



Media Literacy for Learners

By Sikhonzile Ndlovu

“Catch them young,” goes the old adage. When it comes to media, this also holds true. Media makes up a large part of culture and society, both shaping and reflecting issues, perspectives, and attitudes.

Youth in South Africa are a very important part of media consumers. They make up the large majority - 70% - of the population.

These youth find themselves in a very fortunate position as they live in an “information technology” era where they can access information and interact with people globally at the click of a button. However, are these youths enlightened enough to make decisions about their lives? Do they know how to interact with the media or even make their own media?

Gender Links realised there was a gap among youth when it came to media, and in June 2007 launched its first ever Gender and Media Literacy course for young people. The aim of this course was to equip young people with skills to look critically at the media as well as use it to their advantage. This is part of creating an active citizenry that does not passively consume the thousands of media messages that they are subjected to every day.

Gender Links brought together 20 young people from four provinces in South Africa for a week-long course that was to change the way that they look at media forever. These youth, who had never in their lives engaged with the media, saw themselves visit media houses and become part of the news

making process. In a sense, they became activists, as they were able to articulate their views on various issues affecting them.

This is important, especially considering that media is a very powerful tool in shaping a people’s destiny. Like the old saying goes, information is power. Media literacy not only equips youth with critical media skills, but it empowers them to be active citizens. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of our democracy. Audiences can take engage with, and influence, media.

“It is high time that the culture of accepting without questioning stopped. Youth should take control of their lives and use the media for their benefit,” said Ntshiteng Rakgwadi, one of the participants.

In this age, we are bombarded with thousands of media messages that we cannot ignore. For example, almost everyone in South Africa has access to the radio. Television is also accessible to many people. Billboards are everywhere and they communicate many different messages. Cell phones also transmit messages across the globe daily.

Some youth are not passive media consumers. They are very much aware of the gender biases that abound in media. Course participant Kgalalelo Kedijang observed that most media have confined women to the private domain while men remain as powerful figures of authority in the public sphere.



Media Literacy class hard at work.

Credit: Rochelle Davies

During an interview with Kaya FM on the representation of women and men in media, Kedijang was quick to point out that media often presents women in stereotypical ways that limit their potential in life. She observed that media rarely portrays women and girls in challenging positions and roles.

They mostly appear as beauty queens or cooking in the home, while men are represented as powerful and authoritative. She added that girl children are often not aware that they have the same capabilities as boys.

Strategies to ensure that both girls and boys are encouraged to realise their full potential are important. Kedijang applauded the "Cell C Take a girl child to work" initiative, saying that girls are often prejudiced of learning opportunities because of gender imbalances within our societies. Another participant, Tsholofelo Kgosana, noted that empowering girls does not necessarily mean that boys should be ignored.

These young people also expressed a desire to create their own media in their respective provinces. They also wanted to feel they are part of the 'global village.' Internet has been able to link people from across the world. One can only communicate through the internet and surf it if they are 'internet literate.'

Gender Links ensured that these youths went through the steps of opening emails and communicating with other people. Thus began their journey into cyber-space.

They are now able to do cyber-dialogues and engage in debates on the many issues affecting the world at large and South Africa in particular.

While the main aim of the course was to expose youth to the gender dynamics in the media, the course opened the youth's eyes to many other issues that South Africa faces, such as HIV/AIDS. As such, a moving digital photo story of Orange Farm's 'Let us Grow' project was done.

As our future leaders, youths have to be able to take a leading role in taking the media to task, create their own media and also raising awareness among other consumers. There should be a gradual shift from just being consumers of media to creators of media. Change can only be achieved when we have an enlightened citizenry.



Writers Bio

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