Remember the keys to deconstruction.

4. **Create:** Did you make a post or message of your own? Do you understand your responsibility to those who consume? We must be responsible for the media we create, or we become part of the problem.

5. **Act:** What did you do with the message? Did you share it? Did you check the facts yourself first?

What does all this mean for editorial office professionals? Now that we can see the impact media has on consumers, we must consider our responsibilities as content creators and media outlets who disseminate the content. As the public becomes progressively more media literate, they will interpret the messages we share and our underlying intentions. This will extend to the advertisements that provide funding as well as the voice and appearance of our organizations. Just as we deconstruct the media around us the consumers will do the same to the content that we share. The information we’re sharing is important, so make sure it’s clear and something we can be proud to take responsibility for.

Now I have to ask, are you media literate?

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**Works Cited**

