Media Literacy
Seeing below the surface
Below the surface, outside the frame

A goal of the media literacy movement is to look below the surface of a media text and understand how and why it was made. A feature film such as *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2009) involves hundreds of technicians, cinematographers, editors, special effects artists, writers, gaffers and grips not to mention actors (Figure 1).

The resulting scenes seem completely natural, or at least natural to the genre of fantasy films and to the Harry Potter series.

**FIGURE 1** ★ Feature-film makers create a surface within the frame that seems “real” to us, but much lies below the surface and outside the frame. (Copyright © 2007 Warner Bros. Ent, Harry Potter Publishing Rights J.K.R)

### Five principles of media literacy

- All media texts are constructed.
- Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
- Different people experience the same media message in different ways.
- Media have embedded values and points of view.
- Most media are organized to gain profit, power or both.
**Media text: A definition**

A media text is any document or object that makes its meanings with images, sound, text or meaningful patterns.

Visual texts include charts, maps, diagrams, photos, illustrations, paintings, animation and motion pictures, among others.

Other media texts include audio recordings, books, magazines and newspapers.

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**FIGURE 2** President Obama addresses doctors from across the country on Monday, Oct. 5, 2009, in the Rose Garden of the White House. This is an example of a media text, and as media literate viewers, we should question the decisions made in its construction, such as, Why are the doctors wearing white lab coats? (AP)
Principle 1: All media texts are constructed

A successful production looks natural on the surface. From a technical point of view, they are often superb. Coupled with our having seen thousands of such productions, their high quality tricks us into seeing them as seamless extensions of reality.

Our task is to expose the complexities of media texts and thereby make the seams visible. A media literate person understands how media texts are constructed; he or she knows what happens “outside the frame.”

FIGURE 3 ▲ The efforts to produce a natural look in media is most evident in the world of advertising. The production itself of an advertising images is far from natural. This photo is from an advertising shoot by Monte Isom of Detroit Lions player Jahvid Best for Pepsi. The complexity of the lighting equipment and the intensity of the technicians tell us that the “natural look” is carefully contrived. A good thing to remember while viewing media texts is that nothing is left to chance in such productions. Watch a video of this shoot on YouTube of this shoot.
Principle 1:
All media texts are constructed

Keep these ideas in mind when interrogating a media text:

- The media do not present simple reflections of external reality.
- Media texts are subjected to a broad range of decisions.
- Even events that seem unplanned allow the media producer considerable control over the final text.

Consider the decisions the photographer made to produce Figure 4: Why this firefighter? Why this angle? Should the flag be in the background? Which frame of many taken should be used? What is the best facial expression? The answers add up to a powerful ideological, political and cultural message.

Pseudo events

The events we see in the media as “reality” are often carefully constructed productions with the specific purposes of attracting media attention.

The goal often is to “fix the meaning” of an event, in the words of cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall.

Daniel Boorstin bases his concept of the pseudo event on the growing importance of the graphic image in communication as he saw it in the middle of the 20th Century, what he calls the “graphic age.”

In the early 21st Century, political operatives have raised the “photo op,” a subcategory of the pseudo-event, to a high art. The image of President Obama and the doctors on the previous page is an example. Operatives in the George W. Bush White House was superb at arranging events to produce value-laden images, such as the picture to the left and of the president himself. Candidates of both parties have followed their lead.
CASE STUDY: Keepers of Bush Image Lift Stagecraft to New Heights

By ELISABETH BUMILLER
Published: May 16, 2003
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George W. Bush’s “Top Gun” landing on the deck of the carrier Abraham Lincoln will be remembered as one of the most audacious moments of presidential theater in American history. But it was only the latest example of how the Bush administration, going far beyond the foundations in stagecraft set by the Reagan White House, is using the powers of television and technology to promote a presidency like never before.

Officials of past Democratic and Republican administrations marvel at how the White House does not seem to miss an opportunity to showcase Mr. Bush in dramatic and perfectly lighted settings. It is all by design: the White House has stocked its communications operation with people from network television who have expertise in lighting, camera angles and the importance of backdrops.

On Tuesday, at a speech promoting his economic plan in Indianapolis, White House aides went so far as to ask people in the crowd behind Mr. Bush to take off their ties, WISH-TV in Indianapolis reported, so they would look more like the ordinary folk the president said would benefit from his tax cut.

“They understand the visual as well as anybody ever has,” said Michael K. Deaver, Ronald Reagan’s chief image maker. “They watched what we did, they watched the mistakes of Bush I, they watched how Clinton kind of stumbled into it, and they’ve taken it to an art form.”

The White House efforts have been ambitious — and costly. For the prime-time television address that Mr. Bush delivered to the nation on the (first) anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, the White House rented three barges of giant Musco lights, the kind used to illuminate sports stadiums and rock concerts, sent them across New York Harbor, tethered them in the water around the base of the Statue of Liberty and then blasted them upward to illuminate all 305 feet of America’s symbol of freedom. It was the ultimate patriotic backdrop for Mr. Bush, who spoke from Ellis Island (Figure 5).

For a speech that Mr. Bush delivered last summer (2002) at Mount Rushmore, the White House positioned the best platform for television crews off to one side, not head on as other White Houses have done, so that the cameras caught Mr. Bush in profile, his face perfectly aligned with the four presidents carved in stone (Figure 6, next page).

And on Monday (May 12, 2003), for remarks the president made promoting his tax cut plan near Albuquerque, the White House unfurled a backdrop that proclaimed its message of the day, “Helping Small Business,” over and over. The type was too small to be read by most in the audience, but just the right size for television viewers at home.

“I don’t know who does it,” Mr. Deaver said, “but somebody’s got a good eye over there.”

That somebody, White House officials and television executives say, is in fact three or four people. First among equals is Scott Sforza, a former ABC producer who was hired by the Bush campaign in Austin, Texas, and who now works for Dan Bartlett, the White House communications director. Mr. Sforza created the White House “message of the day” backdrops and helped design the $250,000 set at the United
States Central Command forward headquarters in Doha, Qatar, during the Iraq war.

Mr. Sforza works closely with Bob DeServi, a former NBC cameraman whom the Bush White House hired after seeing his work in the 2000 campaign. Mr. DeServi, whose title is associate director of communications for production, is considered a master at lighting. “You want it, I'll heat it up and make a picture,” he said early this week. Mr. DeServi helped produce one of Mr. Bush’s largest events, a speech to a crowd in Revolution Square in Bucharest last November.

To stage the event, Mr. DeServi went so far as to rent Musco lights in Britain, which were then shipped across the English Channel and driven across Europe to Romania, where they lighted Mr. Bush and the giant stage across from the country’s former Communist headquarters (Figure 7).

A third crucial player is Greg Jenkins, a former Fox News television producer in Washington who is now the director of presidential advance. Mr. Jenkins manages the small army of staff members and volunteers who move days ahead of Mr. Bush and his entourage to set up the staging of all White House events.

“We pay particular attention to not only what the president says but what the American people see,” Mr. Bartlett said. “Americans are leading busy lives, and sometimes they don’t have the opportunity to read a story or listen to an entire broadcast. But if they can have an instant understanding of what the president is talking about by seeing 60 seconds of television, you accomplish your goals as communicators. So we take it seriously.”

The president’s image makers, Mr. Bartlett said, work within a budget for White House travel and events allotted by Congress, which for fiscal 2003 was $3.7 million. He said he did not know the specific cost of staging Mr. Bush’s Sept. 11 anniversary speech, or what the White House was charged for the lights. A spokeswoman at the headquarters of Musco Lighting in Oskaloosa, Iowa, said

**FIGURE 6 ★ TOP:** President George W. Bush delivers remarks on homeland security and the budget Aug. 15, 2002, at Mt. Rushmore, S.D. (Eric Draper/The White House)  **FIGURE 7 ★ BOTTOM:** President Bush waves to the crowd in Revolution Square, November 2002, in Bucharest, Romania. (Brooks Kraft/CORBIS)
the company did not disclose the prices it charged clients.

White House communications operatives in previous administrations said many costs of presidential trips were paid for by whoever was deemed the official host of a trip — typically a federal agency, a city or a company. Trips deemed political are paid for by the parties.

“The total cost of a trip is ultimately shared across a wide spectrum of agencies and hosts,” said Joshua King, who was director of production of presidential events in the Clinton administration. “To get to who really pays for presidential events would keep a team of accountants very busy.”

The most elaborate — and criticized — White House event so far was Mr. Bush’s speech on May 1, 2003, aboard the Abraham Lincoln announcing the end of major combat in Iraq. White House officials say that a variety of people, including the president, came up with the idea, and that Mr. Sforza embedded himself on the carrier to make preparations days before Mr. Bush’s landing in a flight suit and his early evening speech (Figure 9).

Media strategists noted afterward that Mr. Sforza and his aides had choreographed every aspect of the event, even down to the members of the Lincoln crew arrayed in coordinated shirt colors over Mr. Bush’s right shoulder and the “Mission Accomplished” banner placed to perfectly capture the president and the celebratory two words in a single shot. The speech was specifically timed for what image makers call “magic hour light,” which cast a golden glow on Mr. Bush.

“If you looked at the TV picture, you saw there was flattering light on his left cheek and slight shadowing on his right,” Mr. King said. “It looked great.”

The trip was attacked by Democrats as an expensive political stunt, but White House officials said that Democrats needed a better issue for taking on the president. A New York Times/CBS News nationwide poll conducted May 9-12 found that the White House may have been right: 59 percent of those polled said it was appropriate, and not an effort to make political gain, for Mr. Bush to dress in a flight suit and announce the end of combat operations on the aircraft carrier.

But even this White House makes mistakes. One of the more notable ones occurred in January, when Mr. Bush delivered a speech about his economic plan at a St. Louis trucking company. Volunteers for the White House covered “Made in China” stamps with white
stickers on boxes arrayed on either side of the president. Behind Mr. Bush was a printed backdrop of faux boxes that read “Made in U.S.A.,” the message the administration wanted to convey to the television audience (Figure 10).

The White House takes great pride in the backdrops, which are created by Mr. Sforza, and has gone so far as to help design them for universities where Mr. Bush travels to make commencement addresses. Last year, the White House helped design a large banner for Ohio State as part of the background for Mr. Bush; last week, the White House collaborated with the University of South Carolina to make Sforzian backdrops for a presidential commencement speech in the school’s new Carolina Center (Figure 11).

“They really are good,” said Russ McKinney, the school’s director of public affairs, as he listened to the president.

Television camera crews, meanwhile, say they have rarely had such consistently attractive pictures to send back to editing rooms. “They seem to approach an event site like it’s a TV set,” said Chris Carlson, an ABC cameraman who covers the White House. “They dress it up really nicely. It looks like a million bucks.”

Even for standard-issue White House events, Mr. Bush’s image makers watch every angle. Last week, when the president had a joint news conference with Prime Minister José Mariá Aznar of Spain, it was staged in the Grand Foyer of the White House, under grand marble columns, with the Blue Room and a huge cream-colored bouquet of flowers illuminated in the background. (Mr. Sforza and Mr. DeServi could be seen there conferring before the cameras began rolling.) The scene was lush and rich, filled with the beauty of the White House in real time.

“They understand they have to build a set, whether it’s an aircraft carrier or the Rose Garden or the South Lawn,” Mr. Deaver said. “They understand that putting depth into the picture makes the candidate or president look better.”

Or as Mr. Deaver said he learned long ago with Mr. Reagan: “They understand that what’s around the head is just as important as the head.”

**FIGURE 10** President Bush speaks in January 2003 at a courier company, in St. Louis. Aides covered the words “Made in China” on the boxes in front and behind the president. (Kevin Lamarque/Reuters)

**FIGURE 11** Bush pledges allegiance May 9, 2003, before speaking at the University of South Carolina commencement. The White House helped design the backdrop. (Larry Downing/Reuters)
Principle 2: Media messages use a creative language with its own rules

We understand this language, but we don’t speak it. Media literacy in part is about learning to speak the language.

We understand the language without really thinking about it. We learn it through constant exposure.

The language depends to a large degree on intertextuality. Certain characteristics are carried over from one media text to another of the same type, or genre.

Sometimes the language of one genre is exploited in another. The Daily Show is an example. It speaks the visual language of the news/talk television show but plays it for laughs. Part of the humor is in the show’s faithfulness to the news/talk genre.

FIGURE 12  Jon Stewart interviews President Barack Obama on The Daily Show, a fake news show that borrows its creative language from the real thing.
Dan Rather was blue. Katie Couric is orangey-gold.
Rather was straight lines. Couric is gentle curves.
That’s what CBS hopes you’ll feel, though perhaps not quite so conscientiously, when you see the new graphics on the “CBS Evening News With Katie Couric” tonight. To match its new anchor, the newscast has undergone a makeover: A new set, a cinematic theme song by “Titanic” composer James Horner, and, most notably, a new set of perpetual-motion, computer-generated graphics, recasting everything from the opening logo to the closing credits.

For National Ministry of Design, the Boston firm that created the new look, CBS producers had a long list of demands. The images had to translate to cellphone screens and the sides of buses, to fit a standard-size TV set and a more rectangular high-definition screen. They had to look modern, but not so much that they turned off an older audience. And they had to be sort of fun.

“We really wanted it to feel like we were inviting viewers to spend a lively and interesting 30 minutes with us, rather than compelling them to do it,” says Rome Hartman, executive producer of the CBS Evening News.

Now, go translate that into some colors and shapes.

The result was a breakneck summer of work in the firm’s modern office, a tucked-away space near Boston University, where designers work near sound and video editors, and Ben Affleck used a soundstage for prep work on his directorial debut, “Gone, Baby, Gone.” After landing the job at the end of June, designers prepared various versions of every element in the newscast. They spoke to CBS executives several times a day, held long debates over such matters as the color of the line that will appear on the bottom of the screen, below correspondents’ names. (It’s going to be orange).

In a business where every image is fraught with symbolism, the attention to detail makes sense, says Robert Thompson, a professor of television and popular culture at Syracuse University. The stakes are high for CBS, whose broadcast is mired in third place, whose relationship with Rather crumbled publicly, and whose courtship of Couric was closely watched.
Tonight’s broadcast, Thompson says, promises to be “some of the most scrutinized frame-by-frame video images since the Zapruder film.”

National Ministry of Design is accustomed to the pressure. Its designers — some of them veterans of Boston’s WBZ-TV — have also created title sequences for the NFL Network, the ABC hit “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” and the UPN reality series “Britney and Kevin: Chaotic.”

They also created the graphics for the Dan Rather-helmed CBS broadcast in 2000, a collection of blue tones and mostly straight, vertical lines. Back then, CBS “wanted it to feel like you walked into the lobby of a Fortune 500 company,” says designer Dave Allen.

This time, designer Jean McCarville says, the firm began by asking CBS executives to reel off adjectives, ideas about the message they wanted to project. The network offered “classy,” “elegant,” and “timeless,” she said. It wanted to suggest that Couric would be accessible and warm, and have more interaction with reporters and viewers.

And executives said, half-jokingly, that they wanted things to look expensive, recalls Ned Biddle, National Ministry’s executive producer for the project.

So designers studied ads for expensive things — architecture, cars, jewelry. They noticed a common theme, McCarville says, “a certain shininess” as light glints off diamonds and chrome. They made light virtually glint off the CBS logo’s letters and curves.

To represent Couric, Allen says, they added warm golds and oranges to a palette that had been exclusively blue. And they changed the eye, CBS’s iconic symbol, from blue to gold in the new title frame.

“It should become synonymous with Katie,” McCarville says. “It’s important at this point to attach her to CBS.”

Designers also lifted the curves from the CBS eye and began to wrap nearly everything in them, from the teaser videos at the top of the show to the images that will appear over Couric’s shoulder as she introduces a story.

“We’re not trying to be blatantly feminine about it, but we definitely thought of the curves,” McCarville says.

But Hartman says he never intended those curves to shout “first sole female anchor.”

“I’m interested in the sweep and in the angles but I hadn’t thought of it as either being feminine or masculine,” he says. “We wanted to make sure that whatever we did fit her, but that’s not a gender thing. That’s a personality and feel thing.”

It goes to show that images can be interpreted differently — and that CBS has reason to be skittish. Last week, the network got a poorly timed black eye when news broke that Watch! magazine, a CBS publication, had airbrushed a publicity photo of Couric to make her look some 20 pounds thinner.

CBS producers decried the move. “Nobody that has anything to do with CBS News would have ever done that,” Hartman says. “It was stupid.”
But calling attention to Couric’s gender has proved to be treacherous ground, says Syracuse’s Thompson.

“I would think they would want to make this look like good old rough journalism, which Katie is perfectly capable of doing,” Thompson says. “They don’t want to make this look like it’s somehow a soft and cuddly evening news.”

How viewers will interpret the images — or whether they’ll notice at all — is an open question. Brian Lucid and Lisa Rosowsky, professors of graphic design at Massachusetts College of Art, both noted the horizontal pinstripes in the new title logo (a sign of tradition, they said) and the gradations of color (a nod to modern technology). Both said the shifting colors, which turn into gold and red in the bottom right-hand corner, made them think of a morning show.

“They’ve thrown a lot in this, and there are mixed messages,” Rosowsky says. “They’re looking for feminine, but they’re trying not to dispense with masculine.” The eye, she said, seemed strangely down played, “almost as minor as you can get.”

But Lucid said he wasn’t surprised. “I assume that what they’re trying to do is bring the Katie Couric brand forward,” he said. “Because she’s what they’re selling.”

FIGURE 14 - Photos of Katie Couric before and after the image was altered to make her look thinner. FIGURE 15 - The airbrushed image appeared in Watch! magazine, a CBS publication.
Principle 3: Different people experience the same media message in different ways

A “construct” becomes our reality.

A “construct,” is the picture we have built up in our heads since birth of what the world is and how it works. It is a model based on the sense we have made of all our observations and experiences.

A major part of those observations and experiences come to us preconstructed by the media, with attitudes, interpretations and conclusions already built in.

Another way to think of it is that the media “re-presents” reality, as Stuart Hall writes, and that becomes our reality.

Consider the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. What we know of these conflicts — and what we believe to be true about them — comes from what we see in the media and how we filter it through our own attitudes and beliefs.

Study the three photos (Figures 16-18): Which one presents the “true” picture of life in North Korea? Would someone who has visited there draw the same conclusions?

When we look at media text, each of us finds meaning through a wide variety of factors:

- personal needs and anxieties
- the pleasures or trouble of the day
- racial, political and sexual attitudes
- family and cultural background

These “frames of reference” have a bearing on how we process information.
When it comes to getting news about politics and government, liberals and conservatives inhabit different worlds. There is little overlap in the news sources they turn to and trust. And whether discussing politics online or with friends, they are more likely than others to interact with like-minded individuals, according to a new Pew Research Center study.

The project — part of a year-long effort to shed light on political polarization in America — looks at the ways people get information about government and politics in three different settings: the news media, social media and the way people talk about politics with friends and family. In all three areas, the study finds that those with the most consistent ideological views on the left and right have information streams that are distinct from those of individuals with more mixed political views — and very distinct from each other.

These cleavages can be overstated. The study also suggests that in America today, it is virtually impossible to live in an ideological bubble. Most Americans rely on an array of outlets — with varying audience profiles — for political news. And many consistent conservatives and liberals hear dissenting political views in their everyday lives.

Yet as our major report on political polarization found, those at both the left and right ends of the spectrum, who together comprise about 20 percent of the public overall, have a greater impact on the political process than do those with more mixed ideological views. They are the most likely to vote, donate to campaigns and participate directly in politics. The five ideological groups in this analysis (consistent liberals, mostly liberals, mixed, mostly conservatives and consistent conservatives) are based on responses to 10 questions about a range of political values. That those who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions have different ways of informing themselves about politics and government is not surprising. But the depth of these divisions — and the differences between those who have strong ideological views and those who do not — are striking.

Overall, the study finds that consistent conservatives:

- Are tightly clustered around a single news source, far more than any other group in the survey, with 47 percent citing Fox News as their main source for news about government and politics.
- Express greater distrust than trust of 24 of the 36 news sources measured in the survey. At the same time, fully 88 percent of consistent conservatives trust Fox News.
- Are, when on Facebook, more likely than those in other ideological groups to hear political opinions that are in line with their own views.
- Are more likely to have friends who share their own political views. Two-thirds (66 percent) say most of their friends share their views on government and politics.

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**But They Also Share Common Ground**

Both consistent liberals and consistent conservatives are more likely to drive political discussion — that is — others turn to them, they lead rather than listen, and they talk about politics more overall.

Percentage who are discussion influencers

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<th>Mixed</th>
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American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19 – April 29, 2014. Based on web respondents. Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see About the Survey for more details).
By contrast, those with liberal views:

■ Are less unified in their media loyalty; they rely on a greater range of news outlets, including some — like NPR and the New York Times— that others use far less.

■ Express more trust than distrust of 28 of the 36 news outlets in the survey. NPR, PBS and the BBC are the most trusted news sources for consistent liberals.

■ Are more likely than those in other ideological groups to block or “defriend” someone on a social network — as well as to end a personal friendship — because of politics.

■ Are more likely to follow issue-based groups, rather than political parties or candidates, in their Facebook feeds.

Those with down-the-line conservative and liberal views do share some common ground; they are much more likely than others to closely follow government and political news. This carries over to their discussions of politics and government. Nearly four-in-ten consistent conservatives (39 percent) and 30 percent of consistent liberals tend to drive political discussions — that is, they talk about politics often, say others tend to turn to them for information rather than the reverse, and describe themselves as leaders rather than listeners in these kinds of conversations. Among those with mixed ideological views, just 12 percent play a similar role.

It is important to note, though, that those at either end of the ideological spectrum are not isolated from dissenting views about politics. Nearly half (47 percent) of across-the-board conservatives — and 59 percent of across-the-board liberals — say they at least sometimes disagree with one of their closest political discussion partners.

For those closer to the middle of the ideological spectrum, learning about politics, or discussing it with friends and family, is a less of a focus. When they do follow politics, their main news sources include CNN, local TV and Fox News, along with Yahoo News and Google News, which aggregate stories from a wide assortment of outlets; these U.S. adults see more of a mix of views in social media and are less likely to be aware of their friends’ political leanings.

This study, the latest in a series of reports on political polarization, is based on an online survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014 with 2,901 members of the Pew Research Center’s new American Trends Panel — a panel recruited from a telephone survey of 10,013 adults conducted earlier this year.

View this case study and other reports at the Pew Resource Center website.
Principle 4: Media have embedded values, points of view

To understand how visual texts affect our sense of reality, we must understand the “practices that produce meaning,” in the words of Stuart Hall. Hall says the production of meaning does not just happen; a word or picture is not fixed in its meanings and the meaning can change.

Governments and corporations use media to give meaning to objects and events, and to communicate that meaning to someone else. Hall calls these “signifying practices” — practices that are involved in producing meaning.

Study the images to the right:

Photographer Thomas E. Franklin’s original image from 2001 combines signs that stirred powerful feelings in those who first saw it published in newspapers and magazines across the country: the flag, firefighters and the quickly recognizable context of the destruction at Ground Zero.

We define culture as those signs that help us make sense of daily life and convey our values and beliefs. In times of national tragedy, we often turn to patriotic or heroic symbolism as a way of reassuring ourselves.

As with another famous flag-raising image, Joe Rosenthal’s picture from Iwo Jima, Franklin’s picture became a sign in itself that expressed complex emotions, attitudes and beliefs. See Figure 20.

Like Rosenthal’s famous shot, Franklin’s photo soon was appropriated for other uses, some noble and some crassly commercial, such as for coffee mugs and T-shirts.

Many groups, wanting to identify with what the photo expressed, sought to attach

FIGURE 20 ▲ Variations on the theme of the flag as heroic symbol.
themselves to it. This included those in the power structures of business and government.

Those in power seek to “fix” meaning, as Stuart Hall states. He adds that power structures seek to fix meaning according to an ideology until the relationship between “the image and a powerful definition of it to become naturalized so that that is the only meaning it can possibly carry.”

But in an open society, meaning ultimately cannot be controlled. Hall states that the meaning attached to any image “is going to come out of the fixing and begin to loosen and fray.” Think back to the pictures of the Bush carrier landing and “Mission Accomplished.” Today it doesn’t have the same heroic meaning as it did in 2003.

More information:

Thomas E. Franklin has put together a revealing video of what it was like to be a photographer on Sept. 11, 2001, at Ground Zero.

Refer to the transcript of Representation & the Media, the video we watched in which Stuart Hall expressed his ideas of representation.

FIGURE 21 ▲ Firefighters Billy Eisengrein, George Johnson and Dan McWilliams join President George W. Bush on March 11, 2002, at the White House to unveil the 911 “Heroes” stamp. (White House photo)
Even advertising — or especially advertising — contains ideological and value messages

All media productions express values or ways of life. Media texts produced for commercial purposes usually affirm the existing social system.

For example, the ideological messages contained in a typical television narrative are almost invisible to North Americans, but they would be apparent to people in developing countries. The same is true for advertisers who seek to attach their products to cultural values. A good example is this TV commercial for Chevrolet. As you watch it, notice that the product is shown only as a backdrop or peripherally. The focus is on the type of people singing the song and what they are doing while they sing it.

FIGURE 22 ▲ The TV commercial “Baseball Hotdogs Apple Pie and Chevrolet” hardly shows the product at all. It is an example of a “high concept” ad campaign that seeks to establish brand loyalty through association with cultural values. WATCH THE VIDEO
CASE STUDY: Diamonds are Forever

Some advertisers have sought to change cultural values to make products more desirable or to change the way a product is used. A well-documented example is the “A Diamond is Forever” campaign. In February 1982, The Atlantic published “Have You Ever Tried to Sell a Diamond?” by Edward Jay Epstein. It is still among the most-often downloaded stories on the magazine’s website. Epstein writes:

■ In the 1870s, huge diamond mines were discovered in South Africa. Because a diamond’s worth is based almost entirely on scarcity, this discovery threatened to make diamonds “at best only semiprecious gems.”

■ In 1888, the major investors in the diamond mines merged into a cartel powerful enough to control production and perpetuate the illusion of scarcity of diamonds: De Beers Consolidated Mines, Ltd.

■ After diamond prices collapsed during the depression, De Beers engaged the advertising firm N.W. Ayers to create a campaign with the goal of selling more diamonds — and inducing people to hang on to them. Epstein writes, “The illusion had to be created that diamonds were forever — ‘forever’ in the sense that they should never be resold.”

■ The campaign involved lush ads, celebrities, even the royal family’s involvement because many diamond investors were British. Around 1950, the ad agency came up with a slogan that expressed romance and legitimacy: A Diamond is Forever. It became DeBeers’ official motto.

The ad campaign, in essence, changed the cultural practices of courtship and marriage. Before the campaign began, diamond sales had been declining in the United States. In the three years from 1938, when DeBeers engaged N.W. Ayers, to 1941, sales of diamonds increased 55 percent.

Epstein reports that N.W. Ayer itself trumpeted “a new form of advertising which has been widely imitated ever since. There was no direct sale to be made. There was no brand name to be impressed on the public mind. There was simply an idea — the eternal emotional value surrounding the diamond.”


FIGURE 23 ▲ An advertisement for De Beers Diamonds from Life magazine, May 3, 1963, with the slogan “A diamond is forever.”
CASE STUDY: High School Musical

Mainstream media convey explicit and implicit ideological messages, such as:

- the nature of “the good life.”
- the role of affluence.
- the virtues of “consumerism.”
- the proper role of women.
- the acceptance of authority.
- unquestioning patriotism.

Understanding the codes can help you to uncover these ideological messages and values systems. Consider one Disney production, *High School Musical*, and think about what messages it conveys. Disney made the movie for only $4.2 million for release in January 2006. The DVD sold 1.2 million copies in the first six days it was on the market.

“HSM” reflects the simplistic values that Disney is known for. *Newsweek’s Johnnie L. Roberts* called it a fantasy world. He wrote:

“Sure, there are cliques and rivalries at East High, but there’s no sex, no drugs, no racial or ethnic tensions, no dropouts and no violence. Everyone is good-looking, well-dressed and talented. Classrooms are spacious and clean. In the end, the home team wins, all conflicts are resolved and everybody dances together in the gym. It’s not high school; it’s high school the way we wish it could be.

“The lustless love on display in ‘HSM’ — there isn’t a single kiss — thrusts the film squarely into the center of the ongoing culture wars over “decency” in radio and television, and at a particularly heated juncture. Just last month [June 2006], President George W. Bush signed the Broadcast Decency Enforcement Act, hiking fines for violations to $350,000 each. But ‘HSM’ is chaste almost to a fault — which is why it comes wholeheartedly recommended as Christian programming. Beliefnet, a religion and spirituality Web site, applauds ‘HSM’ for not featuring ‘promiscuous greasers and accidental virgins.’ The musical has also earned the stamp of approval from Focus on the Family, which gauges entertainment for good and evil influences in an effort to foster spiritual growth.... But it frowned at the number ‘Bop to the Top,’ specifically the lyric ‘Shake some booty.’ “

High School Musical also exploits another American cultural value, one that has come to prominence relatively recently, that of fame. A 2011 study by UCLA psychologists Yalda T. Uhls and Patricia M. Greenfield found that fame is the No. 1 value emphasized by television shows popular with 9- to 11-year-olds, a dramatic change over the past 10 years, the study reports.

On a list of 16 values, fame jumped from the 15th spot, in 1987 and 1997 to the top of the list in 2007. From 1997 to 2007, the value of being kind and helping others fell from second to 13th, and tradition dropped from fourth to 15th.
The study assessed the values of characters in popular television shows in each decade from 1967 to 2007, with two shows per decade evaluated, including Andy Griffith and The Lucy Show in 1967, Laverne & Shirley and Happy Days in 1977 and American Idol and Hannah Montana in 2007.

“I was shocked, especially by the dramatic changes in the last 10 years,” said Uhls, a UCLA doctoral student in developmental psychology and the lead author of the study. “I thought fame would be important but did not expect this drastic an increase or such a dramatic decrease in other values, such as community feeling. If you believe that television reflects the culture, as I do, then American culture has changed drastically.”
Principle 5: Most media are organized to gain profit, power or both

The economic basis of mass-media production impinges on content, techniques and distribution.

Media production is a business and must make a profit.

Take for example television:

■ All programs — news, public affairs, or entertainment — are judged by the size of the audience they generate.
■ A prime-time American network show with fewer than 20 million viewers will not generally be kept on the air.
■ Audience sampling and rating services provide advertisers with detailed demographic breakdowns of audience for specific media.
■ Program content is designed to target the viewer for advertisers by organizing viewers into marketable groups.

Over the past 30 years, dozens of media companies have been absorbed and recombined so that today six big corporations own an estimated 90 percent of American media. That is down from 50 companies in 1983. Here is the list:

- Walt Disney
- News Corp.
- Time Warner
- Viacom
- Comcast/NBC
- CBS

The companies had total revenues of $208.6 billion in 2014.

This list considers mostly the “legacy” media of television, radio, newspapers, magazines and movies. It does not add in the consolidation of social media and other websites.

The list (Figure 27, next page) considers total revenue, not revenue just from media supported by advertising. For example, Disney takes in considerable income from theme parks and movies. If only advertising-supported media is considered, Google is far ahead of other companies (Figure 28, next page), with ad revenue of $69 billion in 2014.

A relatively small number of people decide what TV programs will be broadcast, what issues will be investigated and reported.
### The Big Six

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Big Six</th>
<th>Media Outlets</th>
<th>Revenues (2014)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comcast</td>
<td>NBCUniversal, NBC and Telemundo, Universal Pictures, Focus Features, 26 television stations in the United States, Cable networks USA Network, Bravo, CNBC, The Weather Channel, MSNBC, Syfy, NBCSN, Golf Channel, Esquire Network, E!, Cloo, Chiller, Universal HD and the Comcast SportsNet regional system. Comcast also owns the Philadelphia Flyers through a separate subsidiary.</td>
<td>$69 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Walt Disney Company</td>
<td>ABC Television Network, cable networks ESPN, the Disney Channel, A&amp;E and Lifetime, approximately 30 radio stations, music, video game, and book publishing companies, production companies Touchstone, Marvel Entertainment, Lucasfilm, Walt Disney Pictures, Pixar Animation Studios, the cellular service Disney Mobile, Disney Consumer Products and Interactive Media, and theme parks in several countries.</td>
<td>$48.8 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Warner</td>
<td>CNN, the CW (a joint venture with CBS), HBO, Cinemax, Cartoon Network/Adult Swim, HLN, NBA TV, TBS, TNT, truTV, Turner Classic Movies, Warner Bros., Castle Rock, DC Comics, Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, and New Line Cinema.</td>
<td>$22.8 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viacom</td>
<td>MTV, Nickelodeon/Nick at Nite, VH1, BET, Comedy Central, Paramount Pictures, and Paramount Home Entertainment.</td>
<td>$13.7 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS Corporations</td>
<td>CBS Television Network and the CW (a joint venture with Time Warner), cable networks CBS Sports Network, Showtime, TVGN; 30 television stations; CBS Radio, Inc., which has 130 stations; CBS Television Studios; book publisher Simon &amp; Schuster.</td>
<td>$13.8 billion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Top 10 Global Media Owners 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Owner</th>
<th>Revenues (2016)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alphabet</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comcast</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st Century Fox</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bertelsmann</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viacom</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baidu</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Corp.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 27** The “Big Six” of media control the major share of what we see, hear, read and experience through such venues as theme parks.

**FIGURE 28** When only advertising revenue is considered, Alphabet, the parent company of Google, is far out in front, illustrating the shift of ad money from print and broadcast to the Internet.

*SOURCE: Zenith Optimedia*
Semiotics and media literacy

Semiotics, the study of signs and sign systems, is the basis for the media literacy movement. Semiotics is a theory that defines culture as sets of signs we use to make sense of everyday life and to express our beliefs and values.

- Semiotics helped establish the principle of non-transparency, the idea that those in the media seek to create something that looks and feels natural on the surface.
- Semiotics exploded the media’s own view of being a window on the world or neutral reflector of external reality.
- Semiotics proposes that the media actively produce and encode messages.
- Semiotics proposes that the media are sign-systems that must be read critically.
- Semiotics helped establish the central concept of re-presentation.
- Semiotics theorizes that the media deal with re-presentations and not realities.
- Semiotics connects media meanings with the forms in which they were expressed and states that they cannot be separated.
- Semiotics avoids the value question: How good or bad in a moral sense is a newspaper, film or television program?
- Semiotics assumes that popular culture — the culture most of us see and hear the most — is worthy of objective analysis.
- Semiotics shifts the debate from the question, What is art? to What does this represent? What does it mean?
- As we will find out in the weeks ahead, these are difficult and complex questions.

FIGURE 29 ▲ Roland Barthes, in his book *Mythologies*, analyzed everyday things, such as a striptease act, a tourist guide or a wrestling match. His choice of subjects challenged the notion of established cultural categories, tastes and values as the keys to understanding.
Five key questions of media literacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEYWORD</th>
<th>CORE CONCEPT</th>
<th>KEY QUESTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Authorship</td>
<td>Who created this message?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Format</td>
<td>What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>How might different people understand this message differently from me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Content</td>
<td>What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in; or omitted from, this message?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Why is this message being sent?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Center for Media Literacy