



## Looking Beyond the Frame

New Mexico Media Literacy Project

The ability to analyze and evaluate media messages is an essential first step in becoming media literate. Deconstructing individual media examples, identifying the persuasion techniques used, and applying the media literacy concepts discussed earlier in this section are important skills that can lead us to a deeper understanding of the media messages that bombard us every day.

But this is just the beginning. True media literacy requires “looking beyond the frame” of the media message – the individual TV commercial, news story or website, for example – to examine its *context*. This involves four interrelated concepts and skill sets:

1. Media messages reflect the social, political, economic, and technological environment of the media system in which they are created. They either reinforce that environment — by perpetuating stereotypes, for example -- or they challenge it.

For example, big-budget Hollywood blockbusters are produced by media conglomerates seeking to maximize short-term profits. They often rely on familiar character types, storylines, and genres because old formulas create a safer investment. In contrast, films made by independent filmmakers—particularly those with little access to money and power—are often more original, covering subject matter and featuring characters we haven't seen before. Instead of appealing to the lowest common denominator, independent films often challenge audiences' assumptions and beliefs.

Looking beyond the frame to consider the context of both kinds of films enriches one's understanding of our media culture. This involves *deconstructing our media system* to examine issues of media ownership, power, and control, and to recognize how these issues influence media content.

2. Examining the relationship between media and society raises the issue of *media justice*. Our media system produces a lot of negative, demeaning imagery. It privileges some people and some perspectives, and ignores or silences others. It renders entire groups of people invisible. The dominant media system—consisting almost entirely of private corporations producing and distributing media for profit—provides too little funding and too few outlets for people without money, privilege and power to tell their stories.

The media system is unjust, and it perpetuates and strengthens injustice throughout society. The media justice movement works to create a fairer and more just media system that serves everyone, particularly communities that have been historically underrepresented and misrepresented in the mainstream media, including indigenous communities, people of color, the LGBTQI community, people with disabilities, working class people, and others.

The media justice movement believes that communication is a human right and that media should belong to the people.

3. Just as *literacy* is the ability both to read and write, *media literacy* involves both understanding media messages and *creating* media. We all create media. We write notes and send email. We draw and doodle. Some of us play and compose music. Some take photos or make videos. Many people blog and use social-networking websites. High-tech or low-tech, our own media creations contribute to the media landscape. Learning how to express oneself in a variety of media is an important part of being media literate.
  
4. 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. They are changing the way they use media, challenging media messages and media institutions, supporting independent media, and working for media justice and media reform.

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. Becoming an active agent for change in our media culture is a natural result of being media literate.