

Meanings and messages

*Media education and literacy is a must have in a contemporary media environment says **René Smith**.*

The pervasive nature of the mass media in our everyday lives necessitates the development of skills that will allow recipients of information to actively engage meanings and messages so as to become more discerning viewers.

Audiences need to be equipped with tools that allow them to unpack the ways in which media messages operate within society.

Media education involves education about the ways in which meanings and messages are constructed through codes of form and content as well as the effects of ownership and control on media

production and consumption.

Critical consumption of the media implies engagement with production, consumption, regulation and issues related to representation, in both traditional and new media, so as to afford audiences the right to make choices concerning the information sought and/or received.

What we see or hear on television, radio, Internet or in films, DVDs, newspapers and magazines is often taken at face value and accepted as reality. We cannot expect the public to question, decode and deconstruct meanings without having the necessary

tools to do so.

Signifiers are an indispensable part of media production – media education and literacy entails reading these texts using media skills used in production and recognises active decoding of the dominant ideologies.

The active audience approach is often used to counter “pessimistic” approaches to media power and passive consumption habits. These debates, however, often neglect to engage the necessity of media literacy skills in fostering critical engagement and independent thinking in democracies where

independence and freedom of expression guarantees are constantly challenged.

Media education and literacy advances information and understanding of our human rights and constitutional guarantees. "Moral regeneration", for example, is dependent on a participatory and free media environment – it requires access and interaction with different forms of media and diverse opinions so as to develop critical literacies conducive to sustaining democracy.

Media education in democratic South Africa necessitates a review of the ways in which the mass media in apartheid South Africa was used to challenge or perpetuate a discriminatory regime through ideological structures.

It must also assess the current status quo of constitutional guarantees around freedom of expression and the many ways in which the media operates in democratic dispensations.

The freedom of expression guarantees enshrined in the Constitution ensure that post-apartheid South Africa's political, social and economic agendas are communicated freely and that citizens have the right to access information.

Media freedom thus provides audiences/media consumers with the right to choose how to engage media messages. Equipped with media literacy skills – the ability to read media texts – individuals will be in a position to make more informed media choices, participate in civil society, and contribute to the development of a local media industry.

More informed audiences

Democracy will benefit from more informed audiences, capacitated educators, and youth who will be better equipped for professional involvement in a dynamic media industry. A more media literate society will demand increased access to media use and media diversity and pluralism.

While media education and literacy is to varying degrees the subject of diverse programs in South Africa and extra curricula activities across the country, it has still not been formally introduced into the national school curriculum.

Claim – everyone Can Learn to Access and Interact with Media – is a programme that promotes and advocates for media literacy and education. It is an outcome of the National Media Education Initiative (NMEI), spearheaded by the Film and Publication Board. Claim and various groups interested in media literacy and education – represented by the NMEI – form an integrated network of media education expertise and resources.

Claim will pilot multimedia toolkits in five sites across the country targeted at learners, their educators, parents, guardians and diverse community groups. The aim is to test an approach and a course that promotes critical and creative media literacy; independent thinking, access to media and use of cultural products (such as media) to get one's voice heard.

It also aims to encourage individuals and various communities to explore careers in the media industry and develop audiences for local productions.

Claim advocates the incorporation of media education into national education curricula and for an integrated approach to promoting dialogue among children, young people and their parents and guardians as well as between media consumers and producers.

The task team includes African Film Research and Outreach (AFRO), which produces educational material on African Films; the Film and Publication Board (FPB), a statutory body; the Film Resource Unit (FRU), which aims to develop audiences and improve distribution channels for independently produced and developmentally appropriate film and video materials; and the South African Chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA-SA). ■



Chris Kirchhoff