

The focus on message rather than the technology of delivery is all the more important as forms of media converge. By the time today's preschoolers enter the workforce, it will be common for a single device to serve as computer, phone, game console, radio, television, music player, GPS, camera, and audio recorder not to mention as calculator, alarm clock, calendar, and dozens of other functions no one has even thought of yet. Debates about the relative merits of various media-delivery systems are obsolete for someone who can use a completely customized, pocket-sized, wireless tool to access songs and TV programs, get maps and directions, post comments on a class discussion board, exchange instant messages with a friend, take notes, check homework assignments, play games, gamble, shop, search the globe for information, order a pizza, arrange an impromptu political protest, receive real-time safety alerts, post photos of coveted new shoes to a personalized birthday wish list, or watch a favorite sports hero from a choice of angles. In an age of media convergence and rapid change, the approach that makes the most sense for media literacy educators is to provide students with reading, writing, analysis, and reflection skills that apply across all technologies, including versions that will come in the future.

## THE NATURE OF MEDIA MESSAGES: KEY CONCEPTS

In addition to adopting an inclusive definition of *media*, media literacy education embraces a set of core ideas about the nature of media.<sup>8</sup> In the past three decades, every major organization involved with media literacy has articulated a set of Key Concepts to describe those core ideas. Though specific wording varies, there is broad agreement on these six main points:<sup>9</sup>

1. **All media messages are constructed.** By definition, media messages are representations, filtered through human decisions and the constraints and capabilities of media technologies.<sup>10</sup> This fundamental concept serves to focus attention not just on the message itself but also on who is behind it and the purposeful way in which it was made.
2. **Each medium has different characteristics, strengths, and a unique "language" of construction.** Every type of media has its own set of "grammatical" rules that makes it comprehensible to users. In printed text, the grammar is familiar: nouns, verbs, sentences, paragraphs, and the like. In visual texts, the components of language are things like camera angles, juxtaposition, and movement. The language of audio texts includes sound effects; voice-overs; and the musical grammar of notes, rests, and dynamics. The Internet has elements like URLs, banners, and hotlinks.

These languages make some media more effective than others at accomplishing specific communication tasks. For example, it would be quite difficult to teach someone to hit a baseball by assigning her or him to read a chapter in a book. But a video demonstration that included a voice-over describing how to hold the bat and swing could get someone started in less than sixty seconds.

On the other hand, the book chapter would be the better choice if the goal was to help a student understand the logic underlying a complex idea or debate, because logical arguments—like most printed texts—tend to proceed in a linear way and a person holding a book can read at his or her own pace, pause to ponder, highlight important phrases, write notes in the margins, and easily reread paragraphs or sentences.

3. **Media messages are produced for particular purposes.** Notice that this concept uses the plural *purposes*. People often have more than one reason for creating media messages, and many messages are created by teams of people, each with particular goals.<sup>11</sup>
4. **All media messages contain embedded values and points of view.** In addition to the obvious, media messages reflect the experiences and assumptions of producers and audiences, as well as societal norms and media conventions. For example, while the overt content of a clothing ad is about selling the clothes (or a brand), the choice of a particular model—his body type, height, weight, hairstyle and hair color, skin color, and age—also conveys implicit ideas and cultural preoccupations about beauty.
5. **People use their individual skills, beliefs, and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.** Audiences are active participants<sup>12</sup> in the communication process, and because every person is different, there is no such thing as an automatic interpretation that is true for everyone.<sup>13</sup> There are often dominant readings (i.e., interpretations on which most people would agree), and there can be inaccurate interpretations that are unsupported by evidence in the document, but it is quite possible for two people to interpret the same media text differently without either of them being wrong.

This point is especially important for media literacy educators. Teachers often find that differences in age alone make it likely that they will encounter students who will disagree with them about what a media text means. Other common variables affecting interpretations of media messages include race, ethnicity, culture, gender identity, socioeconomic class, geography (e.g., rural/urban or region), prior knowledge, and political affiliation.

6. **Media and media messages can influence beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, and the democratic process.** We include the word *can* here because media influence is significant but it is neither absolute nor automatic. Media messages can influence people, but they don't always. Sometimes people ignore them or dismiss sources that they find irrelevant or less than credible. Sometimes the messages reach so few people that they are inconsequential. And when the messages are influential, they might not be so in predictable ways for all individuals. Nevertheless, media literacy education is built on the assumption that media matter.

These Key Concepts help to clarify what we mean by *media*, and as such they represent a fundamental part of the *Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the United States* (see Appendix A).