Media literacy: A foundational skill for cultural diplomats

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Article Information

Abstract

This article argues that media literacy constitutes a foundational skill for cultural diplomacy practitioners, navigating today's diplomatic landscape that is a complex of global communications. The author examines how twenty-first-century media environments present both opportunities for cross-cultural engagement and challenges of disinformation, echo chambers, and artificial intelligence (AI) manipulation. The article defines media literacy as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication, emphasising its role in developing critical thinking skills and empathy essential for intercultural competence. The author presents the Center for Media Literacy's framework of 'Five Key Questions and Core Concepts', demonstrating how this evidence-based approach can enhance cultural diplomacy effectiveness — helping practitioners understand message construction, audience reception, embedded values, and communication purposes. The study showcases practical applications through UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy Alliance and Fulbright's NATO Security Studies Award, illustrating how international organisations integrate media literacy into cultural exchange programs. The author concludes that media literacy skills transcend borders and cultures, supporting global communication, connection, and innovation in an increasingly interconnected world.

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Introduction

Today's media environment is a dynamic global village that encourages more people than ever to raise their voices and be heard. It is also a chaotic landscape of echo chambers ripe with harmful disinformation propagated by those with commercial or political agendas. It's both, and everything in between, and for diplomatic interests is made more complex by its uneven distribution and reach into the Global South.

Managing both the positive and negative aspects of globalized communication is not unique to a single country or culture. It touches everyone. The need for a deeper awareness of media messages and what lies behind them, as well as a more objective view of how we are representing ourselves when we communicate across cultures, is communal. It is also crucial for attaining intercultural competence – the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions. (Deardorff 2006)

On the positive side, the twenty-first century media landscape enables cultural diplomacy practitioners, scholars, and citizens to share values, culture, and traditions with the world anytime, anywhere — at least, in principle. State and non-state actors have a variety of means to get their messages out through global online sharing via social media, online streaming, YouTube videos and even videogames that reach international audiences. This helps nations and individuals to encourage economic development through increased interest in tourism, local foods and imported goods and services. It can also bridge cultural divides by increasing understanding and empathy towards nations' customs, religions, and ideas.

However, there are clear negative consequences from the onslaught of media messages with few professional gatekeepers to ensure accuracy. International interference in election processes, misinformation about important healthcare issues, and algorithms that support existing biases instead of exposing us to others with differing points of view lead to serious, and sometimes even life-threatening consequences. The future holds even more questions, as artificial intelligence, deepfakes and more "humanlike" chatbots explode onto the media scene. Also, familiarity with others' customs and values can sometimes breed contempt as opposed to empathy and understanding. (Norton 2007)

Both state and non-state actors are turning to media literacy and critical thinking skills to underpin successful cultural diplomacy efforts in an age of globalised media, algorithms, and artificial intelligence. Intercultural exchanges are including media literacy and offering international participants an evidence-based framework that helps them to understand and analyze messages, identify embedded values, and build empathy for audiences that may perceive communications and experiences in ways different from themselves. Not only are these skills crucial to cultural diplomacy efforts, but they are also necessary for life in a globalized world where messages can reach citizens nearly anytime and from almost anywhere.

Defining Media Literacy

Many organisations have put forth definitions of media literacy. At its core, media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication. (NAMLE n.d.) This includes, but is not limited to, traditional print media such as newspapers and magazines, digital content like websites and blogs, audio-visual materials like videos and films, and interactive platforms such as social media and video games. In practice, media literacy is a process of inquiry. It is knowing what questions to ask to wisely make up one's own mind about what media messages to engage with, how to represent oneself in media, and understanding one's relationship to the media. The tools we use to create media messages change constantly. Media literacy's process of inquiry does not. Media literacy skills are closely related to critical thinking skills, in that they are based upon informed inquiry. While these skills have always been important, they are even more so in the twenty-first century, when media messages travel fast, internationally, and

ubiquitously. The most democratic way to address this challenge is teaching citizens to be wiser information consumers and producers through critical thinking and a pedagogy that empowers them to evaluate, analyze, and choose critically whether to act on information. (Jolls June 2018) Media literacy skills have always been important, but they are crucial now, as internet, social media, and now artificial intelligence has made it possible for anyone to become a citizen journalist (Dangerfield n.d.) In our increasingly media-driven world, the ability to navigate various types of media is critical for informed citizenship and active participation in society.

Critical thinking skills and empathy building are a natural outcomes of media literacy, and they serve cultural diplomacy and international exchange initiatives. Critical thinking demands approaching a problem by first becoming aware of one's own values, biases, and cultural perspectives. These are not skills that human beings are born with – they require education and practice. Although it is arguable whether empathy can be taught, or if it is innate, cultivating empathy is possible. (Abramson 2021) With media literacy, message receivers and creators are taught to consider the values, customs, and points of view of message authors and target audiences. Critical thinking and empathy building are transferable across all contexts. Media literacy education has attracted attention from international organizations, and even military institutions across the globe. NATO offers a media literacy-based Fulbright award. (Program 2024) UNESCO promotes an annual Global Media and Media Information Literacy Week (UNESCO 2024) and brings global media literacy educators and practitioners together through its Media and Information Literacy Alliance (UNESCO, Media and Infromation Literacy Alliance n.d.). The US State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) often includes media literacy workshops for journalists and educators who come to the US during their exchange program (Affairs 2024).

International relations and public diplomacy scholars across the globe are finding that media messages and media literacy's critical

interpretation of them are more impactful to their fields now than ever before. Today's wars are fought with information, and not just bullets and bombs (Seib 2021) with winners increasingly determined by who is the best persuasive storyteller. Today's citizens should be equipped with skills to be the first line of defense against malicious media content and be prepared to be risk managers. (T. Jolls, Building Resiliency: Media Literacy as a Strategic Defense Strategy for NATO Countries 2022)

Berents and Duncombe illustrate the popular power of visuals. Since the 'Arab Spring' (from 2010), it is commonplace to understand the visual as an essential dimension of perception and communication: "Visuals are powerful mediators of global political events. Images, moving and still alike, are significant objects that play a role in shaping our understanding of international affairs. Through their multiple interpretations, these visuals can both represent reality and condition how we understand it. Within International Relations, there has been a growing attention to the visual, with explorations of a wide range of theoretical concerns and empirical focuses." (Berents 2020)

A.N Hazeae of San'a University in Yemen outlines how different international relations perspectives frame media literacy and the English language regarding world issues (WIs): "The objectivist position deals with WIs as neutral discourse shared among humanity and distributed through English as an international language and educational media. The ideologist position treats creative media literacy as relations of power between global and local identities in the form of competing discourses associated with WIs. The rhetorical position reveals the hidden strategies used in global media discourse and English as a global language. The social constructionist position provides three levels of analysis for creative media literacy among university students: textual analysis, discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis." (Hazaea 2021)

Hasan Saliu of Kolegji AAB in Kosovo expands upon earlier research on media diplomacy and finds:

"…The new concept of digital media diplomacy… represents a specific contribution to political communication. Indeed, going beyond traditional communication channels, it makes foreign policy more agile and more dynamic. It has removed barriers of traditional diplomatic communications, allowing a two-way exchange of messages even between countries that may not have friendly relations." (Saliu 2022)

These three quotations illustrate three notable and distinct approaches to media literacy's role in international relations. Together, Berents and Duncombe and Hazeae focus on the power of visuals and language in international relations. Media literacy is a crucial tool for further examination of the power of both, especially as AI and other digital technologies become increasingly adept at generating and manipulating both images and words. (Gu J 2022) Saliu looks at the digital side of diplomacy and political communications. With dynamic two-way communication between countries and foreign citizens, media literacy skills provide a foundation for understanding the meaning, inherent values and perspectives of messages that come from cross-border communicators.

Overall, there is a need for additional research on media literacy and critical thinking skills in terms of how they impact and support the fields and practices of international relations and public diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy practitioners and initiatives in particular can benefit from more decerning message producers and consumers who are skilled in analysing media messages and the values and points of view of foreign publics.

What Media Literacy Is Not

It is essential to clarify what media literacy is not to foster a more accurate understanding of its purpose. Teaching media literacy in schools has been "spotty" at best, and misperceptions about it abound.
—Media bashing is not media literacy; however, media literacy sometimes involves criticising the media.

—Media literacy is not just fact checking. It also illuminates the context of messages.
—Media production alone is not media literacy. (Although media literacy includes media production).
—Teaching with media is not media literacy. It also includes teaching about media.
—Media literacy does not mean 'don't watch or use.' It means 'use carefully, think critically."
—Media literacy does not involve telling others what or how to believe. It is based on a process of inquiry or questioning so that everyone can make their own informed decisions.
—Media Literacy is not only critical thinking: Critical thinking is a component of media literacy, but it also includes practical skills involving creation and engagement with media.
—The ability to use technology is not media literacy: media literacy is not limited to understanding digital tools or platforms. It includes all media forms, and the a deeper understanding of ones relationship to media.
—Media literacy is not only passive consumption of media: it involves analysing, questioning, and participating in media narratives and not simply accepting them.

Five Key Questions and Core Concepts

The Center for Media Literacy (CML, USA), a pioneer in the media literacy field that provides leadership, public education, professional development and evidence-based educational resources nationally and internationally (Literacy, Center for Media Literacy n.d.), developed 'Five Key Questions and Five Core Concepts' (T. Jolls 2005) that form an evidence-based framework for media literacy. Because the framework is scalable, transferable, and easily applied to media messaging in nearly any culture or context, it is a natural fit for learning media literacy within the context of cultural diplomacy. CML has developed Key Questions and Core Concepts for both message receivers and message producers. They form the bases for a process of inquiry that is aligned with the questions that must be asked when considering what is needed for effective and culturally appropriate cultural diplomacy initiatives.

CML Key Question #1

For receivers: Who created this message?
For Producers: What am I authoring?
Core Concept: All media is constructed (by someone).

Whether watching YouTube videos, viewing the nightly news, or even catching sight of a slogan on a T-shirt worn by a passerby, all the messages we see and hear are created by someone. Even AI-generated content is based upon data that was originally created by a person or group of people. What we see (or don't see) reflected in messages are reflective of choices made by the author or authors. For example, some words are spoken, and others are edited out. If one picture is selected, dozens may have been rejected. If an ending to a story is written a particular way, other endings may not have been explored. (Literacy, MediaLit Kit 2005)

Consideration of culture is critical when engaging in deeper analysis of the identity of message creators, as well as when we create messages that will be seen by intercultural audiences. Every creator brings their own values, cultural norms, beliefs, and biases to their messages. Because there are no unbiased human beings (we are all influenced by our experiences, beliefs, and values) there are no completely unbiased messages. Key Question and Core Concept #1 invites intercultural scholars and practitioners to go beyond the obvious content of a message and take a deeper look into who the message maker is, including how their cultural background and values can influence the meaning of their message.

CML Key Question #2

For Receivers: What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
For Producers: Does my message reflect understanding of format, creativity, and technology?
Core Concept: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

Why does Coca-Cola use red in its logo? Why do horror movies use "scary" music? Why do some politicians use inflammatory language? Although these questions may seem diverse, they all have the same answer – to attract the attention of those whom they hope will engage with their message.

To earn the attention of a targeted audience in a world where we are bombarded with persuasive messaging daily is no easy task. It requires strategic thinking, as well as creative talent. While the words, pictures, and other symbols that storytellers rely upon to get their messages across has, to a certain extent, always been targeted towards a certain group of consumers, today's data driven mode of reaching a target audience takes place on a granular and intimate level. (Claxton 2021). The kind of data collection technology that is common today is new to human history. It allows for collection of information about who we are, what we like and dislike, what is on our minds, what we are purchasing, and where we have been. Entities can buy this data without our knowledge or consent. This empowers commercial, political and other enterprises to create ads or other messaging that is uniquely personal and effective to their target an audience's thinking and emotions. (Johnsen 2020) Some scholars call this technique for capturing an audience's attention "surveillance capitalism". (Zuboff 2019) Globally, discussions about privacy and ownership of the data has led to legislation to protect consumers. According to UN Trade and Development, 137 out of 194 countries have put into place some kind of legislation to secure the protection of data and privacy. (UNCTAD, 2021) But surveillance capitalism techniques are still widely used.

As cultural diplomacy scholars and practitioners work to foster understanding between cultures, CMLs Key Question #2 provokes more specific questions to consider when choosing which techniques to use or abandon when aiming to attract a foreign audiences' attention. Does the artwork I am displaying include symbolism that will be clear to my audience? Will the language spoken in a video be understood in another nation, or is translation necessary? Will the song that I am using to capture an overseas population's attention foster mutual understanding, or is its message murky to an

overseas audience? It also invites contemplation about the ethical aspects of techniques communicators use. Some of the questions that arise are: Does this technique violate the privacy of the audience I intend to reach? Do I need a license to use a piece of music so that it is fair to the artist? Am I violating any copyright laws? This further investigation and critical thinking is cultivated through a media literacy framework.

CML Key Question #3
For Receivers: How might different people understand this message differently?
For Producers: Is my message engaging and compelling for my target audience?
Core Concept: Different people experience the same message differently.

This key question and core concept is not only a tenet of media literacy, but also central to successful cultural diplomacy. The human mind is made up of individual experiences, values, customs, tastes, and biases. Where we are brought up, by whom, our level of education, the joys, and the traumas we've experienced in our lives are all part of the kaleidoscope of attributes that make up who we are. This means that different individuals can have vastly different responses to the same stimuli.

This "trick question" serves as an example: You and your friend go to see a movie. Do you see the same movie? The answer is – sort of. You see the same content. You hear the actors saying the same lines. You see the same images cross the screen. You experience the same sound effects, editing, and lighting choices. So, why is it that you can leave the movie thinking that it was a great show, and your friend can believe it was blatantly awful? Because media messages do not stand alone. We bring ourselves to messages. How we see the world and the words and pictures in it is colored by the very same aspects that make us who we are.

Because cultural diplomacy relies heavily on music, dance, film, art, exhibitions, exchanges, and intercultural dialogue, careful consideration through the lens of CML's Key Questions #3 is foundational to successfully conveying a positive

experience of a nation's culture to a foreign audience. There are many examples of images and visuals that are perceived very differently depending upon culture. In most Western cultures, images of cows convey a rural atmosphere and dairy production. In Hindu culture in India, cows are sacred and represents wealth, strength, and abundance. (Newsweekly 2014) The word "gift" in English represents a generous offering. In German, the word "gift" means poison.

When working cross-culturally, consider not just what you are saying, but how your target audience hears it. That starts with listening to them – long known as "Lesson One" of public diplomacy. (Cull 2010) Failing to listen to your target audience can undermine your efforts and successful implementation and make it impossible to truly know how your audience may understand your message differently.

CML Key Question #4
For Receivers: What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message?
For Producers: Have I clearly and consistently framed values lifestyles and points of view in my content?
Core Concept: Media have embedded values and points of view.

Whether it's transparent or opaque, intentional, or unintentional, all media messages include the author's values and points of view. While some values and points of view are included, others are omitted. For example: A bathing suit ad on Instagram shows tan, blonde, fit, young women smiling on the beach next to her surfboard. Some points of view that are included in this message are: Youth, fitness, leisure, and "California girl" living that coincides with images so many have seen on television and films. Some values and points of view that are omitted are diversity of race, ability, age, religious modestly values, and urban and rural living. These inclusions and omissions may be intentional, as the bathing suit company seeks to promote its product to a very targeted audience that is most likely to buy their bathing suits. It can also be accidental if the owner

of the bathing suit company simply included people in the ad that look and live like they do. The key is awareness. Media literacy invites critical thinking about what values and points of view are included and omitted with the audience in mind. It urges more intentional inclusions and omissions, and fewer accidental ones. This is crucial to achieve cultural diplomacy's aim of increasing soft power through sharing of values in a positive and constructive way and supporting overall policy goals. When working with foreign audiences, it is particularly important to be aware that a message maker's values and points of view could be very different from the audience they intend to reach. They may be accustomed and accepting to very different emotional and persuasive techniques based upon those values. For example, a people from a culture that values modest dress would be less likely to be persuaded by visual messages that include models wearing revealing clothing. Listening to that audience and learning about their customs, beliefs and ways of living is crucial prior to creating media messaging intended for them. It is just as important to also to consider hear and see the messages your audiences creates knowing that the values and beliefs represented make be very different from your own.

CML Key Questions #5
For Receivers: Why is this message being sent?
For Producers: Have I communicated my purpose effectively?
Core Concept: Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

Most media messages are organised to gain profit and/or power. That can bring to mind messaging created by nefarious actors such as dishonest politicians looking for votes, or corporate advertisers that seeks to sell consumers items and services that they don't need at inflated prices. But it is a mistake to assume that the purposes of media messages are always malicious or based upon blatant greed. A public service announcement made by an NGO that encourages people to give up smoking is organized to gain power in that it aims to change people's behavior. But when that message effectively reaches its audience, it is usually considered healthy for both

individuals and societies. A social media post that promotes a fundraising campaign to help people who have lived through a natural disaster asks people to contribute money. But it would not be considered a message based upon greed, so long as the funds are used for the stated reason. The purpose of a message can be either constructive or destructive, depending upon its content and how it is received by the audience (which brings its own values, beliefs, and points of view to the message.)

Cultural diplomacy "reveals the soul of a nation" for the purpose of creating influence and enhancing national security. (Diplomacy 2005) It is soft power in that it uses the influential and appealing aspects of a nation to gain power through attraction rather than coercion. But soft power is, at its core, power — power to change behavior and opinions that lead to a nation or non-state actor to achieve its goals and objectives. Through the lens of CML Key Question #5, cultural diplomacy also has economic motives. Sharing the food, art, exports, and customs of a nation through cultural diplomacy initiatives can drive financial gain in the form of increased tourism, economic partnerships with foreign individuals and businesses, and gaining overseas customers who purchase a nation's goods and services.

Ultimately, media messaging is organised around power and profit in the same way as cultural diplomacy. Let's take a closer look at a familiar sentence: "This program has been brought to you by the sponsor." That is often heard when watching a program on television. On the surface, it implies that the sponsor (usually a commercial enterprise) is graciously bringing the gift of the program to the viewers to enjoy. Now let's make the sentence more accurate: "YOU have been brought to the sponsor by this program." What's really happening is that the viewers are brought to the sponsor, who has paid for advertising rights, by the attractiveness and entertainment value of the program. Nations implementing cultural diplomacy initiatives compared to these sponsors, attracting foreign audiences to them using attractive experiences.

Media Literacy and Cultural Diplomacy Working Together

The Fulbright Program and UNESCO are two multi-national organisations – familiar in the cultural diplomacy field – that have incorporated media literacy in their programming. They offer learning opportunities, exchanges, and multi-national conferences that advance the field of media literacy globally and promote best practices for media literacy educators and practitioners throughout the world.

UNESCO Media and Information Literacy Alliance

UNESCO launched the Media and Information Literacy Alliance (MIL Alliance – formerly known as Global Alliance for Partnerships on Media and Information Literacy-GAPMIL) during the Global Forum for Partnerships on Media and Information Literacy, which took place from 26 to 28 June 2013, in Abuja, Nigeria. Its purpose was to enable the media and information literacy community to speak as one voice on certain critical matters, particularly as it relates to policies (Alliance 2022), and foster media and information literate societies through international cooperation and partnerships. (UNESCO, UNESCO launches Media and Information Literacy Alliance 2.0 2020) Today, the Alliance has more than 600 members from 110 countries, divided into five regional chapters, representing Africa, the Arab States, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America and Europe (Alliance, Regional Chapters 2022). Members of the MIL Alliance range from media literacy educators to university-based research organizations to policy makers, such as the European Commission Directorate General for Education and Culture. (Commission n.d.) The members work regionally and across regions to foster international collaboration to advance media and information literacy for citizens across the globe.

UNESCO's overall mission is to contribute to the building of a culture of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication, and information. (Youth n.d.) UNESCO's promotion of media literacy through the MIL Alliance is well aligned with the 'intercultural dialogue' portion of its mission. The Alliance sponsors a wide range of programs and activities where international media literacy professionals and youth interested in the topic exchange ideas and best practices. A Media and Information Literacy Conference takes place in a different country each year, where MIL Alliance members share information, insights, and resources with their peers from around the world, to raise awareness and communicate about the progress achieved towards media and information literacy for all. A Global Media and Information Week happens each year from October 24-31. There, to mobile worldwide stakeholders (UNESCO, Global Media and Information Literacy Week 2024)

Fulbright NATO Security Studies Award

The Fulbright Program is designed to expand and strengthen relationships between people of the United States and citizens of other nations, and to promote international understanding and cooperation. Funded by a partnership between the NATO Public Diplomacy Division and the Fulbright Commission in Brussels, the NATO Securities Studies Award invites American academics and professionals to conduct a research or professional project that fosters awareness and understanding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (Program, NATO Security Studies 2024) In 2022, the award was received by Tessa Jolls, president of the US-based Center for Media Literacy, which works with affiliated organizations on four continents. As a Fulbright scholar, Jolls' interviewed 60 policy makers, media executives, journalists and media literacy researchers and practitioners throughout the Transatlantic. The aim was to have Jolls give an overview of the state of media literacy and media literacy education in an era where the field is being recognized as an important global discipline. (T. Jolls, Building Resilency: Media Literacy as a Strategic Defense Strategy for the Transatlantic 2022)

While NATO's purpose for sponsoring such an

award was clearly defense oriented. (Media literacy as citizen resiliency to serve international defense objectives, such as countering foreign meddling in information spaces.), Fulbright's participation was in the interest of cultural diplomacy. As Jolls completed her tasks, she served as a citizen diplomate for the United States through her leadership in her field. As she conducted her interviews, US and international culture and values surrounding the field of media literacy were shared.

Through the international cooperation that the Fulbright-NATO Security Studies Award provided in 2022, the report 'Building Resiliency: Media Literacy as Strategic Defense Strategy for the Transatlantic' was created. It provided a comprehensive look at where media literacy fits as a strategic defense priority.

Conclusion

Cultural diplomacy rests upon the exchange of information, ideas, and values, and media literacy is foundational to that. Its basis is informed inquiry about the nature and context of messages, and a process for analysing where and who they come from. These skills are critical for forming collaborative intercultural relationships that foster mutual understanding, because they ask us to stop, listen, and then interpret what we see, hear and experience.

Media literacy as a theme for intercultural exchange is taking hold. Although educators, students, policy makers, and journalists are most likely to participate in media literacy exchanges, the benefits are much further reaching. Healthcare professionals utilize media literacy to evaluate and communicate about facts and myths related to health; it supports statisticians who evaluate the reliability of data; social media influencers leverage it to create posts that make powerful impacts.

Technology has created a whole new media world — one that was beyond imagination just a couple of generations ago. The need for media literacy skills to navigate it transcends boarders and cultures. It can support our global village as we face challenges posed by a changing media environment, and increase our capacity to communicate, connect, and innovate.

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