

# Parliament's Kholwane supports and endorses MDDA Media Literacy Summit

Issued by [Media Development and Diversity Agency](#)

24 Apr 2014

Key note address by the chairperson of the portfolio committee on communications, S.E Kholwane, on the occasion of the Media Literacy event.

Programme Director,  
Cllr Mlaudzi,  
Members of the MDDA Board,  
Chief Executive Officer of MDDA, Lumko Mtimde  
Members of Media,  
Learners from various schools,  
Sentech CEO, Prof Somadoda  
Representatives from Departments  
Trainers and Partners  
Local media  
Ladies and Gentlemen

## Programme Director,

Within both academic and policy discourses, the concept of media literacy is being extended from its traditional focus on print and audio-visual media to encompass the internet and other new media. The inclusion of the new media to enhance media literacy addresses three central questions currently facing the public, government, policy-makers and academy: What is media literacy? How is it changing? And what are the uses of literacy? Media literacy is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts.

The outcome is to extend our understanding of media literacy so as to encompass the historically and culturally conditioned relationship among three processes:

- (i) the symbolic and material representation of knowledge, culture and values;
- (ii) the diffusion of interpretative skills and abilities across a (stratified) population; and
- (iii) the institutional, especially, the state management of the power that access to and skilled use of knowledge brings to those who are 'literate'.

### 1. The need for media literacy in the digital age

## Programme Director,

A Kaiser Family Foundation study published in 2012 found that 'Eight- to eighteen-year-olds spend more time with media than in any other activity besides (maybe) sleeping - an average of more than 7.5 hours a day, 7 days a week.' In addition, the 2012 Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism Center's annual State of the Media report found information consumption habits migrating significantly towards digital platforms. One of the largest impacts of the internet today is in the integration of various information types (news, entertainment, and personal communication) and mediums (television, radio, print) into aggregated spaces.

Today's general public is not being equipped with the critical thinking and analysis skills it needs to successfully navigate

our media-saturated environment. Time spent consuming media, continues to increase, but many people often are poorly versed in analysing and understanding different media messages and formats. They prefer to see the world of media messages as simple and straightforward, to be taken at face value, according to recent research in the field of media literacy. While a certain section of the population expresses confidence that media messages have clear primary meanings and sources that can be easily identified, media literacy demands nuanced thinking about message creators as well as their goals and values.

## **Programme Director,**

As policy-makers grapple over how to deploy technology in classrooms through entities like USAASA, I-kamva, Sentech, etc, they should beware of producing generations of students and learners drowning in digital devices without enough good ideas about what to do with them! Therefore, the emergence of the modern media literacy movement in the early 1990s, of scholars and educators who have struggled to define the field and establish standards for what it means to be media literate should be assisted in its work. The MDDA should occupy this space and work towards establishing standards for what it means to be media literate in the context of South Africa!

A growing body of research, published in the *Journal of Media Literacy Education and Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, finds support for the idea that young people, while sometimes fluent in technologies used in and out of the classroom, often struggle to decipher media messages. But what exactly should students and the majority of the South African population learn and what are the best methods for teaching media literacy? How can labour unions working with the Department of Basic Education through teachers know when they have been effective? How can government in all the three tiers help citizens become motivated and engaged rather than disaffected and cynical?

"To be ready for college, workforce training and life in a technological society, people need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesise, report on and create a high volume and extensive range of print and non-print texts in media forms old and new."

## **Programme Director,**

A range of different disciplinary approaches to media literacy exists, as media education scholar Renee Hobbs described. Some scholars and educators focus on "information literacy," with attention to technical and research skills, the use of digital tools, including video and photo editing, online search engines, identifying keywords and developing hypotheses. A different approach known as "critical literacy" includes a focus on social and political contexts and can be understood to include differences between South African and other media systems, economic imperatives, media ownership and control issues, and the techniques used by media marketers. Both approaches are essential, but research suggests that the majority of the population isn't getting enough of the latter approach, which can be seen as a means for improving not only individual media consumption goals but also for improving citizenship and the conditions of democracy.

Stuart Ewen at Hunter College suggested that media literacy should be viewed as "an education in techniques that can democratise the realm of public expression and will magnify the possibility of meaningful public interactions." Lisa McLaughlin, criticised traditional media education, noting that "critical pedagogy seeks to move beyond the mere description of the status quo and to offer new ways of thought and practice that provide people with new 'ways of seeing,' with the goal that they might become empowered to form their own challenges in the arena of public life."

Other media activists and scholars have suggested that media literacy is necessary because media corporations have not done their part to serve the public interest. In these theoretical contexts, media literacy requires much more than the use of digital tools to navigate the media landscape; technological savvy must be accompanied by informed critical analysis.

Helping young and old South Africans develop their media literacy should be the goal of everyone, politicians, teachers, parents, researchers, administrators and policy-makers. We should work together to make it easier for all people to navigate the changing media landscape and build skills that will last a lifetime. Media literacy should continue to be incorporated into primary, secondary and higher education curricula, and teachers should continue to find ways to

emphasise media literacy in their own classrooms. Three key points can be used immediately by teachers, institutions like the MDDA over the long term in the curriculum development process.

## **2. Mindful Media Consumption**

### **Programme Director,**

Previous theoretical and empirical research suggests that critical thinking and conscious processing of information are important components of media literacy. The emphasis of broadcasting media (radio and television) on speed and immediacy has an ideological effect on news production. Because news is a commodity that is both expensive to gather and distribute, poorer countries are often driven by economic and technological constraints to buy 'white news' of themselves or of their neighbours.

Meehan's argument is that the commodification process means that only established multinational corporations based in first world countries have the fiscal and technological expertise to process news into tight satellite packages that are sold to all corners of the world. The implications are that the news that reaches the rest of the world has been selected according to the interests and perspective of that particular media corporation or its country of origin.

Therefore the majority of the population, especially young people, must be taught to be active and mindful in their media consumption rather than relying on automatic processing habits. This means asking questions about media content rather than accepting messages at face value. This also means being an active consumer of information and making conscious consumption decisions rather than passively consuming whatever is most easily and readily available. All people should learn to develop and articulate their own personal goals for consuming media content, and they should be able to assess whether those goals are being met by the content they consume.

## **3. Media System Knowledge**

### **Programme Director,**

It's certainly important to be able to evaluate media content, but doing so requires structural knowledge of how the media system operates. Research suggests that many people know little about the economic realities of media such as the roles of advertising, profit orientations and ownership issues. The general public should also learn about content formats and frames, including knowledge of media routines that influence the message construction process. Media effects constitute another important knowledge area. Some people seem to instinctively understand the potential effects of the disconnect between media representations and reality, but most need active instruction in this area.

## **4. Individual Responsibility**

### **Programme Director,**

It's easy to blame media for their faults and shortcomings, but it's more important that people know how to take responsibility for their media consumption. People who do so are better able to determine whether they receive credible information and whether they become accurately informed. People who understand their role in making consumption choices and are aware of the need to examine diverse sources are more likely to be appropriately skeptical of media content. The challenge for many South Africans should be to learn to connect their consumption behaviors with their knowledge about media systems and structures. Only then can they be in control of their individual message consumption and processing.

As media scholar Marshall McLuhan famously pointed out, humans live in constructed media environments as unconsciously as fish in water. Media literacy institutions like the MDDA must help the majority of the population, especially those living in rural areas, to understand and analyse media constructions of reality, which sometimes offer incomplete or inaccurate portrayals of the world we live in. Perhaps the MDDA should request additional allocation from Parliament for the

purposes of media literacy education which begins with awareness and analysis but culminates in reflection and engagement. The ultimate goal of media literacy is empowerment.

There are a number of wrongs which have surfaced through the media - recent research has shown that exposure to the ideal thin standard of female beauty commonly presented in advertising and the broader media contributes to body image disturbance among women. Researchers have proposed that social comparison processes underlie this phenomenon; women may routinely compare their bodies with images of feminine beauty contained in the media and consequently become less satisfied with their own bodies.

In addition, socio-cultural factors are also thought to play a central role in the promotion of and maintenance of eating disorders. These socio-cultural pressures include the ultra-slender ideal body image (or thin-ideal) espoused for women in western cultures, the centrality of appearance for women's societal success. According to the socio-cultural model of bulimia, eating disorders are a product of the increasing pressures for women in our society to achieve an ultra-slender body. The societal obsession with weight is so ubiquitous that a moderate degree of body dissatisfaction is currently normative among women.

## 4. In Conclusion

A starting point for discussion is the recognition that promoting and enhancing media literacy across South Africa and Africa, for child and adult populations, is of growing importance, in a context of digital media convergence and a highly complex media and information ecology. Without efforts to enhance media literacy, South African citizens have much to lose. We must emulate what Europe has done, through a media literacy research and policy held on 13 September 2013.

- It should be acknowledged that media literacy remained difficult to define, thus making it difficult to locate within policy and funding frameworks, because of its wide relevance to the mediation of politics, commerce, work and private life. Strategically, there are advantages in formulating a focused agenda to incentivise politicians and other policy-makers to lobby for media literacy initiatives and funding;
- In addition to the multiple interacting layers of geography, culture, politics, economy, regulatory frameworks and education, the fast-changing media environment and the competing priorities regarding children's rights internationally further complicate implementation of media literacy efforts. Yet these same factors mean that policy-makers are open to proposals to advance the media literacy agenda;
- Policy-makers, entities like the MDDA and researchers should focus on reformulating their approach, often refocussing on the challenges of locating media education in particular formal, semi-formal and informal educational settings. It is a challenge in this regard that education is largely a matter for MDDA rather than directed by the private sector, NGOs, media companies, CBOs etc;
- There is a need to build partnerships with education and to focus efforts on the development of curricula and training. Once implemented, such initiatives should be evaluated, which occurs far too rarely. Evaluations enable sharing best practice and learning lessons from problems encountered; they also provide case studies to advocate for further interventions and funding.
- Measuring media literacy in other countries has proved contentious, especially as regards the development of comparable, standardised indices. However, some advances in approach and measures were evident, with a growing collection of measures for media literacy that included not only access but also critical and creative engagement, also allowing for the relation between contexts and literacy levels. South Africa must learn from countries who have already done this exercise, especially the US.
- There must be a master plan or sketch towards an action plan for media literacy in the country. This should prioritise a focus on empowerment, to embrace a positive view of media literacy rather than one centred on the risk and safety agenda, so as to motivate a wider array of experts and others to participate in promoting media literacy. It should also

recognise that since the media environment fundamentally changes people's lives, government through the MDDA and others should think bigger-seeing media literacy on the same level as reading, writing and calculating, and pursuing a broader education campaign rather than thinking of media literacy as a simple tool or optional add-on.

I thank you.

- **Deadline looms for MDDA-Sanlam Local Media Awards entries for 2014** 23 Jan 2015
- **MDDA-Sanlam Local Media Awards entries for 2014 now open** 26 Nov 2014
- **Entries open for MDDA-Sanlam Local Media Awards** 25 Nov 2014
- **Mandla Langa acknowledges 20 years of media freedom and diversity** 28 May 2014
- **MDDA-Sanlam Local Media Awards winners announced** 27 May 2014

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