CML's Five Core Concepts and Key Questions for Consumers: Media Deconstruction Framework

Key Question #1:	Who created this message?
Core Concept #1:	All media messages are constructed.

We should not think of media texts (newspaper articles, TV shows, video games, comic books to name just a few) as "natural" things. Media texts are built just as surely as buildings and highways are built. The building materials involved vary from one kind of text to another. In a magazine, for example, there are words in different sizes and typefonts, photographs, colors, layout and page location. TV and movies have hundreds of building blocks—from camera angles and lighting to music and sound effects.

What this means is that whether we are watching the nightly news or passing a billboard on the street, the media message we experience was written by someone (or probably several people), pictures were taken and a creative designer put it all together. But this is more than a physical process. What happens is that whatever is "constructed" by just a few people then becomes "normalized" for the rest of us; like the air we breathe, it gets taken for granted and usually goes unquestioned. But as the audience, we don't get to see or hear the words, pictures or arrangements that were rejected. We only see, hear or read what was accepted!

The success of media texts depends upon their apparent naturalness; we turn off a production that looks "fake." But the truth is, it's all fake—even the news! That doesn't mean we can't still enjoy a movie, watch TV or listen to music. The goal of this question is not to make us cynical but simply to expose the complexities of media's "constructedness" and thus create the critical distance we need to be able to ask other important questions.

Keyword:	Authorship
Guiding Questions:	• What kind of "text" is it? • What are the various elements (building blocks) that make up the whole? • How similar or different is it to others of the same genre? • Which technologies are used in its creation? • How would it be different in a different medium? • What choices were made that might have been made differently? • How many people did it take to create this message? What are their various jobs?

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Key Question #2:	What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
Core Concept #2:	Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

Each form of communication—whether newspapers, TV game shows or horror movies—has its own creative language: scary music heightens fear, camera close-ups convey intimacy, big headlines signal significance. Understanding the grammar, syntax and metaphor system of media language, especially the language of sounds and visuals which can reach beyond the rational to our deepest emotional core, increases our appreciation and enjoyment of media experiences as well as helps us to be less susceptible to manipulation.

One of the best ways to understand how media are put together is to do just that—make a video, create a website, develop an ad campaign about a community issue. The more real world the project is, the better. Digital cameras and computer authoring programs provide easy ways to integrate creative production projects in any subject area. In addition the four major arts disciplines—music, dance, theatre and the visual arts—can also provide a context through which one gains skills of analysis, interpretation and appreciation along with opportunities for self-expression and producing a message for an audience.

Keyword:	Format

Guiding Questions:	• *What do you notice…*(about the way the message is constructed?)
	  » Colors and shapes?
	  » Sound effects? Music? Silence? Dialogue or Narration?
	  » Props, sets, clothing?
	  » Movement? Composition?
	  » Lighting?
	• Where is the camera? What is the viewpoint?
	• How is the story told? What are people doing?
	• Are there any visual symbols or metaphors?
	• What's the emotional appeal? Persuasive devices?
	• What makes it seem "real"?

CML's Five Core Concepts and Key Questions for Consumers: Media Deconstruction Framework

Key Question #3:	How might different people understand this message differently?
Core Concept #3:	Different people experience the same media message differently.

Audiences play a role in interpreting media texts because each audience member brings to the media text a unique set of life experiences (age, gender, education, cultural upbringing, etc.) which, when applied to the text—or combined *with* the text—create unique interpretations. A veteran, for example, brings a different set of experiences to a war movie than any other audience member—resulting in a different reaction to the film as well as, perhaps, greater insight. Even parents and children watching TV together do not "see" the same program.

This concept turns the tables on the idea of TV viewers or internet users as just passive "couch potatoes." We may not be conscious of it but each of us, even toddlers, are constantly trying to "make sense" of what we see, hear or read. The more questions we can ask about what we are experiencing around us, the more alert we can be about accepting or rejecting messages. Research indicates that, over time, children of all ages can learn age-appropriate skills that give them a new set of glasses with which they can "read" and interpret their media culture.

Keyword:	Audience
Guiding Questions:	• Have you ever experienced anything like this? • How close does it come to what you experienced in real life? • What did you learn from this media text? What did you learn *about yourself* from experiencing the media text? • What did you learn from other people's responses—and their experiences? • How many other interpretations could there be? How could we hear about them? • How can you explain the different responses? • Are other viewpoints just as valid as mine?

CML's Five Core Concepts and Key Questions for Consumers: Media Deconstruction Framework

Key Question #4:	What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
Core Concept #4:	Media have embedded values and points of view.

Media, because they are constructed, carry a subtext of who and what is important—at least to the person or persons creating the construction. Media are also storytellers (even commercials tell a quick and simple story) and stories require characters and settings and a plot that has a beginning, a middle and an end. The choice of a character's age, gender or race mixed in with the lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors that are portrayed, the selection of a setting (urban? rural? affluent? poor?), and the actions and re-actions in the plot are just some of the ways that values become "embedded" in a TV show, a movie or an ad.

It is important to learn how to "read" all kinds of media messages in order to discover the points of view that are embedded in them and how to assess them as part of the text rather than merely accepting them as "natural." Only then can we judge whether to accept or reject a message. Being able to recognize and name *missing* perspectives is also a critical skill as we negotiate our way each day through our mediated environment.

Keyword:	Content
Guiding Questions:	- How is the human person characterized? What kinds of behaviors / consequences are depicted? - What type of person is the reader / watcher / listener invited to identify with? - What questions come to mind as you watch / read / listen? - What ideas or values are being "sold" in this message? - What political or economic ideas are communicated in the message? - What judgments or statements are made about how we treat other people? - What is the overall worldview? - Are any ideas or perspectives left out? How would you find what's missing?

CML's Five Core Concepts and Key Questions for Consumers: Media Deconstruction Framework

Key Question #5:	**Why is this message being sent?**
Core Concept #5:	**Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.**

Much of the world's media were developed as money-making enterprises and continue to operate today as commercial businesses. Newspapers and magazines lay out their pages with ads first; the space remaining is devoted to news. Likewise, commercials are part and parcel of most TV watching. What many people do not know is that what's really being sold through commercial media is not just the advertised products to the audience—but also the audience to the advertisers!

The *real* purpose of the programs on television, or the articles in a magazine, is to create an audience (and put them in a receptive mood) so that the network or publisher can sell *time* or *space* to sponsors to advertise products—usually in a way that entices us to want what we really don't need! Sponsors pay for the time based on the number of people the producers predict will be watching. And they get a refund if the number of actual viewers or readers turns out to be lower than promised.

But the issue of message motivation has changed dramatically since the Internet became an international platform through which groups and organizations—even individuals—can attempt to persuade others to a particular point of view. The Internet provides numerous reasons for users of all ages to be able to interpret rhetorical devices, verify sources and distinguish legitimate online sources from bogus, hate or 'hoax' websites. And with democracy at stake almost everywhere around the world, citizens in every country need to be equipped with the ability to determine both economic and ideological "spin."

Keyword:	**Purpose**
Guiding Questions:	• Who's in control of the creation and transmission of this message? • Why are they sending it? How do you know? • Who are they sending it to? How do you know? • Who is served by, profits or benefits from the message? The public? Private interests? Individuals? Institutions? • Who wins? Who loses? Who decides? • What economic decisions may have influenced the construction or transmission of the message?

CML's Five Core Concepts and Key Questions for Producers: Media Construction Framework

Key Question #1:	What am I authoring?
Core Concept #1:	All media messages are constructed.

Certain buildings look certain ways for certain reasons. A church looks differently than a house; an office building looks differently than a retail store. Whether someone tells us what type of building it is or not, we recognize the building for what it is due to the way that it's built or put together; the elements that make up the construction of the building cue us as to how the building is used. And someone, or a team of people, decided what those construction elements were going to be and then actually put the building together, piece by piece.

The same is true of media. When we decide to "manufacture" media, we as authors decide what type of building we will make and what construction elements to use so that the building's purpose is recognizable to others. Whether it's an advertisement or a logo, a billboard or a webpage, a video game or a novel, all media constructions exemplify certain characteristics that must be present for the construction to be recognized. Then, these elements are carefully put together to meet the author's specifications, whatever they may be.

Authors, designers, developers and producers—however they are labeled—all create their own media environments, just as builders create physical environments. When we enter or create a media world, we leave the real world behind.

Keyword:	Authorship
Guiding Questions:	• What kind of "text" genre am I creating? • What various elements (building blocks) make up the whole? • How similar or different is it to others of the same genre? • Which technologies am I using to create? What will my medium be? • How would my construction be different in a different medium? • What are my choices? What choices might I make differently? • Have others contributed to this construction? How should they be credited? • Have I respected copyright, trademarks or other intellectual property that I may have used?

CML's Five Core Concepts and Key Questions for Producers: Media Construction Framework

Key Question #2:	Does my message reflect understanding in format, creativity and technology?
Core Concept #2:	Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

Marshall McLuhan famously said the "media is the message." Often, the media determines a great deal about the message. If I am using a cell phone, my message had better be short and compact! If I want my message to resonate with powerful emotions or with compelling facts, I had better be the master of crafting a particular form of message, whether it's entertaining, informing, persuading or participating.

Having a deep knowledge of the arts is also helpful in mastering the creative languages of media construction. Theater requires knowledge of writing and storytelling techniques; dance and motion demand understanding of choreography; music involves knowledge of tempo and instruments and orchestration; visual arts require knowledge of perspective and line and form and color. And technology plays a role, too, because the technology provides the tools and also the environmental constraints in which the tools can be used. In cases like video games or search engines the technology often dictates the form of the message. Before making or breaking the rules, I must first know what the rules are and thoroughly understand the rules.

Keyword:	Format
Guiding Questions:	• What do I want people to notice…or not…(about the way I am constructing my message)? • What technologies am I using? How is my message structure affected? • What techniques stand out the most? Color and shapes? Sound? Silence? Dialogue or Narration? Movement? Composition? Lighting? Texture? Scent? • How am I telling the story? Do I know the storytelling conventions available to me? What storytelling conventions am I using? • When does my message take place? What is the setting or timing of my message? What impact might the setting or timing of my message have on other choices I make? • What visual or verbal, musical or visual symbols or metaphors am I using? • What emotional appeal am I using? • What persuasive devices am I employing? Am I being ethical? • What factual information am I presenting? Are my facts and information accurate? How do I know? • Does my message seem "real?" Why?

CML's Five Core Concepts and Key Questions for Producer: Media Construction Framework

Key Question #3:	Is my message engaging and compelling for my target audience?
Core Concept #3:	Different people experience the same media message differently.

Creative techniques alone are not enough to attract the attention of an audience, because each audience and indeed, each individual is different. The more I know about the audience I am appealing to, the better chance I have of engaging that audience, whether the audience is one person or many. And if the audience is engaged, the audience will feel compelled to take in my message and possibly even view or hear or interact with my entire message, from start to finish.

When I go to see a movie, I never "see" the same movie as my neighbor or friend. I can only see through my own eyes. Yet media appeals to life experiences that we have in common, or otherwise we would have no interest in the message. It is for this reason that advertisers "target" audiences, sometimes to reach the widest audience possible, and sometimes to reach only a select few. But in either case, knowledge of the audience and data about the audience helps provide understanding in reaching the audience efficiently and effectively, hopefully for mutual benefit.

Keyword:	Audience
Guiding Questions:	• Who is the target audience for my message? • What do I know about this person or people? What are some important characteristics about them I should know? • How wide an audience do I want to appeal to? Or how narrow? • Have I respected the need for privacy or confidentiality on the part of my audience? • Have I taken into consideration the appropriateness of my message for special or vulnerable audiences, such as very young children or youth or those disabled? • How might my audience interpret my message and respond to it? • What effect might I anticipate my message having on my audience? Positive, negative, neutral? • Why should my audience care about my message?

CML's Five Core Concepts and Key Questions for Producers: Media Construction Framework

Key Question #4:	Have I clearly and consistently framed values, lifestyles and points of view in my content?
Core Concept #4:	Media have embedded values and points of view.

Because I am me, I always bring myself—my values, my life experience and my points of view—to my message. Yes, I can represent other voices and other viewpoints to the best of my ability, but there is never a way for me to represent all other voices; necessarily, someone or something is always left out. Because I am human, I can only aim to be fair and balanced, or admittedly biased in my viewpoint, but I can never be truly objective or provide perfect information.

Instead, when I present my message to my audience, I am selecting and framing the content that I am presenting according to my own priorities. Perhaps I consider the needs of the audience or perhaps not. The more clearly and consistently I frame and select my content, the more readily my audience can identify the values, lifestyles and points of view I am presenting, and determine whether that frame suits them or not.

Keyword:	Content
Guiding Questions:	• What is my main message? • How am I supporting my main message? What information am I including? What am I leaving out? Why? • Who or what do I invite my audience to identify with through my message? What lifestyles, values and points of view are overt? What are implied? • Have I represented other voices or social groups? Are these representations nuanced or are they stereotypical? • What might the opposition to my message say? Have I treated my opposition with respect? • Have I made appropriate disclosures about conflicts of interest or assumptions? • Have I considered the needs of the "whole" person that I'm relating the message to? If not, are my reasons ethical? • Does my message convey real-life behaviors or consequences? If not, why not? • What is the overall worldview depicted in my message?

CML's Five Core Concepts and Key Questions for Producers: Media Construction Framework

Key Question #5:	Have I communicated my purpose effectively?
Core Concept #5:	Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

If I am going to send a message, I must have a reason or a purpose. Generally, there are three reasons: I want to persuade or influence or inform someone of something, and as a result, I have a power motive (defining power as neutral and in its broadest sense!). Or I want them to buy something that I am selling, and so I have a profit motive. Or perhaps I have a mix of both a profit and a power motive, where I want to sell the world on a new idea and a new product at the same time. These motives are not necessarily good nor bad, but purpose is always present.

Behind media messages there is always intent. Inherently, there is nothing wrong with profit or power; they can be honorable and serve the public good. Is my intent to make the world a better place? Does my message provide mutual benefit for individuals and for the social good, as well? These are questions I must ask of myself.

Keyword:	Purpose
Guiding Questions:	- What is my intent? Whose needs am I trying to satisfy with my message? - Am I primarily entertaining, persuading, informing, or encouraging action and participation as the form of my message? - Who is paying for this message to be constructed and sent? Should I disclose this underwriting for any reason? - Do I want my audience to feel, think or do anything specific as a result of engaging with my message? - How is the audience served by my message? How do I profit or benefit? How does the audience profit by or benefit from my message? - Who wins? Who loses? Who decides? - What economic decisions may have influenced my message and how I constructed or transmitted it? - Have I considered ethical, social and/or legal constraints on achieving my purpose?