

What is media literacy and why does it matter?

Have you ever wondered how much of the media you consume is factual? With so much of our time taken up by different forms of media, we need to make sure that we are consuming it wisely.

In this article, we will explore what media literacy is, what makes it so important and ways you can become more informed about media literacy. We will also take a look at the impact of media literacy and some media literacy skills.

What is media literacy?

For those of you who haven't heard of this term before, it may seem a little confusing. Perhaps you know what 'media' and 'literacy' mean but haven't heard them used together before. Before we can understand the term, we need to understand the meaning of media and literacy separately.

What is media?

Media is a broad term, and encompasses many different forms. Media is any communication outlet used to distribute information, entertainment and data. Essentially, media is the method by which messages are distributed to an audience.

When referred to as 'mass media' this is in relation to forms of media that can reach mass audiences in a short amount of time (such as newspapers and television). Let's take a look at some other commonly used media:

Social media (this includes platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. We use these to distribute content amongst our connections on these platforms)

- **Film**
- **Radio**
- **Video games**
- **Books**
- **Artificial intelligence devices**

What is literacy?

We can define literacy as the ability to identify, interpret, understand and communicate. Literacy skills include the ability to read, write, speak and listen effectively.

So, how do these two words tie together? Media literacy is the ability to understand information that is presented to us and respond appropriately. We need to make a conscious effort to understand how all forms of media are created and consumed. We'll discuss why this is so important later in the article.

The impact of media literacy

Whether it's scrolling through Instagram or soaking in the daily newspaper, we are surrounded by various forms of media on a daily basis. Media is how we stay entertained, connected and informed, so it has a huge impact on our lives.

With subscription services such as Netflix and smartphones rising in popularity, media has never been so easily accessible. Statistics show that Americans spend an average of 473 minutes each day consuming media.

What's more, is that the average daily social media usage worldwide is 145 minutes per day. Young people, in particular, tend to spend large amounts of time browsing social media apps each day. This can be incredibly dangerous for young minds, as we'll discuss shortly.

Many of us shape our opinions based on media, stay connected with friends and family via media, and educate ourselves using media. There's no doubt that the media influences our lives in many different ways.

Media messages vs media effects

As we discuss media literacy, it's important to distinguish between two central concepts; media messages and media effects:

Media messages

This is the underlying message and intention of all media that is distributed. Media messages usually aim to entertain, persuade or educate. It's possible for a media message to have multiple intentions, such as an entertaining yet persuasive advertisement, for example.

To put it simply, media is created to serve a purpose. Media messages are the intended information that creators wish to convey to push their goals, whatever that may be.

Media effects

On the other hand, media effect is a measurable effect that occurs as a result of media messages. The type of effect and level of effect is dependent on the media message itself, and the audience it is broadcasted to.

Mass media can impact an audience's thoughts, attitudes, and behavior, often playing part in shaping modern culture. Such effects can also reinforce existing beliefs, whether for good or ill. The media we consume also has the potential to evoke important changes – big or small.

Why media literacy is important?

Despite many positives, there are many risks and issues within the world of media. Without cautiousness and care, these risks can make media consumption potentially problematic. Media

literacy allows us to question the intent of media and protect ourselves from any negative impacts of media.

So, what are some of the negative aspects of media consumed without media literacy?

Fake news

Thanks to the power of the internet, we are all able to share information with the world. We can share information on social media, email, or even update open-source websites such as Wikipedia. With so much free reign on sharing information, it's inevitable that not all of it can be considered trustworthy.

Fake news and disinformation has become widespread in the internet age, so it's important to be able to differentiate between fake news and real news. The media we consume shapes our opinions on many different important topics – including politics, healthcare, and current events.

The last thing we want is to base such important opinions on lies and misinformation. Platforms such as Instagram and Facebook allow rapid sharing of information, which gives news a chance to spread quickly, often making the fake news seem believable.

Not all fake news is distributed with ill intent; there is a landscape of both intentional and unintentional misinformation. If you're keen to build on your skills to spot fake news in the media, check out our Disinformation, misinformation and fake news teach-out course.

Media bias

As we explored in our understanding media bias blog post, media bias is an ongoing issue within the media industry. Media bias is the biased opinions of news distributors when selecting which stories and events get covered and broadcasted.

This is an extremely important issue to tackle; without the knowledge of media literacy, people could completely miss or misinterpret the huge events that are happening due to media bias. Journalists and news producers often paint situations in a light that favours one side of the story.

We need to be able to form our own opinions and views on situations. Media bias can lead to consumers not getting a full understanding of scenarios and topics, and affect our opinions massively. This is why media literacy is important; it allows us to think critically about the information we take in.

You can find out more about how data is used and manipulated in the media with our course from The University of Sheffield.

Mental health concerns

Sadly, a lot of the media available today poses a threat to the mental health of young individuals. Studies have shown a link between heavy social media use and anxiety and depression, for example.

Along with the risk of bullying and harassment online, there is also the pressure of comparing yourself to everyone else on social media platforms. Influencers are now prominent over all social media platforms, painting a picture of what you should look like or should be doing.

However, as with a lot of things online, these posts are not always truthful. These photos do not portray every aspect of people's lives and tend to only highlight the luxuries. Often, they're sponsored or highly curated content with the intention of selling or promoting a certain brand or product.

Younger audiences, in particular, may not understand the full extent of these posts and compare themselves to what seems like an ideal life. Critical thinking skills are essential for viewing such content objectively.

The ability to differentiate between worthwhile content on social media could be the difference between a positive or a negative social media experience. By developing social media literacy skills, we can help work towards a future where no one feels socially isolated.

Internet and media access

Another thing to consider is access to media and the internet. For many of us, having a strong wifi connection and the technology to access the internet does not seem like a luxury. However, there are many people who do not have such a privilege.

Those who are not fortunate enough to have easy access to online platforms may not be as accustomed to news formats and information online. When exposed to media they may struggle to differentiate fake information from real information, so it's important to educate everyone on the topic of media literacy.

Media literacy skills

To ensure you are safely consuming media, you can pick up some key media literacy skills and start your journey to being media literate. Let's look at some helpful skills to get you started:

Analyse and evaluate media content

We are living in an era with a vast library of information available to us. In order to pick what media we consume, it's best to first analyse the information in a media literate manner. When analysing a piece of media, you should take note of the relevance, accuracy, bias and reliability of the content.

This skill is referred to as media analysis and encompasses all research involved in critiquing a piece of media. By analysing content, you can determine what the purpose of the content is and the potential impact that media may have. Media literacy is very closely tied with critical thinking – it's an essential skill to unpick media content.

Create content

As we've mentioned throughout this article, it is easy for us to produce media on the internet ourselves. Some of the ways we can contribute to the world of media are via blog posts, YouTube videos, podcasts and even social media posts.

With a strong understanding of media literacy, you'll be able to create online content with good intentions and add to the wealth of helpful media available online. You could even use media outlets to try and educate others on why media literacy is important. By creating your own media, you'll develop your media literacy skills along the way.

Act based on your knowledge

The ability to act on your knowledge of media literacy is a very important media literacy skill. Making a change in your life based on a very reliable source of media is acting on your media literacy knowledge.

For example, if a reliable source shares information about a world issue and you commit to volunteering to help aid that cause – that's acting on your media literacy knowledge.

Similarly, you may want to get involved in various areas of the media. Our ExpertTrack How to be a Journalist in a Social Media and Digital Age gives you the skills to produce and consume high-quality news.

How to become media literate?

We now know that we shouldn't believe everything we see and read in the media. But how do we know what to trust? Let's look at some ways you can become media literate.

Educate yourself on media literacy

You're already one step ahead by taking the time to read this article. But you can never have enough knowledge, and a great way to develop your skills is to carry on learning. There are plenty of resources available online to help you on your media literacy journey.

A great place to start is by taking our Introduction to media literacy and representation course.

Practice your skills

Considering the amount of media we are exposed to each day, it's near impossible to analyse every single piece of media in great depth. However, the more you practice your media literacy skills, the better you'll be at analysing and evaluating media.

Our course on digital skills for work and life can help you develop the skills to thrive in the digital world of work.

As you work on these skills, your critical eye for the media and cautiousness around what you consume will become a habit and you'll be able to consume content in a healthier manner.

Question the media you consume

You should make a conscious effort to assess the media you consume. You can do this by asking yourself some key questions about the media you come across. By doing so, you can find out the intent of what you consume and determine whether or not it is worth consuming.

Here are some things you could ask yourself:

- What is the purpose of this content?
- Who is it geared towards, is it targeted to a specific audience?
- How could this be interpreted by different audiences?
- Has this information come from a reliable source?
- What, if any, information has been left out?

The future of media literacy

By now, you should be able to tell that being media literate is a great skill to have. So, what does the future hold for media literacy as a whole?

Media is continually growing and advancing, so there's a lot to keep up with. Platforms such as artificial intelligence devices and virtual reality headsets are now commonly owned in households despite being relatively new. The way you approach media will depend on the way that it is presented, so new media presents new opportunities and risks.

Algorithmic literacy

This new concept stems from the algorithms that websites and applications use to provide you with media that is specific to you. A lot of the content that is presented to you online is shown to you based on previous activities and habits.

Algorithmic literacy is the ability to understand that these things are shown to you based on algorithms. It's important to understand that you may not be receiving the full information available on a topic if it is personally targeted towards you; you may only be shown what algorithms determine is relevant to you.

As algorithms grow stronger and manage to target you with even more specific content and ads, we can expect algorithm literacy to become more important in the future.