

# Issues in the Study of Language and Literature

**Theory & Practice**

Edited by  
**Ikenna Kamalu**  
**Isaac Tamunobelem**

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*Taiwo Abioye*

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**Isaac Tamunobeleva**



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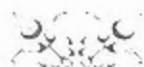
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## CHAPTER

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## MEDIA LITERACY AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA

*Taiwo Abioye*

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the relevance of media literacy as a major part of the communication process in a developing nation like Nigeria. It examines past research efforts aimed at unraveling the nature, significance and essence of media literacy with specific focus on how media literate individuals can become active participants in media dialogues by deconstructing the messages of the media. The end-product of such enterprise is that media literate youths and adults gain greater freedom to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media. The chapter underscores the point that media consumers, including parents and children, need to be guided to perceive the moral values underlying media messages. Some of the issues raised include the role of media literacy in the 21st century, deconstruction of media messages for effective communication and the challenges confronting media literacy in Nigeria. Possibilities and ways forward are then pointed out.

### **Communication**

Communication is a basic component of the society, regardless of whether it is written or spoken. MacBride (1980) sees communication as a two-way process in which partners—individual and collective—carry on a democratic and balanced dialogue in the sense that there is an action and a reaction; a stimulus and a response. Language represents one of several modes through which communication is conducted (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001).

Communication is the thread that runs through and which knits together individuals in a society, and even societies and nations. Basically, communication is grouped largely into three—oral, written and others. This paper is more concerned about communication which is largely channelled through the mass media. The mass media, in this respect, encompasses the print media, namely newspapers, magazines, journals, books, and cards while the electronic media is an umbrella term for the radio, telephone, television, motion pictures, home video and the Internet, etc. Also in this category are the new media technologies.

The challenge here is that the electronic media has been so glamourized that people are increasingly putting more money into these than in the print media. The reasons are not far-fetched. First, the electronic media are packaged in such a way that it is easy to get the pictures and the actions (sight), and the words (sounds) instantaneously. Indeed, viewers or the audience can easily get an immediate reply to queries/requests while “chatting” on the Internet. The gratification is immediate and the sense of satisfaction or otherwise is not delayed. Then, the viewer requires less concentration while watching the television or video, whereas, a reader needs full concentration while reading, particularly for specific purposes.

However, studies show that the electronic social media, particularly, mobile phones, computers and even the radio, are gradually taking over the relevance of books in the society. For instance, the Chief Executive of Longman Nigeria, Simon Terndrup, in an interview in the *Broad Street Journal*, on 16th February, 2009 disclosed that “Nigerians prefer investing in video and electronic gadgets to investing in books” (*Broad Street Journal*, 2009). This applies not only in Nigeria but in the global village.

### **Literacy and Media Literacy**

Definitions of literacy are as many as societal needs and requirements. This is to be expected since the society is in a state of flux where needs and requirements change in order to meet global needs. The most simplistic definition of literacy is ‘the ability to read and write’. However, with the current trend in the dynamics of societal needs in countries such as Israel, Brazil, Kenya and Nepal, the definition could be expanded to mean access to unprejudiced information, for instance, the electorate must be literate if they must participate meaningfully and effectively in political decision-making so that they can understand the philosophy of the government they will choose or have chosen (Anyanwu, 1981:33). Also, Venezky, Wagner and Ciliberti (1990:24) argue that literacy liberates, stating that it is “used to domesticate free individuals who would have otherwise been wild and unruly.” Emmitt and Pollock (1997:13), citing Freire (1972) the proponent of critical literacy, opine that literacy should enable learners to be more critically aware of their world and to be in creative control of it.



This helps us have greater control over our destinies. Thus, Oyedeji (1997:7) opines that:

no nation is able to adequately provide for its illiterate population when it comes to meetings, conferences, dissemination of information, etc. It may be able to translate documents into mother tongues, but literacy in the mother tongue is also required to peruse such document.

To Halliday (2001:181), literacy refers “specifically to writing as distinct from speech: to reading and writing practices, and to the forms of language, and the ways of meaning, that is typically associated with them.” Baran (2004) sees literacy as the ability to effectively and efficiently comprehend and use symbols in any form of communication. Thus, literacy is absolutely essential to the individual who does not wish to be marginalized in the quest for human liberation.

Literacy involves a complex set of abilities to understand and use the dominant symbol systems of a culture for personal and community development. The need and demand for these abilities vary in different societies. In a technological society, the concept is expanding to include the media and electronic text in addition to alphabets and numbers. Individuals must be given life long learning opportunities to move along a continuum that includes reading, writing, and the critical understanding and decision-making abilities they need in their communities (The Centre for Literacy of Quebec).

The postmodernist theory of literacy posits that literacy is an instrument of power and oppression legitimating dominant discourses and endangering languages, cultures and local knowledge. This view, according to which literacy is a ‘meaning-making’ tool, pays attention to the ultimate vision and direction of the ‘literacy project’, which it claims, aims to standardize the Western notion of education (Shikshantar, 2003).

The mass media is a “market place of ideas”, and purveying information is the primary responsibility of this agency. In the media, particularly print, the power of the written word transcends other things. Agbese (1987:9) argues that “the word, written or spoken, is a powerful instrument for social dynamics.” Words are widely believed to carry with them power, both from the earthly and spiritual realms. Another argument for the power of the word is found at the beginning of creation, when God pronounced “Let there be light: and there was light” (Gen.1:3). Those words put in motion the machinery of creation.

Baran (2004: 50) argues that “media literacy takes on slightly different meanings depending on the orientation of the person or organization doing the defining”. He points out that it could be viewed from several standpoints such as political, cultural, functional, educational, etc. For

instance, one requires the ability to effectively understand and utilize media messages in the political arena for that person to be able to make wise decisions in politics. The same applies to the other aspects.

Fairclough (1995) asserts that critical media literacy sees media texts as social action (or interaction) which can be responded to with other forms of social action such as reading, writing, speaking, etc. For Thoman and Jolls (2005:4):

No longer is it enough to be able to read the printed word; children, youth, and adults, too, need the ability to both critically interpret...and express themselves in multiple media forms. Media literacy is the new literacy needed for living, working and citizenship in the 21st century...It is a basic requirement for lifelong learning in a constantly changing world.

Their definition of media literacy is taken from two paradigms—Five core concepts and Five key questions:

1. All media messages are constructed. Who constructed this message?
2. Media messages are constructed using a media language with its own rules. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. Different people experience the same media message differently. How might different people understand this message differently from me?
4. Media have embedded values and points of view. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power. Why is the message being sent?

Anyone who can adequately and effectively examine the media from this interdisciplinary perspective, looking critically at the message and the influence of the same, can be described as media literate. The relevance of media literacy is obvious in UNESCO (2004) definition of literacy. According to UNESCO (2004), Literacy is the “ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.” However, it is instructive to note that media literacy is not listed as a skill in UNESCO (2004).

### **Media Literacy in the 21st Century**

Critical media literacy not only teaches students to learn from media, to resist media manipulation, and to use media materials in constructive ways, but is also concerned with developing skills that will help create good citizens and that will make individuals more motivated and competent participants in social life. Critical media literacy in our



conception is tied to the project of radical democracy and concerned with developing skills that will enhance democratization and participation. It takes a comprehensive approach that would teach critical skills and how to use media as instruments of social communication and change.

Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute (AMLLI) in 1992 defines *media literacy* as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms." The Center for Media Literacy modified the definition for its MediaLit Kit as follows: "Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy." One common denominator in the two definitions is that media literacy is a skill that is of utmost importance in this age. The need to be media literate becomes necessary in the face of the enormous power wielded by the media to convey numerous information and messages to their users. It has been observed that the traditional agents of education - the home, the school, the church and the peer group, have now been joined by another agent, the mass media which is perhaps more powerful than all the others in respect of information processing and dissemination. The mass media, as it exists today, not only pose as a viable instrument for wealth creation for media owners, it is also a formidable instrument of social engineering. The vast stride that accrues to it can be linked to this function. Its impact on every aspect of human endeavour makes it absolutely mandatory for us to understand the dynamics of the modern media of social communications especially in the face of the apparent globalisation of information and the increasing influence of the market economy on the mass media.

Today's media practice constructs our culture. Indeed, our perception of reality is shaped by the information and images we receive via the media on a daily basis. These information and images, in effects, affect our thoughts, attitudes and actions. In general, we increase our individual understandings of the world and how it works based on pre-constructed media messages. Thus, media such as advertising, news, movies, pop music, video games, etc. are such a powerful force giving us our sense of reality.

In sum, media messages are not only made to inform and entertain but also targeted at persuading their consumers to do something. Most media messages in news, advertisements, documentary films, TV dramas, nonfiction books, etc., employ persuasive techniques such as flattery, repetition, fear, and humor to unconsciously persuade and coax media audience to accept their own versions of reality. Unpopular aspects of media messages construct fantasy worlds which are both pleasurable and

entertaining. The dangers of fantasies especially in movies, TV shows, music video, are that sometimes they provoke viewers to engage in unwise and anti-social actions. According to Media Literacy Project submission, media literacy helps people to recognize fantasy and constructively integrate it with reality.

Every media message is a reflection of the viewpoint of its makers and it contains the text and the subtext. The text is the actual words, pictures and/or sounds in a media message. The subtext is the hidden and underlying meaning of the message (Media Literacy Project). All media literate youths and adults have the ability to understand how mass media work, how they produce meanings, how they are organized, and how to use them wisely (Tyner & Lloyd, 1991). Thus, they can understand how these media messages are constructed, and discover the underlying meaning in the complex messages they receive from various forms of media. The notion here is that a media literate person is in control of his or her media experiences and can describe the role media play in his or her life. In addition, media literate people can also create their own media, becoming active participants in our media culture (Media Literacy Project).

### **Towards Deconstructing Media Messages for Effective Communication**

All media messages, disseminated through movies, music, radio or TV shows, newspapers, novels, advertisements, etc., are made or constructed by people. One of the most important media literacy skills is deconstruction. Deconstruction entails a close examination, evaluation, and interpretation of media messages to understand how they work. The essence of deconstructing a media message is to develop an informed and critical understanding of the nature of mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques (Media Literacy Resource Guide, Ministry of Education Ontario, 1997). Deconstruction assists in having a better understanding of who created the message, and who is intended to receive it. It can also expose the point of view of media makers, their values, and their biases and also help to uncover hidden meanings – intended or unintended (Media Literacy Project).

Media audiences interpret and analyze media messages differently based on their own knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and values. Though deconstruction does not have one precise or acceptable method, Media Literacy Project suggests that deconstructing enterprise should focus on the following:

- (a) **Source:** Who is the creator? All media messages are created. The creator could be an individual writer, photographer or blogger. In the case of a Nollywood movie, the scriptwriter, director, producer, and movie studio all play a role in creating the message. The key



point is: Whose message is this? Who has control over the content?

- (b) **Audience:** Who is the target audience? Media messages are intended to reach audiences. Some—like Facebook messages—are designed to reach all friends on the list of the message creators. Others—like a letter or email—may be intended only for one person. Most media messages are designed to reach specific groups of people—defined by age, gender, class, interests, and other factors—called the “target audience.”
- (c) **Text:** We often use the word “text” to mean “written words.” But in media literacy, “text” has a very different meaning. The text of any piece of media is what you actually see and/or hear. It can include written or spoken words, pictures, graphics, moving images, sounds, and the arrangement or sequence of all of these elements. Sometimes the text is called the “story” or “manifest text.” Media experts believe the text of a piece of media is always the same.

An exhaustive deconstruction of media messages goes beyond sifting through the messages to exploring deeper issues such as: Who produces the media we experience and for what purpose? Who profits? Who loses? And who decides? (Thoman, 1995). Such exploration will reflect the social, political, economic, and technological environment of the media, that is, the system in which they are created. This stage of social, political and economic analysis also looks at how everyone in society makes meaning from our media experiences, and how the mass media drive our global consumer economy. In short, such full deconstruction of media system examines issues of media ownership, power and control to recognize how these issues influence media content and messages.

Attempt at a total deconstruction furthermore examines the relationship between media and society thereby raising the issue of *media justice* (Media Literacy Project). It evaluates media message viz-a-viz its manner of representing various strata of the Nigerian society. The media system in Nigeria for instance is a mixture of the creatively good, bad and the ugly. Advertisers for instance often resort to positive name-calling as a form of persuasion - “Tuface says it’s too good” (referring to an advertisement of one of Airtel packages). The advert maker attempts to persuade the populace to embrace the package by building on the fame of the popular musician. This implies that the package is good enough simply because Tuface affirms it.

Another contextual exploration of media message leaves open both how to understand it and how it is created. Such analysis instantiates appreciation of its creative process and helps to learn how to express oneself in a variety of media since we all create media. For instance, in the electronic media, we send emails, blog and also use other social

networking websites. Also, some people play and compose music while others make videos or take photos. In each of these activities (whether high-tech or low-tech), our individual media creations contribute to the media landscape.

According Media Literacy Project, media literate individuals are active participants in our media culture. While many people analyze and criticize media messages, and others focus on creating their own media, more and more people are also becoming media activists. The implication is that, media literate individuals are changing the way they use media, challenging media messages and media institutions, supporting independent media, and working for media justice and media reform. However, since media create so much of our culture, any social change will require significant change in our media environment, in media policies and practices, and in media institutions (Media Literacy Project). Teaching and learning about the media can give adults and young people the skills necessary to interact with the media in order to contribute to the building of a society that is just, humane and peaceful (Ehusani, 2006).

### **The Challenges of Media Literacy in Nigeria**

While media literacy is now mandated in curriculum across countries like Canada and the United States thus making huge gains in schools in many parts of the industrialized world, it is yet to be formally recognized in Nigeria as a form of education. One reason for this is the conservative nature of the education system (Adamu, n.d). For the most part, the understanding most people have of literacy is restricted to the ability to read and write printed text. Most Nigerians still hold on to the notion that print is the dominant form of discourse. Many, if not most, educators ignore non-print texts in their teaching. What the education systems have not acknowledged is that while print is even more valuable today than ever before, print is no longer the dominant form of discourse in a multimedia world especially for young people. In addition, the fifty-six million illiterate Nigerian population are not mentally equipped to understand the deeper content of the message of the mass media (Olufowobi, 2013).

### **Possibilities and Definite Ways Forward**

The overwhelming capability of the media to influence the world at large (and Nigeria in particular) challenges media regulators to thread with caution with respect to the way they conjure persuasive messages. Consumers on their part should take seriously the need for media education or media literacy. Nigerian consumers of media products are hereby challenged to become ever more enlightened by opting to analyze, evaluate and interpret media messages. They are expected to discern the values or



the underlying vices promoted in the media and are to be able to discriminate between good and bad messages.

According to Media Literacy Project, all media literates who are active participants in media culture can “talk back” to deceptive or harmful media messages by creating *counter-ads*. Counter advertising (*counter ad*) is advertising that takes a position contrary to an advertising message that preceded it. Such advertising may be used to take an opposing position on a controversial topic, or to counter an impression that might be made by another party’s advertising. Through counter-ads or altering the texts and graphics of real adverts, media literates deploy media literacy skills to communicate positive messages in an exciting manner. This is necessary judging from the profound impact the media has on how people understand life, how they perceive the world, and how they look at themselves. The media also impacts heavily on people’s values, their choices and their behaviours (Miller & Philo, 1996).

## Conclusion

Media literacy helps to develop critical thinking and active participation in our media culture. The goal is to give media audience greater freedom by empowering them to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media. The point cannot be overstated that media consumers need to be empowered to transform their passive relationships to media and its messages into an active one. This would probably help them to critically evaluate and challenge some media traditions and structures and be able to differentiate between good and bad messages. In essence, there is the need for a clear awareness of how the media influences, shapes and defines peoples’ lives.

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