# Establishing the Rationale for Media Education for Students in Ghana

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*Abstract*

*Recent developments in Information, Communication and Technologies (ICT) is propelling shifts in how important institutions such as the family, school and religion impart values to people, especially young persons. Arguably, these institutions seem to be losing their enviable positions as the main purveyors of values and wisdom in society. The paper argues for an overall rationale for media education in Ghana. Questionable contents of some media seem at variance with Ghanaian cultural values and norms within a context in which Media Education is taken for granted demands examination. In terms of methodology of the study, documents and other scientific research papers on Media Education were reviewed. A major finding of the study is that in Ghana there is no formal discourse about the need to integrate media education into curriculum. Therefore Media Education is yet to become a relevant course in the curricula of schools from the basic level of education to the second cycle through to the tertiary level. The paper concludes that Ghana can profit from a policy that establishes Media Education (ME) in her school system.*

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**Introduction**
The importance of education in the process of development is recognized the world over. Education is central to the quality of life of people and it is has a result of this that the government of Ghana spends a substantial amount of the national budget to finance education. Available statistics indicate that Ghana spends above UNESCO's recommended ceiling of 20 per cent of a country's national budget on education (UNESCO, 2014). Prudent investment in education requires effective and strategic planning in order to reap the benefits new initiatives geared toward strengthening and improving the quality of education, particularly the content of academic programmes at all levels of the education system.

Following developments in the Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) field and its influence on people's lives, Ghana like other countries in Africa and beyond had to take appropriate measures to re-evaluate the content of curriculum in the educational system.
The government of Ghana has noted the numerous benefits of ICT training and education. Consequently, from the basic level of education to the Senior High School through to the tertiary level, courses in ICT are being offered.

The government has acknowledged the need for ICT training and education in the schools, colleges and universities and the improvement of the education system as a whole. The deployment of ICT into education will result in the creation of new possibilities for learners and teachers to engage in new ways of information acquisition and analysis. ICT will enhance access to education and improve the quality of education delivery on equitable basis (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Despite such benefits associated with the introduction of ICT in the curricula of schools, there is an apparent gap in how both teachers and students can acquire needed competency, skills and knowledge to enable them become empowered media literates. The absence of ME courses in Ghana's education system has implications for effectively and efficiently educating students to squarely face the challenges of industry and the culture of work in the 21st century, which depends on ICT and the media.

Indeed, the quest for sustainable education could be a mirage without ME being taught as a relevant course in Ghana's schools. The relevance of ME cannot be over-emphasised. It seems that audiences of diverse media systems seem unaware of the fact that notwithstanding the fact that the media furnish us with lots of news and multiple interesting entertainment packages, they equally at times in no small measure negatively influence peoples' attitudes, behavior and mindsets. Communication scholar, Piere Paolo Passolini, as cited in Srampickal and Perumpally (2009: iv) succinctly captures this reality with the observation:

> The consumers do not realise that the media programmers are like the juicy bones that the burglars throw to the watchdog to keep it busy while he goes in to burgle the house. The threat of Stalin or Hitler was external. But the electronic technology is within our gates, and we are numb, deaf, blind and mute about its encounter with our lives. However, it is not the time to suggest strategies on how to counter this, when the threat has not even been acknowledged to exist by most people.

Yet currently, apart from the University for Development Studies in Ghana, which runs an ME course at Level 300, no other university/school from the basic through to the tertiary level has integrated ME in their curricula. It is important to note that in Ghana, though some courses that are run by some tertiary institutions are aimed at achieving media literacy, it needs to be made clear that ME provides the foundation and initiates the process, and media literacy (ML) the outcome of the process. It is necessary to point out the conceptual difference between ME and ML. ME focuses on the process of creating awareness and knowledge about the media industry and the meaning embedded in them. Gaining such knowledge enables users to be active recipients of media messages through the competencies they have to demand quality in the messages produced. Fedorov (2001:8) equates media education (ME) to the shaping of culture of interaction with media, the development of creative, communicative skills, critical thinking, perception, interpretation, analysis and evaluation of media texts, teaching different forms of self-expression using media technology. ML is the knowledge and skills learners acquire as the outcome of being educated about the importance of media in society. ML provides tools for people to critically

analyze messages, offer opportunities for learners to broaden their experience of media and develop their creative skills in making their own media messages (Fedorov, 2015). UNESCO captures the essential boundaries of ME as all communication media including the printed word and graphics, sound, still and motion images, delivered on any kind of technology. It enables people to gain understanding of the communication media used in their society and the way they operate and to acquire skills using these media to communicate with others. It ensures that people learn how to analyze, critically reflect upon and create media texts and identify the sources of media texts, in the context of their political, social, commercial and/or cultural environments. ME also entails interpreting messages and values offered by the media and selecting appropriate media for communicating messages or stories to reach their intended audience (UNESCO, 1999 cited in Fedorov, 2015).

Therefore, without the direct teaching of ME in schools in Ghana, it may be difficult for tertiary institutions teaching some courses indirectly related to ME to achieve the aims of media literacy. This paper focuses on establishing the rationale for Media Education for students[i]. The paper is made up of five inter-related sections: the Introduction, Literature Review on ME, ME and Social Media Menace, Making Practical Sense of the Theory of Media Education and Conclusion.

## Literature Review on Media Education

Communication technologies now provide new platforms for audiences to engage by using various kinds of media and the shift in how people communicate and learn highlights of the importance of media education. Cycles of information revolution and education reform are fuelling significant changes in the sectors of media and education the world over.

The importance of media education in the curriculum of education is being appreciated in many countries, albeit at different levels of implementation. Notably, almost three decades have passed since the Grunwald Declaration on Media Education was issued by the representatives of 19 nations at UNESCO's International Symposium on Media Education in Germany (UNESCO, 1982). At the ground-breaking international symposium on ME, the declaration noted:

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.

Regrettably most informal and non-formal educational systems do little to promote media education or education for communication. Too often the gap between the educational experience they offer and the real world in which people live is disturbingly wide. But if the arguments for media education as a preparation for responsible citizenship are formidable now, in the very near future with the development of communication technology such as satellite broadcasting, two-way cable systems, television data systems, video cassette and disc materials, they ought to be irresistible, given the increasing degree of choice in media consumption resulting from these developments. 'Responsible educators will not ignore these developments, but will work alongside their students in understanding them and making sense of such consequences as the rapid development of two-way communication and the ensuing individualization and access to information. This is not to underestimate the impact on cultural identity of the flow of information and ideas between cultures by the mass media.

The school and the family share the responsibility of preparing the young person for living in a world of powerful images, words and sounds. Children and adults need to be literate in all three of these symbolic systems, and this will require some reassessment of educational priorities. Such a reassessment might well result in an integrated approach to the teaching of language and communication. Media education will be most effective when parents, teachers, media personnel and decision-makers all acknowledge they have a role to play in developing greater critical awareness among listeners, viewers and readers. The greater integration of educational and communications systems would undoubtedly be an important step towards more effective education.

Action points competent authorities were called upon to carry out included: initiate and support comprehensive media education programmes - from pre-school to university level, and in adult education - the purpose of which is to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes which will encourage the growth of critical awareness and, consequently, of greater competence among the users of electronic and print media. Ideally, such programs should include the analysis of media products, the use of media as means of creative expression, and effective use of and participation in available media channels; *and* develop training courses for teachers and intermediaries both to increase their knowledge and understanding of the media and train them in appropriate teaching methods, which would take into account the already considerable but fragmented acquaintance with media already possessed by many students.

The question is: How far has Ghana gone with the implementation of such recommendations? Little efforts have been made so far in making sure that ME is taught in schools. While ME was evolving in other continents, Africa was left behind until 1994 when the dismantling of apartheid and the institution of democracy in South Africa brought in its wake an increasing demand for Media Education. The first national Media Education conference in South Africa was actually held in 1990 and the new national curriculum has been in the writing stages since 1997 (http://www.medialit.org/voices-media-literacy-international-pioneers-

speak). Fedorov (2015) established that Canada, Great Britain, Australia, France and the USA are leading countries in the development of media education, followed by Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan, Mexico and Taiwan. Apart from South Africa, which 7.69% of respondents mentioned as a leading country in ME, no African country's efforts at promoting ME was recognized.

Therefore, it is clear that in Africa only South Africa has initiated some concrete efforts to support media education programmes, even though the efforts are quite below expectations. In a paper titled: "Media education in South Africa: Whence and wither?" Prinsloo (1994) reports that ME exists in South African schools. However, Prinsloo notes that what is of concern is that ME not being taken seriously stems from a continuing lack of understanding of what ME offers to teachers and learners.

The picture is completely different in other countries outside Africa. The Philippines manifests considerable interest in media education, but most seems concentrated in Catholic schools and other religious organisations. The Philippines Association for Media Education has been in existence for some years.

In Russia, critical media studies are beginning to develop in the newly democratic atmosphere, and with it a renewed interest in media education, with several publications in the field (Sharikov 1992; Bazalgette, et al. 1992: 161-165).

In India, considerable enthusiasm for media education exists among individual educators and non-governmental organizations, although little impact has yet been felt in curricula or classroom. Catholic organizations are providing considerable thrust in the field and have issued a number of publications concerning it.

The growth of the mass media has made a significant impact on Latin Americans despite widespread poverty which limits access to the media for many. Nowhere is this more evident than in Brazil, which is famous for its exports of soap operas. The use and abuse of the mass media by political and military interests throughout Latin America as well as rampant

commercialisation have contributed to a continent-wide malaise about the media among academics, educators, religious leaders and other informed persons. The driving force in favour of critical media education has come from the Church and non-governmental organisations, rather than governments. Since 1987, the Science of Education Faculty of the Universidad de Playa Ancha de Ciencias Educacion, Valparaiso, Chile has offered a post-graduate programme in "Media for Education: Television for Computation". From 1992, a course in "Education and Social Communication" has been required of all students in the teacher training course of the university.

Despite its leadership in the development of the modern mass media, the U.S.A lags woefully behind most of the rest of the English-speaking world, at least, in systematic media education in schools. There are many enthusiastic but isolated teachers of media education throughout the United States, but their efforts often seem doomed to wither on the vine after their passing, due to lack of institutional backing. Possible reasons that account for the situation are that the resistance of the advertisers who pay the bills of a commercially dominated mass media and have political influence. Crowded curricula and administrative elite who are both pedagogically conservative and/or fiscally restricted may be additional factors (see Domatob, 1991).

Over the last ten years, the European Union (EU) has promoted several initiatives in order to encourage the development of digital and media literacy as well as ME in the EU Member States (Celot & Tornero 2008; Bruni, 2010 & Buckingham, 2003). Groups of experts were formed to define actions, surveys were carried out, and a set of recommendations were published. For example, in December 2006, the European Parliament (EP) and the Council released two recommendations. In the *Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* (2006/962/EC), a new framework for key competences was outlined and digital competence was included among the competences for lifelong learning. Here digital competence is defined as involving "the confident and critical use of Information Society Technology (IST) for work, leisure and communication". It is underpinned by basic skills in ICT: the use of computers to retrieve, assess, store, produce, present and exchange information, and to communicate and

participate in collaborative networks via the Internet" (European Parliament 2006, L. 394/16). At the same time, the EP published the *Recommendation on the Protection of Minors and Human Dignity* (European Parliament 2006), where the following aspects are emphasized: the need for teacher training on media literacy; the inclusion of media literacy in the curriculum to enhance children's capacity of self-protection; and promote responsible attitudes among all users (Parola, 2011:90).

At the same time, a variety of impressive research projects for a better understanding of the impact of digital media on the lives of minors were implemented. One of the most important is the research project EU Kids Online (http://www.eukidsonline.net), which focuses on the relationship between the media and minors both in terms of protection as well as empowerment. As a matter of fact, digital media introduce risks (exposure to dangerous or scarcely reliable content; connections with strangers, privacy, cyberbullying and cyberstalking; illegal downloading, gambling etc.), but also offer opportunities, such as accessing information resources, participating in social networks and interest groups, exchanging information; forms of civic engagement and content creation activities (Staksrud et al., 2009; Hasebrink et al., 2008). Given such level of interest in ME, it is an exciting time for media education in Europe. Several initiatives have been launched and a number of national and international research studies on digital media and new generations have been realized, leading to a shift in the protective paradigm to one focused on children empowerment.

The reality is that the process of being empowered with media literacy skills and knowledge set requires systematic education covering courses in the curricula. Indeed, media literacy education is part of the curricula in European Union countries, even if teachers are often not qualified and the application of best practices is still deficient (Supsakova, 2016).
In order to bridge the ME gap in Ghana, it is imperative to design and systematically roll out ME course because the absence of ME course in Ghana's education system has implications in effectively and efficiently educating students to squarely face the challenges of media and technologically filled working environment in the 21st century. Indeed, the

quest for sustainable education could be a mirage without ME being taught as a relevant course in Ghana's schools.

To a certain extent, Ghana is experiencing some changes in her system of education as a result of the influence of communication technologies. It is assumed that the introduction of ICT courses in the curricula of schools is a realization of its potential influence. What is apparent in Ghana is that everyone seems to eulogise the benefits of ICT without critically examining some negative aspects of ICT with their attendant consequences. It is important to note that attempts aimed at promoting sustainable education for all needs to factor in the ICT and ME nexus. However, the literature clearly indicates that Ghana is yet to integrate ME into the curricula of schools.

**Media Education and Social Media Menace**
The study of ME is relevant because of the benefits for students and society as a whole. According to Srampickal and Perumpally (2009:10), Soares (2001:7) and UNESCO (2008), the use of social media among students is gaining a lot of grounds. In a study titled, "The Social Media Scourge among University Students: A Study of the University for Development Studies, Ghana," respondents admitted that social media usage took time from their academic work. Some indicated that they spent about two United States dollars each day on social media and that they used such media during lectures, thereby making them lose concentration during lectures. It also emerged from the study that students use such media to perpetrate fraud (Tuurosong & Faisal, 2014). ME is an attempt at making media users critically conscious of the impact on their lives, in order to enable them to become creative users. It may be defined as the process by which users become aware of the ways in which the various media influence their thinking, affect their value system and change them and society. As a result, they become critical and discerning receivers of media messages capable of demanding quality media programmes and eventually leading them to create their own media. Effective ME enables them to respond intelligently to media creations and manipulations.

Furthermore, ME in an ICT age is important because young persons, particularly in urban areas who are beginning to spend a lot of time interacting with different forms of mass media ranging from television to

video games and the Internet are more influenced by the mass media. Despite the fast development of this media-centric youth culture, majority of youth do not have any form of media education in order to enable them optimize  the use of the several media products available to them (Diedong, 2017). ME, therefore, can make a significant contribution to the education and development of society. Basically, the process of media education comprises six inter-related dimensions:

- Media literacy
- Knowledge of the media industry
- Active interpretation
- Critical analysis of ideology
- Group discussion
- Creating our own media

**Media literacy** is "core aspect of media education. The main objective of media literacy is comprehension of media "languages." For example, each medium or genre has developed symbolic "codes", which the media reader needs to understand in order to facilitate a more meaningful interaction with a particular medium such as radio or print/newspapers. One cannot fully understand and enjoy films or home video without a basic knowledge of "language" used in the narrative structure, which is made up of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic elements of the narration. The basis, scope and vision of media education is that if people are educated and have a taste for quality media, they will get quality media. The positive power of the media can be harnessed for the good of people and the nation provided people are well educated on how meaningfully they can interact with the media.

**Knowledge of Media Industry**
The main objective in this dimension of media education is to enable people/students understand the selective constraints on content. These constraints are: the typical process of production: from "idea" to distribution; the commercial-financial structure of the media industry; the entertainment demands of the media; the right to freedom of expression of journalists and artists; limited space; and the media as an open public forum, which ideally should allow no room for favouritism.

## Active Interpretation

The process of interacting with the media if it is to be meaningful implies that one has to become an active and thinking user of media. Therefore, a reflexive action is involved: as I interpret the meaning embedded media products, I become aware of my interpretation. The main objective in becoming an active, thinking user of media is, becoming aware that everybody perceives media from the perspective of his/her own identity. Apart from perceiving and appropriating diverse forms of identities such as national, religious, occupational from the media, the uniqueness of personal identity may not be compromised by virtue of the individual's capacity to discover his/her unique "life story" in the stories of the media. The media provides identity symbols, which their users stand to profit from if they can actively, critically "appropriate my identity" from the numerous and diversified media products.

## Critical Analysis of Ideology

This particular dimension of media education has the main objective of enabling people/students to learn how to perceive and verify that a media representation is a human injustice. When people are so empowered they learn to perceive ideological distortions in media content such as gender discrimination, religious discrimination, and the defense of class interests as well as the concentration of media power and the lack of access participation in media.

## Group discussion

Learning to view/read the media as a family or friend group and then discussing can be an enjoyable and fulfilling experience. The main objective in such an exercise is to understand that inter-subjective discussion of a media experience creates a richer and a deeper understanding.

## Creating our Own Media

Normally, when people become fans of a particular artist or genre, they begin to create their own version. The strong desire to be an active creator of media and culture leads to the development of projects of script writing for radio/TV, production of bulletins and newsletters and learning how to produce short video documentaries or drama. People truly understand the

media when they begin to produce it, therefore actively participate in their meaning making process.

In essence, the outcome of media education should lead to a situation whereby the literate person is capable of doing the following:
- use media effectively;
- employ critical thinking skills to evaluate media messages;
- evaluate the credibility of information;
- 'read' and understand the deeper meaning of a media message;
- appreciate numerous perspectives;
- engage critically with the media;
- understand media influence;
- have an understanding of media ownership;
- and understand the effects of the media.
- engage with a regulatory authority such as the Press Ombudsman (by means of a letter or   email correspondence, for example);
- engage with the media by means of an opinion article or a letter to the editor;
- identify techniques used by advertisers to sell products or services;
- identify blatant or subtle stereotypes;
- debate contentious ethical issues;
- determine the message's target audience and ask questions regarding content that was not included, and the reasons influencing content selection (see Holubek & Shipek, 2013).

In Ghana, as in other parts of the world, the internet with its World Wide Web opens the entire world to unsuspecting youth/students. This spawns a new culture altogether. New values are being proposed by these new media sometimes diametrically opposed to the values we have adhered to for years, or not thought of in our social system. This scenario presented by Sodzi-Tettey (2014: 10; also see Aziz, 2016) should awaken responsible parents, educators, policy makers and all well-meaning bodies to the need to view seriously the dominance of multiple media in the informal education of children and youth. Sodzi-Tettey notes that today's children have become social media addicts, hands on the keyboard and keypads all day, faces lit by mobile phone screens at night even in the face of *dumsor* (power outage), giggling to themselves and or laughing  loudly. The meeting between Dr.

Sulley Ali-Gabass and the boy he had anal sex with was made possible through social media. A place akin to the streets, where you meet all kinds of people with different values and orientations interacting at different levels. Today, the young man joins a list of many others the world over who are victims of social media interaction gone very horribly wrong.

It is apparent that effective education of youth in a media-saturated environment is needed in Ghana and this requires a collaborative effort of all stakeholders in education. In Brazil, some non-profit organisations and schools have combined forces to help promote the "active" reception and the "critical" consumption of media content as indispensable skills to be reached by today's youngsters (Soares, 2001: 7). It is not to simply teach and learn "with" media, but that a comprehensive educational environment also requires that students study "about" media in order to analyse the world of new texts, technologies, media industry and their relevant contexts. Many scholars stress the need to expand the concept content and purposes of traditional literacy in order to accommodate contemporary digital, multimodal and media literacy. Indeed, media literacy is foundational to basic education in an Information Age (Gutiérez-Martin & Tyner, 2010:3; see also UNESCO, 2006).

**Making Practical Sense of the Theory of Media Education**
The multi-dimensional and integrated theory of the subject in media education explains that the active subject is a deconstructor/reconstructor of the meaning of the media, who is aware of making constructions different from the text/the symbolic meanings embedded in the messages and/or images relayed by the media. Essentially, there is the need for the reader of media to be an active, thinking user of media. What the theory as proposed by Martinez-de-Toda (1998; see figure 1 in the appendix) emphasizes is that the subject in front of the media, being media literate, is assumed to have the capacity to determine the quality and, in fact, be in a position to rationalize media texts critically not as given by the transmitter or source of the message, but through an active, meaningful and beneficial interactive process informed by the socio-cultural context of the media consumer. The theory comprises the most important dimensions of ME – media literate, aware, active, critical, social and creative.

In terms of the practical dimension of ME, there are several exercises that students can engage in to sharpen and deepen their creativity and critical thinking skills about how to meaningfully interact with the media. For example, in Ghana's TV3 programme – "Talented Kids" is a good example of getting youngsters to meaningfully engage in the media. However, the academic component is yet to bear on such innovative initiatives in order to create, nurture and sustain a situation whereby academic departments could team up with working class students in several media projects such as the production of video about the environment, teenage pregnancy and other topical issues. The goals in such projects/exercises would be to improve communication, solidarity and citizenship. Indeed, the introduction of media literacy education into the school curriculum promotes civic engagement and enhances students' awareness of the power structures which are usually at play using popular media. Knowledge of media education also assists in building students' critical and inquiry skills (National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2016).

**Conclusion**

This paper has established the relevance of ME and the need for it to be introduced in the curricula of schools in Ghana. It provided a brief review of ME development around the world and in the process made a case for Ghana to initiate a national policy dialogue towards the development and integration of Media Education in the curricula of schools at all levels of the system of education. The current dynamics of education the world over require that educators know exactly what to do with media education.

It is recommended that the Ministry of Education initiates the process by engaging curriculum development experts, media experts and professionals, the teacher training colleges, universities, coalition of non-governmental organisations in education as well as Parent Teacher Associations in a series of workshops, which would eventually lead to the mapping out of policy options on how to implement ME in Ghana.
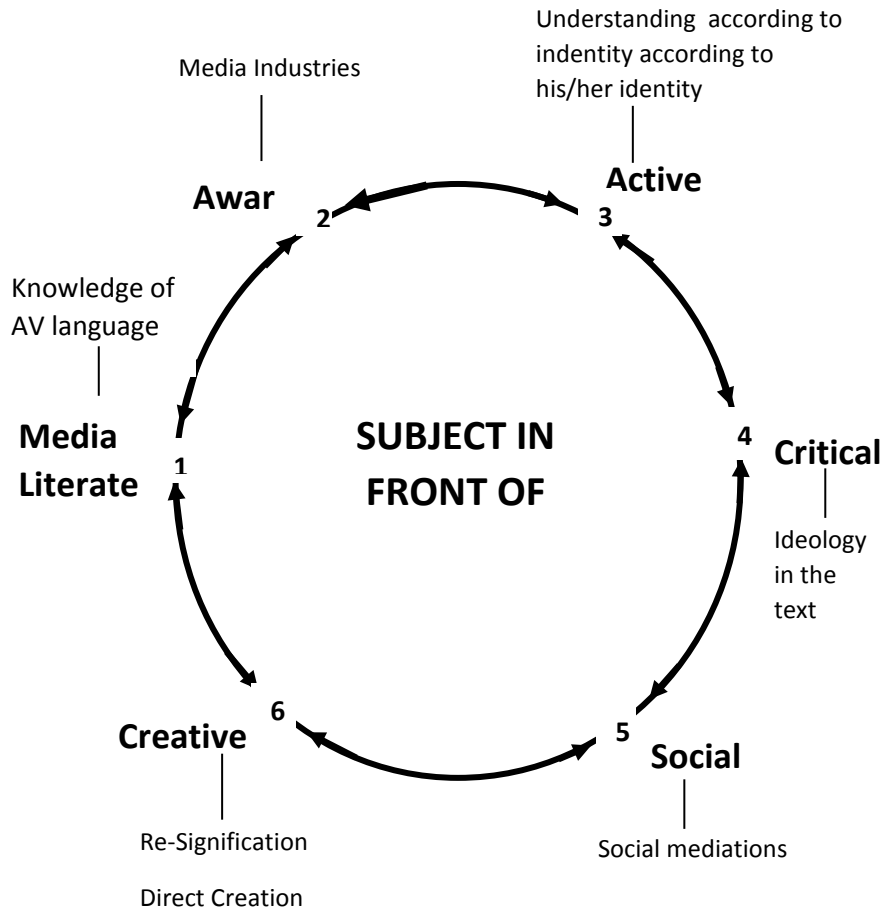
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## Appendix

### Figure 1: Subject interacting with the media