



# critical media project

Media Literacies

## why media literacy

The average teenager in the United States engages in about five hours of direct instructional time in his or her high school, five days each day, for a total of about 180 days per year. By contrast, teenagers in the United States engage in about nine hours of media use on an average day, seven days each week, for almost 365 days per year. When we take into account the amount of time spent “media multi-tasking” — with multiple types of media being used at the same time, including social media — that number jumps to about eleven hours of total media exposure for the average teen every single day of the year. Teens from lower-income families, meanwhile, spend on average 3 hours more with media per day than their peers from higher income families. And Black and Hispanic youth spend two more hours a day on average than white youth.

With media playing such a central role in the lives of young people, shouldn't some of that high school instructional time be spent discussing media itself? That recognition is the foundation for media literacy education, a movement of educators, students, authors, media producers and many others that has taken root in the US and around the world over the last several decades. A commonly cited definition of “media literacy” was created at the 1992 Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute:

*Media Literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms.*



From [Media Literacy Now](#).

Media literacy education takes as its subject any number of media examples, including films, television shows, newspaper articles, websites and blogs, songs and music videos, social media,

and much more. *Media literacy is an umbrella to consider other literacies, including news literacy, visual literacy, technology and platform literacy, and data literacy.*

A number of initiatives have been developed over the years to help improve the way young people “access, analyze, evaluate and create” these media forms. Indeed, several projects have been designed specifically to be integrated into the activities of high school educators.

First and foremost, media literacy education aims to encourage students to think critically about media messages. As a starting point, the [Center for Media Literacy](#) has outlined “Five Key Questions” that media consumers might ask as they analyze a piece of media:

- Who created this message?
- What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
- How might different people understand this message differently from me?
- What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
- Why was this message sent

Coupled with these key questions, the Center for Media Literacy has also provided a useful guide of the “Five Core Concepts” that might emerge from media literacy education. They suggest that students who are media literate will be able to recognize that:

- All media messages are ‘constructed’
- Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rule.
- Different people experience the same media message differently.
- Media have embedded values and points of view.
- Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

Together, these key questions and core concepts represent an avenue through which students can better understand the role and purpose of media in contemporary society. The development of these skills is seen as important in the development of active, engaged citizens in a vibrant democracy. Here at the Critical Media Project, we applaud the work that others have done in advancing the cause of media literacy, and we are inspired and influenced by the work that has come before us (see [useful links](#) page). At the same time, however, we believe that there are significant drawbacks and gaps within the traditional approach of many media literacy

initiatives. We hope that this website provides a unique contribution to the field of media literacy education, one that will be particularly useful for educators in their everyday lessons in the United States and beyond.

### **the “critical” in critical media literacy: a focus on identity**

Critical Media Project builds upon previous media literacy efforts in several ways. Inspired by the writings of scholars like UCLA’s Douglass Kellner and Jeff Share, the emphasis on “critical” media literacy means that we focus more explicitly on analyzing the “politics of representation” in media. Understanding the intersection between media and issues of identity — like gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, age, and disability — is central to our approach. We argue that the media plays a key role in helping to shape the way these identities are formed and enacted in society — throughout history, today and into the future — and that understanding identity is an important step in understanding ourselves and the world around us. We live in a world characterized by cultural diversity, and this project represents an opportunity to explore cultural diversity through the always important lens of media.

We also believe that any analysis of media must always be combined with an analysis of power. In addition to having the ability to “access, analyze, evaluate and create” media, we encourage educators and students to explore complex ideological questions around media power. For instance, we should ask, who has the power to create and disseminate media products? What power do audience members have in their interpretation of media messages? What type of influence does media have on the way gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, age, ability, and other issues of identity are perceived in broader society? These and other important questions can be a powerful way for educators to encourage critical thinking among students on issues that matter to them in their everyday lives. See our [mission page](#) to learn more.