Introduction to Media Literacy:
Applying Concepts & Understandings
to the 2016 Election Coverage\(^1\)

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Presented by
Allison Butler, PhD
atbutler@comm.umass.edu
Steering Committee, Mass Media Literacy
Lecturer & Advisor, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Department of Communication
Director, Media Literacy Certificate Program, University of Massachusetts Amherst

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## Introduction to Media Literacy:
Applying Concepts & Understandings to 2016 Election Coverage

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What is media literacy?

In 1992, a group of American scholars met to discuss the need to make sense of the power of mainstream media and concretize a definition of what it would mean to study the media. The Aspen Institute defined media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, and produce a variety of media.

Over the years, this definition has been altered and expanded in various ways. In the age of digital, mobile media, marked most clearly by social networking, these three areas – access, analyze, produce – have taken on new meanings, however, the core principal remains the same: Young people deserve to be formally educated about the media, including what influence it has on their daily lives. Furthermore, their educators – including classroom teachers, librarians, community workers, and youth advocates – deserve to be trained in media literacy as well.

Comprehensive media literacy asks participants to take a critical distance from the text in order to ask questions of it: What is known about the text and, possibly even more important, how is this known? This approach means that individual participants need not come to the same “conclusion,” but rather, will become clear on their own positions and interpretations as part of the larger media context. Through a critical, comprehensive approach to media literacy, participants may still enjoy and get pleasure from a variety of media, while also having a more thorough awareness of who owns the content, how it was produced and distributed, and how one’s own lens contributes to sense-making. A critical approach to media literacy invites the user to recognize the position of the entity that created the media, what they may be attempting to influence, and what there is to gain. Our approach to media literacy illustrates that we are not just clarifying our own position, but also recognizing the position of others.

Mass Media Literacy (MML) developed a set of concepts and understandings as a way to codify comprehensive media literacy learning. These concepts and understandings detail what is learned from the media and how we, as scholars and learners, can scaffold critical analysis in an organized manner, building our learning, questioning, and inquiry from a strong foundation.

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**MML: Who we are**

Mass Media Literacy (MML) is a grassroots, Massachusetts-based organization that works for educator training in media literacy and supports legislation that requires media literacy training for all MA public school educators.

MML has trained teachers in media literacy, developed and implemented curriculum for K-12 classrooms in Massachusetts, presented media literacy workshops at public schools, presented at local and national conferences on teacher training in media literacy, worked with legislators to better understand the permutations of media literacy, and developed and published research on the necessity of media literacy.

We take a comprehensive approach to media literacy, rooted in social justice; this means we do not deny the pleasures gained from the media. Instead, we teach teachers and students to see the media as multidimensional forces that have a great deal of power in our global culture. We believe this is necessary learning and work so that all educators and students will have a full understanding of the media industries.

Our curriculum pieces work within state standards, across subject matters, and adhere to Common Core standards; educators are trained how to use the concepts of media literacy to teach their subjects. We work directly with educators to build and implement curriculum for specific lessons as well as larger projects.

We work through a set of Concepts & Understandings that frame a comprehensive list of questions to ask of the mainstream media as well as a Scope and Sequence which details, by grade, what students will have learned on their way to becoming media literate.

MML’s efforts are rooted in social justice and are focused on the inclusion of the “behind the scenes” work of the mainstream media, including ownership, production, and distribution, which is often ignored by American media educators. We feel that the true power of the media lies beyond the content, so we make sure to analyze what’s on the screen as well as what’s behind it. We are committed to independent analysis and therefore do not accept corporate money for research or practice.
Making sense of media literacy: Concepts and Understandings

1. Construction and Deconstruction
   Media are constructions – they are created by someone in order to share a message
   Production, ownership and distribution of media are owned by a small number of multinational corporations
   Media construct reality; our reality is shaped, in part, by media; media construct culture; culture is shaped, in part by media
   Interpreting meaning from media messages is based on individual perspectives and is situated in our understanding and experience of reality; a breadth of interpretations can be made by individual agents and these interpretations deserve respect
   Media use persuasive techniques to convince audiences of a text’s worth
   Mass media encourages audiences to solve problems through consumption
   Media can be deconstructed by asking the following questions:
     Who produced the media and for what purpose?
     Who is being targeted and who is being left out (consider gender, race, class, sexual orientation, geography, perceived dis/ability and age)?
     What are the text (explicit) and subtext (implicit, subtle) messages?
     What perspectives/issues are being left out?
     Does this text/subtext teach tolerance, aggression, or encourage some other response?
     Is there a mental, physical, or emotional health message in this text?
     What is the mental, physical, or emotional health message in this text?
     What is the environmental message and/or impact?
     What tools of persuasion are used?

2. Audience
   Media texts are made for audiences
   Actual audiences are unknown; sense making of the audience can be understood through the following questions:
     Who is the intended audience of this text? How known?
     According to the mass media, what is the “correct” response to this text? How should the audience behave? What other interpretations might be available?
   Audiences can be fans of media and find pleasure in media texts; critical media literacy respects fan culture while also providing an avenue for understanding institutional motivation
   Audiences are local, national, global and come with unique biographies; audiences can and do interpret media in a variety of ways
   Audiences, especially young people, learn about their own values, prejudices, hopes and dreams by analyzing their reactions to media messages

3. Industry and Context
Media are powerful
Dominant culture is rarely analyzed in mass media
The political/democratic process is rarely analyzed in mass media
Stories both shape and frame our understanding of the world
Mass media have commercial interests; the corporate media’s main goal is to make money
Corporations own and control most media production and distribution
Media present value statements and perpetuate dominant ideology
Media makers use ideology to maintain hegemony mass media messages
construct identities of appropriate gender, race, economic class, sexual choice, and perceived dis/ability:
Mass media messages are gendered:
  Cultural ideals of female beauty and male masculinity are constructed by mass media
  Physical appearance is valued more than development of self
  Girls/women exist for male pleasure in mass media
  Boys/men are supposed to be hypermasculine and seek feminine adoration in mass media
  Women and girls are sexualized in mass media
  Male dominance is normalized in mass media
Mass media messages are race/ethnicity biased:
  Bodies of color are disparaged in mass media
  Light-skinned bodies of color are more prevalent and are treated better than dark-skinned bodies of color
  ‘Ethnic’ actors are often expected to play roles that do not match their race/ethnicity
  White, ‘non-ethnic’ bodies possess unearned privilege in the mass media
Mass media messages favor the middle and upper- socioeconomic classes:
  Lower- and working-class bodies are disparaged in mass media
  Mass media misrepresents the quantity and ratio of lower-, working-, middle- and upper class bodies
  The middle- and upper-classes are regularly rewarded in the mass media
  Wealth is glorified in mass media
Mass media represent sexuality/sexual identities in biased ways:
  Mass media messages reinforce heteronormativity
  LGBTQ bodies and concerns are often disparaged or ignored in the mass media
  LGBTQ bodies and concerns are criminalized or victimized in the mass media
  Sexual orientation is mostly absent in media
Mass media encourages violence to solve problems
  Mass media develops our thinking of “other” and creates stereotypes
  Mass media impacts public health
  Good and evil are presented as absolutes without complexities
Violence is sanitized and without consequence in the mass media

4. Distribution and Production
   Traditional media distribution is bolstered by an increasingly digital distribution model (that provides an illusion of choice for audiences)
   Access to technology influences media production
   Media Literacy students produce their own media to apply practical, hands-on skills that complement and enhance theoretical and analytical learning
   Audiences, especially young ones, can be inspired to create their own media by deconstructing existing media
Application of Construction and Deconstruction

The following images are “action shots” of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton; they are not posed. For this exercise, we will look at them out of context, that is, we will not discuss who took the photos or for what medium (we will cover that in Audience and Industry & Context)

Positive image: Donald Trump

What makes this a positive image:
“Thumbs up” = optimistic
Relatively somber expression = serious leader
Blue suit jacket, white shirt, red tie = patriotic
Blue & red background = patriotic
Shot from below = he is in a position of authority
None of the “regular” Donald Trump tropes (facial expressions, hair mockery)

Negative image: Donald Trump

What makes this a negative image:
Pointing finger = aggressive
Biting bottom lip, “scrunching” up face, obvious double chin = non authoritative person
Facial expression is emotional, angry = not in control
Shot from even level = non authoritative, not taller than the viewer
The above images can be analyzed with the following from the Concept of Construction and Deconstruction:

**Media construct reality; our reality is shaped, in part, by media; media construct culture; culture is shaped, in part by media**

- The various images tap into our pre-existing knowledge of each candidate; in general, we do not need to ask who this person is (we are rewarded for our knowledge)
- If we agree/disagree with the image, we gravitate toward/away from it; the positive/negative images can be used to tell a story that needs no woes
- We will “know” what each candidate stands for based on the images – especially if they are trustworthy, approachable, strong leader

**What are the text (explicit) and subtext (implicit, subtle) messages?**

Positive image: Hillary Clinton

*What makes this image positive:*
- American flag in background & red jacket = patriotic (plus, appeals to “red state voters”)
- Standing at podium, good posture = position of leadership
- Teeth-showing smile = approachable (counters her “cold” reputation)

Negative image: Hillary Clinton

*What makes this negative:*
- Eyes are “bugged out,” mouth is wide open = she is not in control (of self or country)
- Disembodied hand coming towards Clinton = attack, no critical distance
- Mouth open exaggerates double chin = non-authoritative presence
- Hair appears unkempt = out of control individual
• The positive images send the message that this individual is a good and capable leader while the negative images send the message that the individual is dangerous and unpredictable

What perspectives/issues are being left out?
• In looking at these pictures out of context (as “just” images, we do not know how they fit into a larger picture)
• By looking at images solely (with no corresponding text or commentary) we rely on an emotional response

Does this text/subtext teach tolerance, aggression, or encourage some other response?
• The positive images are presented as solid, patriotic, and trustworthy while the negative images are aggressive and ready for mockery – a way of distancing viewers from trusting the depicted individuals

What tools of persuasion are used?
• Colors, framing, and perspective influence the approach to the images
Application of Audience

July 26, 2016: Hillary Clinton is officially nominated as the Democratic Presidential Candidate: How do the mainstream media cover this in their July 27 hompages?

Conservative Press:  

*Fox News website (screen shot)*

**Negative towards Clinton nomination:**  
- Not the main “above the fold” headline  
- The main headline focused on 1981 attempted assassination of President Reagan; draws attention to Republican interests and the modern president most warmly associated with contemporary “Republican values”  
- One small link to Clinton’s nomination under “Watch now” header – surrounded by opposition (Donald Trump and domestic safety question) and husband (reinforcing gender as well as “Clinton legacy”)

*National Review website (screen shot)*

**Negative towards Clinton nomination:**  
- Unattractive photo of Clinton (pointing, pursed lips, her face is overshadowed by the headline that has nothing to do with nomination)  
- No mention of nomination – instead a connection to Obama and implication of failed policies (it’s as if she was not nominated)  
- Sidebar links to alleged criminal acts of Clintons and how their behavior may help Trump

*Wall Street Journal website (screen shot)*

**Negative towards Clinton nomination:**  
- No discernible focus in image chosen – a DNC crowd shot (negation of gender)  
- No mention in headlines of the historic importance of the nomination (negation of gender)  
- Under “what’s news” is link to release of John Hinkley, Jr.
These images and their perceived audiences can be analyzed with the following questions from the Concept of Audience

**Who is the intended audience of this text? How known?**

- The intended audience of each text is one who has already made up their mind for whom to vote; these are not headlines/images that will sway voters to the “other side;” instead, they are headlines that confirm already held positive towards Clinton nomination:

  - Use of word “historic” in headline
  - Corresponding image is of a woman of color holding a “girl power” banner: connects with multiple voting blocs; emphasize the historic nature of nomination

Positive towards Clinton nomination:

- *The Washington Post* had alternating images on their homepage, both illustrated, which reveal positive coverage of Clinton’s nomination
  - Attractive, almost artistic, photo of Clinton; silhouette of photographers looking up at her on the “big screen;” emphasizes her capacity; connection with Obama and Biden, signifies unity in the party
  - Countered with a negative image of Trump; on the “big screen” he looks as if he is crying; headline takes on different meaning as it separates Obama and Biden from Trump, signifies division
beliefs. This is known because the images and headlines are flattering to the chosen candidate in the liberal press or dismissive of her in the conservative press; the conservative press works to shift the readers’ attention away from Clinton and the historic relevance of the first female nominee for president. The liberal press works to shift the readers’ attention towards Clinton by emphasizing her strengths, the Democratic party's unity, and Trump's immaturity.

According to the mass media, what is the “correct” response to this text?

• The “correct” response is for readers to continue to believe what they already believe – and therefore, continue to draw from sources that confirm their beliefs. Because these are websites of well known print publications, they are most likely reaching a regular readership of like-minded individuals. If a reader is looking for “objective” information, these major news sources do not unequivocally provide that.

How should the audience behave? What other interpretations might be available?

• According to these headlines, conservative readers should care more about Clinton’s alleged criminal connections and the release of John Hinkley, Jr., than the historical significance of the nomination of the first woman candidate for President from a major political party. A possible alternate interpretation is that the 2016 election does not matter nearly as much as the “noise” of it seems to indicate. Liberal readers will feel confident in their choice of Hillary Clinton (or of switching from Bernie Sanders) because the images and headlines are positive, reassuring, and inclusive.
Application of Industry & Context

Using the same images used in making sense of Audience, we can look “behind the scenes” to explore the Concept of Industry & Context by documenting who owns the various media outlets and how they may decide on the emotional flavor of their coverage.

**National Review**

- Print and online versions are separate and distinct, but under same umbrella; largest conservative publication in US
- Print version is biweekly with a readership just over 150,000; 81% male, 18% female, with a median income of $100K
- Online version has 4.5 million monthly viewers, 76% male, 23% female, with a median income of $95K
- Started in mid-1950s with explicit purpose of expanding a politically conservative viewpoint (largely based on a fear that liberals were taking over)

**Fox News**

- Owned by the Fox Entertainment Group, a subsidiary of 21st Century Fox
- Fox Entertainment began in 1985 as the 4th network; started by media mogul Rupert Murdoch who hired Republican Party Media Consultant Roger Ailes to run the news division (in July 2016, Ailes resigned in a sexual harassment scandal)
- Reaches an older audience, above age 60; minimal youth audience
- Though catchphrase of news division is "fair and balanced reporting,” agenda has always been explicitly conservative
The above images can be analyzed with the following from the Concept of Industry & Context:

**The political/democratic process is rarely analyzed in mass media**
- The news coverage in July, 2016 was dominated by stories on the election because of the conventions, the historical nomination of a woman as a major candidate...
party candidate, and the various twists and turns this election season in particular has taken. For the most part, “analysis” is not a part of this presentation; instead, the focus is on the sensation of the election.

Stories both shape and frame our understanding of the world
- The “average” reader of these websites fits into a category that is deemed valuable by advertisers and marketers and audiences generally turn to publications that will reinforce what they already believe – without having much knowledge of the “behind the scenes” of the producers and publishers.

Mass media have commercial interests; the corporate media’s main goal is to make money
- The largest mainstream media outlets are either owned by, or are owners of, various corporations, which invites them to distribute their info and expand their brand in multiple arenas.
- Most mainstream publications rely on corporate advertising in order to profit and all web pages have some level of advertising on their opening pages.
Application of Distribution & Production

On social media, our news comes to us via algorithm, which means we are already and always reading what we agree with – we do not learn “new” or “opposing” information

Facebook screenshots:

*Please note:* These Facebook screenshots are taken from my personal Facebook page, which means there is already a particular lens chosen to share these images; this is not an arbitrary choice and reveals both what Facebook thinks I will be interested in as a reader and who they believe I am as a consumer.

Newsfeed items and sidebar suggestions/advertisements:

- Bernie Sanders campaign; sidebar suggestion to “like” Obama daughters’ FB pages
- *The Economist* on Hillary Clinton, an archive piece on the work she will have to do; sidebar suggestion to “like” Spirit and Science of Buddhism page
- Martin O’Malley (former MD Democratic Governor) citing speech where he puts down Trump and praises women; sidebar suggestion to “like” Spirit of Science and Buddhism page
- Speech by mother of Orlando, FL shooting victim speaking on gun control; sidebar advertisement for No.7 Advanced Serum, available at Target
- Trump’s alleged misogyny; sidebar advertisement for No.7 Advanced Serum, available at Target
The above images can be analyzed with the following from the Concept of Distribution and Production:

**Traditional media distribution is bolstered by an increasingly digital distribution model (that provides an illusion of choice for audiences)**

- When one scrolls through their own Facebook or other social media source, the non-liked/subscribed pages that appear are those that have been determined by a mathematical formula to be attractive to the user; this invites the appearance of flexibility and choice, while also repeatedly re-confirming the user’s beliefs (there is no need to seek an alternate perspective because it “feels” as if one is getting a copious amount of information).

**Access to technology influences media production**

- The ability to access clips, archived stories, criticisms, and praise are largely dependent on what technology we can access. And what technology we can access is largely dependent on whether we fit into proscribed categories (see, for example, the demographics of web-based news readers).
Putting it all together: Applying Concepts & Understandings

While it is helpful in learning the Concepts and Understandings to separate and explore them individually, they all work together and overlap. To make sense of this, we will use a particular element of the political process – humor – to apply the Concepts and Understandings as a whole unity. During and after the Republican National Convention, both Jon Stewart and John Oliver presented monologues critiquing aspects of the convention; Stewart focused on the rhetoric of Fox News in its promotion of Trump and Oliver focused on the emphasis on feelings over policy.

How is humor used to cut through political rhetoric? Is humor a form of political rhetoric itself? How do Jon Stewart and John Oliver – well-known comedians and talk show hosts – use humor to dissect the Republican Convention?

To watch the videos, please go to the following links:
Jon Stewart on the RNC 2016:

John Oliver on the RNC 2016:
http://mediamatters.org/video/2016/07/25/john-oliver-theme-republican-convention-was-emphasizing-feelings-over-facts/211865

Each text can be analyzed through the following excerpts from the Concepts and Understandings:

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**Industry and Context**
Media are powerful
Dominant culture is rarely analyzed in mass media
The political/democratic process is rarely analyzed in mass media
Stories both shape and frame our understanding of the world
Media present value statements and perpetuate dominant ideology

**Distribution and Production**
Traditional media distribution is bolstered by an increasingly digital distribution model (that provides an illusion of choice for audiences)
Access to technology influences media production
How can we help you?

We are committed to fostering community, working in collaboration, and developing ongoing research and scholarship in media education. The following is a sampling of organization with whom we are aligned, our publications, presentations, and workshops:

Fiscal sponsor
Our fiscal sponsor is the Media Education Foundation (MEF), a Northampton, MA-based nonprofit organization that produces and distributes critical documentaries on media-related topics. For more information of MEF and their work, please see: http://www.mediaed.org/

We work closely with the following groups and programs:

• Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME): https://acmesmartmediaeducation.net/
• The Media Literacy Certificate program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst: http://www.umass.edu/communication/node/917
• Project Censored: http://projectcensored.org/
• Sacred Heart University’s Media Literacy and Digital Culture MA Program: http://www.sacredheart.edu/academics/collegeofartssciences/academicdepartmentsschoolofcommunications/mediaarts/graduatedegrees/mastersdegreeinmediacultureanddigitalculture/
• Global Critical Media Literacy Project: http://gcml.org/

Publications


Conference presentations
2016: Comprehensive media literacy: Teacher training, curriculum development, and strategies for curriculum building. Boston Educators for Social Justice; Boston, MA (May)
2016: Media education for a digital generation. Action in Media Education Conference; Fairfield, CT (April)
2016: Teacher training in media literacy education: Social justice, research, and practical issues. Action in Media Education Conference; Fairfield, CT (April)
2015: Digital media literacy education: Visions and possibilities for the digital generation. Media Education Summit; Boston, MA (November)
2015: Teacher training in media literacy: Exploring struggles, successes, and next steps. Media Education Summit; Boston, MA (November)
2015: Stories from teachers: Teacher training in comprehensive media literacy. International Digital Storytelling Conference; Amherst, MA (September)
2015: *Media Literacy in the Classroom.* Boston Educators for Social Justice Conference; Jamaica Plain, MA (May)

2014: *Courtroom and classroom considerations: Legislation for and development of comprehensive media literacy.* New York Bar Association Annual Conference: The informed citizen: Media literacy in the classroom; Stony Brook, NY (October)


2013: *Media literacy activism, legislation and education.* Mid-Atlantic American and Popular Culture Association; Atlantic City, NJ (November)

2013: *From the classroom to the courtroom: Efforts in media literacy legislation.* The Historical Roots of Media Literacy Symposium; Providence, RI (September)

2013: *Media Literacy Education in the High School Classroom.* Media Madness: The Impact of Sex, Violence, and Commercial Culture on Adults, Children, and Society; Boston, MA (July)

2013: *Creating our media reform future: Media literacy and activism in education.* National Conference on Media Reform; Denver, CO (April)

2013: *Media Literacy Education.* The Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood Summit; Boston, MA (March).

**Invited workshops & research**

2014-2015: Teacher Training and Lesson Plan Implementation, South Community High School, Worcester MA


**How can we help you?**

We can be available for in-person, ongoing trainings in media literacy; for curriculum and activity development of media literacy work; to help you build a media literacy curriculum for your organization.

We are happy to share resources

**Please visit our website**

http://www.massmedialiteracy.org/