

5.1 Media Literacy

OBJECTIVES:

- Define and explain what media literacy is
- Analyze the type of information we consume through technology and on social media platforms
- Understand the dangers of living in our 'imagination' and not accepting reality for what it is

MEDIA:

means of communication that reaches and influences widely. This includes TV, video games, apps, internet, music videos, etc.

Today, literacy extends beyond books, newspapers, magazines and includes technological sources of information as well. Oftentimes, these sources can prove to be overwhelming because there is so much content in many different forms, more so than traditional forms of literacy ever offered. As a result, it is essential that we work to critically think about the information we consume through media and consider why certain content is being created and by whom. In other words, we need to become media literate.



STOP AND REFLECT: Why do you think it is important to have strong media literacy (critical thinking about what media presents you)? What would you say to someone who thinks what you watch doesn't affect you?



It's easy to consume media without being thoughtful and critical about what we are watching. We might feel like watching something on television even if we would be uncomfortable watching the same thing in real-life. This can include content that is extremely violent, graphic, or indecent. For example, we would not go to ḥarām gatherings or be in ḥarām relationships, but we might view such things in TV shows and movies without even thinking about what we are taking in.

How can we become more literate about what we watch? We know that we should be doing everything in our lives with intention and trying to get closer to Allah (swt), including what we choose to do for fun. The purpose of entertainment in our lives should be to relax in order to do our other responsibilities while well-rested. It should never take us away from Allah (swt).

Let's take a look at some āyahs and ḥadīths about how what we see and hear affects us.

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا مَا جَاؤَهَا شَهِدَ عَلَيْهِمْ سَمْعُهُمْ وَأَبْصَارُهُمْ وَجُلُودُهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ

“When they come to [the Fire], their hearing will bear witness against them and their sight and their skins concerning what they used to do.”¹

STOP AND REFLECT: According to this āyah, what are three parts of the body that can be misused in a way that will lead someone to the Fire of the hereafter? What are some examples of ways that each can be misused?



وَالْعَيْنُ جَاسُوسُ الْقَلْبِ وَبَرِيدُ الْعَقْلِ

Imām ‘Alī (‘a): “The eye is the postman (barīd) for the ‘aql (intellect).”

1 Noble Qur‘ān, Fuṣṣilat, 41:20

STOP AND REFLECT: What do you think it means for the eye to be a postman or messenger for the ‘aql (intellect)? **HINT:** what kind of messages could the eye bring to a person?

Our ‘aql or intellect, is the key to our thinking and thus our decision making, which translates to our actions. What we see influences what we do.

الْقَلْبُ مُصْحَفُ الْبَصَرِ

Imām ‘Alī (‘a): “The heart is record-book (muṣḥaf) for the eye”

According to these narrations, what the eye sees directs the intellect and our center of emotions. What we see directly influences our mind (what we think) and our heart (what we feel). Therefore, we should be careful about what we choose to watch.

THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

God has blessed us with the power of imagination. Imagining is a tool for understanding parts of reality that we can't see. The difference between “**tafakkur**” (thought) and “**takhayyul**” (imagination): takhayyul when used for tafakkur is positive. Takhayyul when used for the sake of takhayyul might be good for young children but as you get older, living in an imaginary world it is not useful or beneficial. When imagination takes over someone's mind, they become less able to deal with reality. Reality has ups and downs, sweet times and bitter times, life and death, limited resources, and consequences for our actions. Embracing reality for what it is helps us to live our lives in a fulfilling manner and in preparation for the Hereafter.

Activity 5.1a: Jigsaw!

Each student will receive one ḥadīth or āyah to read and reflect on for 5 minutes.

- 1. 5 MINUTES:** Read your āyah/ḥadīth and write down 1 or 2 points of reflection and 1 question that arises for you.
- 2. 3 MINUTES:** Find all the other students in your class with the same āyah/ḥadīth - this is now your research group! Once you are in your group, each student will have one role: Discussion leader, recorder (takes notes), researcher (goes through everyone's notes and summarizes) and presenter.
- 3. 15 MINUTES:** With your research group, reread the āyah/ḥadīth and discuss ideas, thoughts and questions. As a group, come up with 3 key points the presenter can share with the class in order to teach them about your āyah/ḥadīth.

ĀYAH 1:

“People’s accounting [of their deeds] will happen soon. But they are in a state of ghaflah [unaware and heedless]. Whenever a new reminder [from the Qur’ān] comes to them, they listen to it as they play around. Their hearts are filled with lahw (distraction).”²

HADĪTH 1:

لَيْسَ فِي الْبَدَنِ شَيْءٌ أَقَلَّ شُكْرًا مِنَ الْعَيْنِ فَلَا تُعْطُوهَا سُؤْلَهَا فَتَشْغَلَكُمْ عَنْ ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَ جَلَّ

Imām ‘Alī (‘a): *There is nothing in the body more ungrateful than the eye. Do not give it what it asks for, or else it will distract from remembering Allah (swt), the Exalted.*

HADITH 2:

Imām ‘Alī (‘a): *Every glance in which there is no learning or contemplation is lahw (distraction)*

HADĪTH 3:

Rasūlullāh (ﷺ) is reported to have said, *“Keep away from looking at what you shouldn’t! Doing so plants the seed of low desire and gives birth to heedlessness!”*

ACTION PLAN:

After learning about the ḥadīth and āyah above, what are some actionable items you can incorporate into your daily life to embrace reality for what it is?

² Noble Qur’ān, Al-Anbiyā’, 21:2-4

Jigsaw Student Handout - Āyah #1

“People’s accounting [of their deeds] will happen soon. But they are in a state of ghaflah [unaware and heedless]. Whenever a new reminder [from the Qur’ān] comes to them, they listen to it as they play around. Their hearts are filled with lahw (distraction).”³

NOTE: The characteristics of something that is lahw are:

- It makes you occupied and distracts you from something else
- What you are distracted from is more important than this distraction
- The distraction is done in a subconscious way

³ Noble Qur’ān, Al-Anbiyā’, 21:2-4

Jigsaw Student Handout - Ḥadīth #1

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Jigsaw Student Handout - Ḥadīth #2

Imām ‘Alī (‘a): *Every glance in which there is no learning or contemplation is lahw (distraction).*

NOTE: The characteristics of something that is lahw are:

- It makes you occupied and distracts you from something else
- What you are distracted from is more important than this distraction
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SACREDNESS OF READING BOOKS

In Islam, there is a sacredness that is associated with learning in person. All learning, online and otherwise is highly encouraged; however, in person learning is considered to be the most effective because learning goes beyond simply the transfer of knowledge. The process of learning involves interaction and observation, which are two key factors to the learning process.

In addition to learning directly from someone, reading is also highly encouraged as you are able to interact with the text, ask questions, and truly learn to exemplify the information presented by the expert author. This isn't to say that other forms of learning such as listening to a speech or learning through technology are not helpful. However, they often result in living on your own analysis of materials and Islam tradition emphasizes learning through qualified scholars and people that are experts in their field.

The medium of a book is more prone to appeal to the intellect than visual media. A scholar who is an expert on Islamic family matters states, *“Reading is a competitor to [negative] media. However much a family becomes more tuned to the media, they will distance themselves from the culture of reading. The more they read, the less media they will use.”*⁴

Regarding the importance of reading and what we should read, a respected Marja' states, *“Certain people are used to reading books, but books that do not require thinking. Nothing is wrong with this. After all, this is a kind of reading. I would not deny this. But it is better to combine recreational reading - like reading novels, autobiographies and easy historical books - with reading serious books, books that require thinking and careful studying.”*⁵

What we read must be chosen carefully. A lot of reading material is not suitable — and as you get older, things get worse.

Rasūlullah (ﷺ) says,
“A (true) believer is like a bee, who eats from something pure, and then gives something pure.”

4 Ustād Abbasi, *Man-e Digare Mā*

5 Āyatullāh Khamenei

SACREDNESS OF MEETING IN-PERSON



STOP AND REFLECT: What are the advantages of meeting someone in-person as opposed to chatting with them online?

As we mentioned above, there is a sacredness to being around scholars and learning directly from teachers in-person. Similarly, speaking to people in person has a sacredness that speaking to people online does not. Of course, it is important to keep in touch with family and good friends that do not live near us, but visiting them in-person is much better. Naturally, we know this, as we know that even if we talk to someone everyday on the phone, we still miss them and feel excited to meet them in-person.



The Influence of Social Media

In June 2019, Kirsten Muller-Vahl, a psychiatrist at Hannover Medical School in Germany, was faced with an influx of patients experiencing a complex form of tics. All the patients had been diagnosed with Tourette's syndrome however, Muller-Vahl's professional opinion that these tics were related to something else entirely. After much research and discussion, they learned that all the patients admitted had identical symptoms to a famous Youtuber, Jan Zimmerman, who majority admitted they watched often. Despite the patient symptoms all being similar and coming up over and over as Tourette's symptoms usually do, they were far from what classic tics manifested as. These patients were instead demonstrating symptoms of functional movement disorder (FMD), a disorder with no neurological basis but a psychological one. For some patients, simply learning they didn't have Tourette's stopped their symptoms while others required a course of psychotherapy. This was the first case of a mass sociogenic illness, or social virus, that resulted through the use of social media, in this case the Youtube videos. The wide spectrum of symptoms had spread through social mimicry and where there have been cases of this in single schools or communities, scientists are concerned that these will now be much more widespread due to wide access to social media and screens. Since 2019, multiple clinics nationwide have reported drastic increases in patients presenting with tic-like symptoms, even in women, despite much scientific research showing that boys are much more likely to be diagnosed with Tourette's. Much of this is due to TikTok becoming a safe haven for people with Tourette's to discuss their symptoms and feel like part of a larger community. The tics have even been nicknamed "TikTok tics" due to the sheer number of individuals that have developed the symptoms through social mimicry.

MEDIA AND FEELINGS OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION



STOP AND REFLECT: How do you feel after having too much "screen time" (i.e. watching too many episodes of a show at once)?

In previous lessons, we mentioned the importance of identifying the sources of anxiety and depression in order to remove these conditions over time. Whenever we consume media, we should reflect on how it affects us. When we watch a television show, movie, or Youtube video, or other clip, we should pay attention to how we feel after we are done. Sometimes, we immediately get the feeling that we spent too much time looking at our screen. The next question we should ask ourselves is if this was because of the time we spent watching, or the content we were watching, or both? This can help us decide whether or not to watch something in the future.

Sometimes when we watch a lot of small curated clips, (Tiktok, Instagram, Youtube etc.), we are actually being advertised to by money-making engines that have very powerful algorithms. We might get a distorted view of life that causes us to get feelings of depression. For example, if a lot of videos that are coming up on our feed talk about wanting something new, or doing a new trend with friends, we might feel bad if our life does not feel that way. We might be shown something as simple as a montage of nice pictures together, but our photo gallery might not have as much that looks nice. We have to remember that social media influencers will spend hours looking at their photos, making sure they take photos every time they go out, and putting them together in a way that influences you under a minute. Social media is moving in this direction of posting more clips and short moments because they know it makes us want to come back to see more.



PRACTICING GOOD INTERNET HYGIENE

We have talked about having good media literacy skills when it comes to what we watch, but it is also important to pay attention to what we post. When it comes to posting things on social media or on the internet, first and foremost, we should remember that the rules of Islam still apply, even online.

It is also important to remember that everything that we put on the internet is actually saved somewhere. Even websites and social media where they claim the pictures disappear, the information is still stored somewhere. As time goes on, we start to put more and more on our digital footprint, which is your trail of online activity.

STOP AND REFLECT: Why do you think it is called a digital footprint? What happens when you walk and leave footprints behind?

Whenever we use the internet to post something, it is stored even if we are sending it privately or have a private account. Having a private account is at least good in the way that what we post is not searchable on google, but even a private account can be hacked. If your account is public, anyone can find what you have posted. Deleting the posts might not fully get rid of the information, as sometimes google will still store things. Your digital footprint always leads to you and is permanent! It can never truly be deleted. This is why we should always be thoughtful about what we post.

TIPS FOR GOOD INTERNET HYGIENE

- **Don't Post Everything:** Don't post everything about your life, even if you are using a private account. You should especially avoid posting your personal information, like your address or phone number.

- **Post Thoughtfully:** Whenever you post something on social media, think about what purpose you are posting for. Then, ask yourself how you would feel if you could never take down your post in the future.
- **Clear Cookies:** Cookies are what give advertisers the ability to track what else you are doing on the internet, and continue to advertise to you.
- **Avoid People you Don't Know:** Never share personal information with strangers and avoid discussing things on social media publicly, even if your account does not have your name on it.



TIPS FOR BETTER MEDIA LITERACY

- **Read Together:** Suggest having reading time for your whole family in order to have a balanced exposure to different types of media.
- **Read to Unwind:** Reading before going to sleep (the Qur'an, or other books) is a good way of letting your eyes have less exposure to blue light and will help you sleep better.
- **Control media exposure:** Don't let it control you!
- **Delay Having Your Own Devices:** Until necessary, there is no need to own your own devices. When someone else owns it, or it is a shared entity, it helps you to be more responsible about how you use it. Similarly, there is no need for excess devices.
- **Pay Attention to What you Search:** Take special care when using search engines, or when just randomly browsing recommendations
- **Be aware:** Pay attention to the negative effects of media on ourselves as individuals and in performing our duties to our families.

Activity 5.1b: Review Questions

1. Media Literacy means...
 - a. Thinking critically about who we talk to in-person
 - b. Thinking critically about what you watch, read, and listen to
 - c. Thinking critically about what we post on social media
 - d. B and C
2. The best way to gain knowledge is
 - a. In-person from a teacher
 - b. Through reading
 - c. Through watching documentaries
 - d. Through searching the internet
3. Your digital footprint is permanent
 - a. True
 - b. False
4. If you post something online, but you use a fake name, no one will know it is actually you
 - a. True
 - b. False
5. If you send a disappearing message or picture, it disappears forever
 - a. True
 - b. False



Activity 5.1c: My Media Habits

DIRECTIONS: Answer the following questions about your media habits. You will not need to share with anyone.

1. How often do you watch shows? How much time do you spend watching them?

a. What goals, if any, do you have for how much time you want to spend watching shows?

2. How often do you watch movies? How much time do you spend watching them?

a. What goals, if any, do you have for how much time you want to spend watching shows?

3. How often do you scroll through videos? (i.e. Instagram, Tiktok)

a. What goals, if any, do you have for how much time you want to spend watching shows?

4. Are there any shows or movies that you think you should stop watching or should not watch again? If so, which ones?

5. Are you on social media? What accounts do you have?

a. How much time do you spend on social media?

b. Are your posts public?

c. Do you use your real name?

d. Do you talk to people you do not know on social media? Do you share anything too personal?

6. What are your goals for how much time you spend on social media?

7. What do you want to change about how you use social media to make yourself more secure online?
