

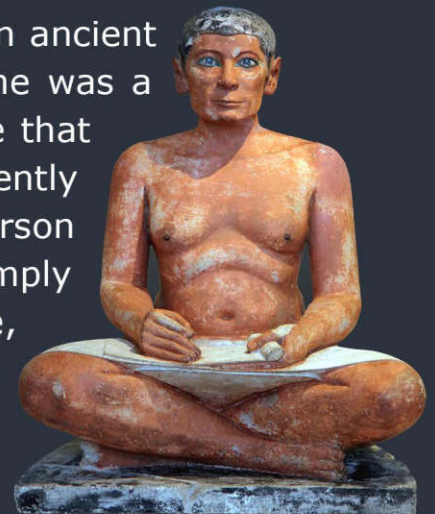
WHAT IS MEDIA LITERACY?

What is media literacy? Before we suggest an answer to this question, it is useful to try to define the two constitutive notions of this phrase, that is, literacy and the media.

3.1. BASIC AND FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

So, what is literacy? That seems easy enough – literacy is the ability to read and write. Until relatively recently, say, few decades ago, this definition would be sufficient. By this I mean that if you knew how to read and write, you would be considered literate. Looking back in the past, literacy was not a universal phenomenon, but rather a privilege of the privileged few.

Take a look, for example, at this sculpture – it is an ancient Egyptian sculpture of a **scribe**. Literacy at the time was a rare skill belonging only to a small group of people that served the pharaoh. It was so rare that apparently thousands of years ago people believed that a person should be immortalized in the form of a sculpture simply because of his ability to write. In the meantime, things have changed, and nowadays, at least in Europe, practically all people are literate. If this be so, then there is no need for our course on media literacy. Or is there?



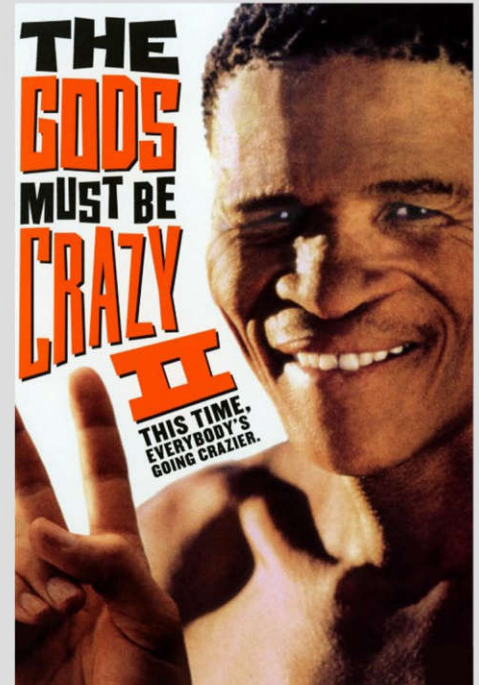
If you look for a definition of **literacy** in a dictionary, you will find two definitions. The narrow one, we could say, is that literacy is **the ability to write**; the other one, let us call it the broader one, defines literacy as **a possession of knowledge**. This second, broader definition effectively means that it's perhaps not enough simply to be able to read or write, but that a person needs to have certain knowledge required to function in a world in which s/he lives.

Let me illustrate this point with two funny clips from a comedy called ***Gods must be crazy***. In the **first clip**, we see a group of Bushmen from the Kalahari Desert in Africa, who can “**read**” animal trails.

In the **second clip**, one Bushman meets a lawyer from New York who had a crash and ended up in the desert.

Now, who is actually illiterate here? Since only the lawyer knows how to read and write, according to our first definition she is the only one literate. But, how about the second definition? Who possesses the knowledge required to survive and function in the desert?

Of course, it is the Bushman, and in that sense he is actually right – she is illiterate, inasmuch as she doesn’t know to interpret signs from the desert. Strictly speaking, her knowledge of American legal system might earn her a fortune in New York, but it will not help her survive a day in the jungle.



This brings us to the core of our problem – what are the skills and knowledge necessary to survive in today’s modern jungle that we live in?

Here lies the answer to the question about the importance of media literacy. In the era of technology, internet and mass media, simple ability to read and write is not enough. You may very well know these things and still be dysfunctional in today’s society. That is why a widely used term nowadays is not just literacy, or basic literacy that applies to reading and writing, but functional literacy. According to many thinkers, to be functionally literate in today’s world, you need to know much more than just to write – you need to be able to use the internet, social networks, probably a smartphone as well.

This effectively means that being functional today means being media literate, that is, to know how the media function in today's world, being able to access, critically reflect on, and produce media messages.

Additional Reading: **Paris 2007 Declaration on Media Education**

UNESCO takes Media literacy seriously!

Already in 1982, UNESCO made a so-called Grunewald Declaration, stating:

“ We live in a world where media are omnipresent: an increasing number of people spend a great deal of time watching television, reading newspapers and magazines, playing records and listening to the radio. In some countries, for example, children already spend more time watching television than they do attending school. ”

“ Rather than condemn or endorse the undoubted power of the media, we need to accept their significant impact and penetration throughout the world as an established fact, and also appreciate their importance as an element of culture in today's world. The role of communication and media in the process of development should not be underestimated, nor the function of media as instruments for the citizen's active participation in society. Political and educational systems need to recognize their obligations to promote in their citizens a critical understanding of the phenomena of communication. ”

In 2007, UNESCO made another declaration in Paris, which you can read above or in full [here](#).