W. JAMES POTTER 10TH EDITION

MEDIA LITERACY

Media Literacy

Tenth Edition

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Tenth Edition

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• Brief Contents •

• Detailed Contents •

• Preface •

Most of us think we are fairly media literate. We know how to access all kinds of media to find the music, games, information, and entertainment we want. We recognize the faces of many celebrities and know many facts about their lives. We recognize a range of musical styles and have developed strong preferences for what we like. We can easily create messages through photos, videos, and text and then upload them to various sites on the internet. Clearly, we know how to expose ourselves to the media, we know how to absorb information from them, we know how to be entertained by them, and we know how to use them to create our own messages and share them with others.

Are we media literate? Yes, of course. We have acquired a great deal of information and have developed remarkable skills. The abilities to speak a language, read, understand photographs, and follow narratives are significant achievements, although we often take them for granted.

While we should not overlook what we have accomplished, it is also important to acknowledge that we all can be much more media literate. In many ways, your overall level of media literacy now is probably about the same as it was when you were a teenager. Since that time, your information base has grown enormously about some types of media messages, such as popular songs, internet sites, and video clips. However, your information base may not have grown much in other areas—who controls the mass media, how decisions are made about the production of content, and how that constant flow of content affects you and society in all sorts of subtle as well as powerful ways. Thus, your current level of media literacy allows you to do many things with the media, but you could be exercising much more control and getting *more* out of your media exposures if you grew your knowledge in additional areas.

The more you are aware of how the mass media operate and how they affect you, the more you gain control over those effects, and the more you will distinguish yourself from typical media users who have turned over a great deal of their lives to the mass media without realizing it. By "turning over a great deal of their lives to the mass media," I mean more than time and money, although both of those are considerable. I also mean that most people have allowed the mass media to program them in ways that they are unaware of. And because they are unaware of these ways, they cannot control the media's influence or shape the way the media are affecting them.

The purpose of this book is to show you how the media have been shaping your beliefs and behavioral patterns. Until you become aware of how much your beliefs have been formed by media influence and how the media have accomplished all this shaping, you will continue to float along in a flood of media messages, oblivious to their constant, subtle influence. However, once you begin to see things from a media literacy perspective, you can see how this process of influence works, and this understanding will help you to gain control over this shaping process.

How to Get the Most Out of This Book

As you read through this book, think beyond the many details and focus on the frameworks it provides as reminders of what is most important. Frameworks are maps. When you have a map to guide your reading journey, you'll always know where you are and where you have to go next. To help you perceive the most important frameworks, each chapter begins with a key idea followed by an outline of the topics covered. When you keep these frameworks in the front of your mind, you will be able to both read faster and get more out of your reading.

As you read each chapter, be strategic. Use the frameworks to ask questions, then actively look for the answers to those questions as you read. By *actively*, I mean don't just scan the words and sentences; instead, start with an agenda of questions, then as you read through each section, look specifically for answers to your questions. After you have finished a chapter, close the book and see how much you can recall. Can you remember only a random assortment of facts or can you envision a structure of knowledge that is organized by your questions?

This book is composed of 15 instructional chapters followed by four issues chapters. The purpose of the 15 core chapters is to provide you with a set of key ideas to help you organize your knowledge structures in four areas: knowledge about media effects, knowledge about media audiences, knowledge about the media industries, and knowledge about media content. To navigate through the detail presented in each chapter, use the outline at the beginning of that chapter as a map. When you have finished reading a chapter, try doing the exercises. These exercises will help you use and elaborate on the information presented in the chapter. If you want to continue elaborating your knowledge beyond what is present in each chapter, look at the sections on further reading that recommend particular books, articles, and websites; I have selected these as particularly interesting extensions of what I have presented in the chapter. Also, because things change so fast these days with the media, I have provided several sources of information—typically websites—where you can access the most current information available.

You will get more out of each of the core instructional chapters if you try to incorporate the information you are learning into your own experience. This book has a self-help tone as it presents guidance and practical exercises to guide you in your journey toward achieving higher levels of media literacy. Do not get caught in the trap of thinking that it is sufficient to memorize the facts in each chapter and then stop thinking about the material. Simply memorizing facts will not help you increase your media literacy much. Instead, you need to internalize the information by drawing it into your own experiences. Continually ask yourself, "How does this new information fit in with what I already know?" "Can I find an example of this in my own life?" and "How can I apply this when I deal with the media?" The exercises at the end of each chapter will help you get started with this. The more you work through the exercises in your everyday life, the more you will internalize the information, thus making it a more natural part of the way you think.

After you have finished with the instructional chapters and building your initial set of knowledge structures, you will be ready to dig deeper into the controversies within media studies. The four issues chapters give you a chance to use your knowledge structures and increase the strength of your skills as you take apart these controversies, appreciate the beauty of their complexity, and construct your own informed opinion on each of these issues. The first issue unpacks the controversy

about whether or not the ownership of the mass media has become too concentrated; some critics argue that there are now too few owners of media businesses. The topic of sports is treated in Issue 2 by examining possible answers to the following question: Is there too much money being spent on sports? Issue 3 tackles the persistent controversy over whether there is too much violence in the media and whether the prevalence of violence in media content is harming individuals and society. This section concludes with Issue 4, which examines the growing concern about privacy and how the new media environment is making it much more difficult for you to exercise control over who gets access to your private information.

If you engage these issues on a superficial level, then you will likely be frustrated by what seem to be unsolvable problems. But if you dig deeper and apply your developing skills of media literacy, you will begin to see how the complexities of these issues may be causing problems in your own life. When you recognize these problems, you will be able to use your greater level of media literacy to develop strategies to reduce their influence. Thus, you will be taking more control over issues that you previously thought were too big, too complicated, and the fault of other people.

To Conclude

It is my hope that this book will stimulate you to think more deeply about your media habits and become motivated to increase your control over the process of influence from the media. The information presented in these chapters will get you started in this direction. Will the book provide you with all the information you need to complete this task fully? No. That would require too much information to fit into one book. You will need to continue reading. At the end of most chapters, I suggest several books for further reading on the topic of that chapter. Although some of those books are fairly technical, most of them are easy to read and very interesting.

This book is an introduction. It is designed to show you the big picture so you can get started on increasing your own media literacy efficiently. It is important to get started now and to begin exercising the power that you did not know you had.

I hope you will have fun reading this book. I hope it will expose you to new perspectives from which you can perceive much more about the media. If it does, you will be gaining new insights about your old habits and interpretations. If this happens, I hope you will share your new insights and "war stories" with me. Much of this book has been written to reflect some of the problems and insights my students have had in the media literacy courses I have taught. I have learned much from them. I'd like to learn even more from you. So, let me know what you think and send me a message at wjpotter@comm.ucsb.edu.

See you on the journey!

Teaching Resources

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This text includes an array of instructor teaching materials designed to save you time and to help you keep students engaged. To learn more, visit sagepub.com or contact your SAGE representative at sagepub.com/findmyrep.

• Acknowledgments •

This book project has traveled a very long distance from its initial conceptualization in the mid-1990s. Since then, I have had the privilege of using various versions of the book with several thousand students at Florida State University, UCLA, Stanford University, and the University of California at Santa Barbara. These students helped me form the idea into a useful book for a broad range of undergraduates and refine the material through nine subsequent editions. I thank them for every question, every puzzled look, and every smile of satisfaction from an insight gained. Over the years, *Media Literacy* has been translated from English into seven other languages, which makes it accessible to readers in many parts of the world. Some of those readers have provided me with their reactions, and I thank them.

I thank the many reviewers whom SAGE called on to critique the text in each edition. Some contacted me directly; others chose to remain anonymous. In all cases, their comments were valuable. The reviewers included Kelly A. Berg, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University; Frank Nevius, Western Oregon University; Stanton H. Hudson, Jr., State University of New York, Buffalo State; Doug Tewksbury, Niagara University; Sara Drabik, Northern Kentucky University; Phyllis Zrzavy, Franklin Pierce University; and Anthony Jerome Stone Jr., University of Cincinnati.

I am grateful for the support of SAGE with its many highly skilled staff members over the years. First, I need to thank Margaret Seawell, who initially signed this project then shepherded it through three editions; then Todd Armstrong, who took over for Margaret on the fourth and fifth editions; then Matt Byrnie, who took over for Todd and gave me considerable help with the sixth, seventh, and eighth editions before turning it over to Terri Accomazzo for the ninth edition; then to Lily Norton for this, the tenth edition. In the production department, Astrid Virding skillfully took the first edition from manuscript to bound book, as did Claudia Hoffman on the second edition, Tracy Alpern on the third, and Astrid Virding again on the fourth, fifth, and sixth editions and now Megha Negi with the current edition. They made it look easy, though there must have been days when it was anything but. I also want to thank Carmel Withers in marketing and SAGE salespeople for their enthusiastic support of the new edition. Finally, I must thank the many fine copy editors SAGE has assigned to this project over the years, especially Erin Livingston who continually impressed me with her detailed and insightful editing of this tenth edition.

If you like this book, then I share the credit of success with all the people I mentioned above. If you find a mistake, a shortcoming, or a misinterpretation, then it is my fault for not fully assimilating all the high-quality help I have been privileged to experience.

Reviewer Acknowledgments

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• About the Author •

W. James Potter, professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara, holds one PhD in communication studies and another in instructional technology. He has been teaching media courses for more than two decades in the areas of effects on individuals and society, content narratives, structure and economics of media industries, advertising, and journalism. He has served as editor of the *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* and is the author of many journal articles and several dozen books, including *7 Skills of Media Literacy; Introduction to Media Literacy, Digital Media Effects; Analysis and Evaluation of the Major Theories of Media Effects*; *The 11 Myths of Media Violence*; and *Becoming a Strategic Thinker: Developing Skills for Success*.

Introduction

PART I

1

Media literacy increases your ability to exercise control over the vast array of messages you encounter through daily media exposure.

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Why Increase Media Literacy?

Key Idea: To survive in our information-saturated culture, we put our minds on "automatic pilot" in order to protect ourselves from the flood of media messages we constantly encounter. The danger with this automatic processing of messages is that it allows the mass media to condition our thought processes.

The first challenge we all face when confronting a new body of information is motivation. We ask ourselves: Why should I expend all the effort to learn this? How will learning this help me enough to make all that effort worthwhile?

With media literacy, our initial answers to the above questions are likely to make us feel that learning about media literacy is not worth the effort because we feel that we already know a lot about the media. We are familiar with a large number of websites, apps, recording artists, and celebrities. We are already able to access a wide range of entertainment and information, so why would we need to learn a lot more about the media? This book will show you the answer to that question by presenting you with some key insights about the media. This information will expand your perspective into new areas and increase your power to exercise control over your media exposures so that you can get more value from those messages. Let's get started!

In this chapter, I will show you the big picture of our media environment so that you can see how enormous the information problem is. The strategy we use to deal with this problem typically works well on a day-to-day basis because it is efficient; however, over the long term, it is not very effective. That is, the advantages we achieve in the short term when we focus only on efficiency grow into disadvantages over the long term. To show you why this is the case, let's first analyze the information problem.

The Information Problem

Our culture is saturated with media messages—far more than you may realize. Hollywood film studios release more than 700 hours of feature films each year, which adds to its base of more than 100,000 hours of films they have already released in previous years. Commercial television stations generate about 48 million hours of video messages every year worldwide, and radio stations send out 65.5 million hours of original programming each year. We now have more than 140 million book titles in existence, and another 5,000 new book titles are published throughout the world each day.

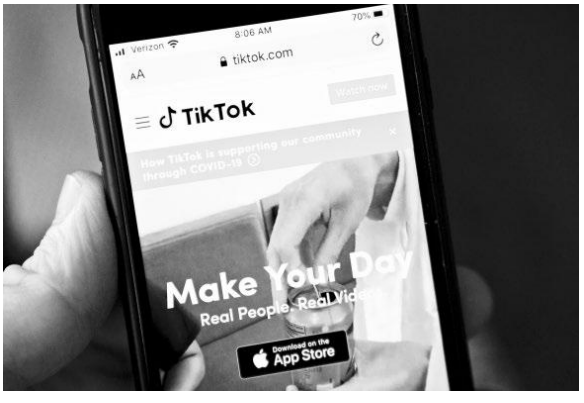
Then there is the World Wide Web, which has been estimated to have almost two billion websites (Internet Live Stats, 2018) but is so huge that no one knows how big

it really is. Each of these websites has the potential to deliver an unlimited amount of information. For example, a video platform such as YouTube has more than five billion videos available for viewing (YouTube, 2018), and users are uploading more than 500 new hours of video *every minute of every day* (Clement, 2019).

Growth Is Accelerating

Not only are we already saturated with media messages, the number of messages available from the media continues to grow. More information has been generated since you were born than the sum total of all information throughout all recorded history up until the time of your birth. In 2012, Silver estimated that the amount of information was doubling every year. And the rate continues to accelerate! This means that today, over half of all the information that is available to you (in all the libraries, websites, recordings, etc.) did not exist one year ago.

Why is so much information being produced? One reason is that people are producing more information than ever before. Half of all the scientists who have ever lived are alive today and producing information. Also, the number of people in this country who identify themselves as musicians has more than doubled in the last four decades, the number of artists have tripled, and the number of authors has increased fivefold (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 2017).



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Social media is one of the fastest growing areas for media exposure, being consumed mostly on smartphones and other mobile devices and increasing in popularity among all age groups.

Another reason is that the technology now exists to provide easy-to-use platforms to share information. Thus, everyone can generate and share information with large numbers of people every day. You no longer need to be a musician to create songs; you can use Garage Band or other computer synthesizers. You don't need to be signed to a recording contract by a record company to distribute your songs. You can also be a journalist, a fiction writer, a photographer, a filmmaker, or even a video game designer as a hobby and make your messages easily available to millions of people, just like professional artists. Or you could generate and share smaller forms of information such as emails and tweets. There are now 4.5 billion regular users of the internet worldwide, and they send and receive 300 billion email messages each day (Clement, 2020a). Each minute, 188 million emails are sent, 18.1 million texts are sent, 4.5 million searches are conducted on Google, and 1.4 million swipes are made on Tinder. Furthermore, during any given minute of the day, users of Netflix stream 694,444 hours of video; users of Instagram post 277,777 stories; and 231,840 users of Skype are making calls (Fancycrave1, 2019).

Each of us is adding to this flood of information like never before. Tucker (2014) explains,

> Between checking your phone, using GPS, sending e-mail, tweets, and Facebook posts, and especially streaming movies and music, you create 1.8 million megabytes [of data] a year. It's enough to fill nine CD-ROMs every day. The device-ification of modern life in the developed world is the reason why more than 90 percent of all the data that exists was created in just the last three years. (p. xv)

Tucker continues, "And it's growing exponentially, with 44 times as much digital information in 2020 as there was in 2009" (p. xvi).

High Degree of Exposure

The media are highly attractive, so we increase the time we spend with media messages each year. Over the last three decades, every new survey of media use has shown that people, on average, have been increasing their exposure time every year. For example, in 2010, people spent an average of 10 hours and 46 minutes with all forms of the media each day; this increased to 12 hours and 14 minutes by 2017 (eMarketer, 2017). The media become increasingly important to us as we absorb information from others and contribute our own information by connecting with friends and sharing our ideas, pictures, and opinions with others every day.

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Multitasking, like messaging someone on your smartphone while watching online videos, increases your media exposure. But are you truly multitasking, or are you still missing bits and pieces of information?

Keeping Up

How do we keep up with all this information? One thing we try to do is multitask. For example, a person can listen to recorded music, text friends, and watch a video on a pop-up window all at the same time—thus experiencing three hours of media exposure for each hour of clock time.

Multitasking, however, is not a good strategy for helping us keep up with the flood of information. For example, if you wanted to view all the videos uploaded to YouTube today, it would take you an entire year of viewing and you would have to multitask by watching 20 screens every second of every day! While multitasking helps increase our exposure, it is not a good strategy to help us keep up with even a tiny fraction of media messages in the flood of information every day.

Dealing with the Information Problem

Although we are all saturated with information and each year the media are more aggressive in seeking our attention, we are able to deal with it. How is this possible? The answer lies in the way the human brain is wired and programmed: its hardware and software.

Our Mental Hardware

The most remarkable piece of hardware on Earth is the human brain. Although the human brain is relatively small (weighing less than four pounds), it has a remarkable capacity to take in information from the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell); process all that information by either filtering it out or attending to it; process its meaning; store it and later retrieve it; and make decisions that often stimulate action. The human brain is composed of 100 billion neuron cells—which is the number of stars in the Milky Way (Storr, 2019). Each cell is linked by synapses to as many as 100,000 others. That means your brain has created over 500 trillion stringlike fibers (called *axons*) and dendrites that connect with other neurons at junctions (called *synapses*). "These synapses constantly form and dissolve, weakening and strengthening in response to new experiences" (Haven, 2007, p. 22).

As the human brain is constantly monitoring the environment, thousands of neurons are receiving stimulation from thousands of other neurons and must decide whether to ignore the input or respond in some way by sending a signal to another specific neuron. "Somehow, through this freeway maze of links, loops, and electric traffic jams, we each manage to think, perceive, consider, imagine, remember, react, and respond" (Haven, 2007, p. 22).

Our Mental Software

How does this complex piece of hardware know what to do? The answer to this question is that the brain has been programmed to perform certain functions. This programming or software, which is sometimes referred to collectively as *the mind*, tells the brain how to function, much like the software on your computers tell them which functions to perform and how to perform those functions.

Some of this software has been hardwired into the brain before birth. For example, the brain automatically oversees the body's internal states by constantly monitoring the performance of the organs (heart, lungs, kidneys, etc.) to keep them functioning properly. The brain also has been programmed to monitor a person's environment for threats. For example, orienting reflex directs the brain to pay attention to the environment for sudden changes, such as loud noises or flashes of light, and when a potential threat is identified, the brain creates an attentional state that forces the person to examine the thing that triggered the attention to determine whether it is an actual threat or not. Also, the brain has been hardwired with a fight-or-flight reflex so that when a potential threat is encountered, the body is automatically made ready (increased heart rate and blood pressure) to either fight off the threat or run away to safety.

In addition to the hardwiring of the brain to maintain *physical* well-being, the brain has also been hardwired to enhance its *social* well-being. For example, the ability for language has been hardwired into human brains so that people can easily communicate. Throughout history, every culture has developed a language. While the basic ability to learn a language is hardwired, the learning of any particular language must be learned after birth so that each individual can use their language facility to transmit meaning to others and receive meanings from their culture.

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The human brain not only oversees autonomic functions like breathing, it also manages the choices we make and how we act in social situations.

As we accumulate experiences in life, our minds create additional programming that tells our brains how to perform additional functions, such as math or logical reasoning; how to work through moral problems; how to control one's emotions; and how to expand and grow the skills that would lead to rewarding careers and relationships. This additional programming initially comes from one's parents and siblings. It also comes from one's contact with cultural institutions, such as education, religion, politics, and government. It comes from one's friends, acquaintances, and even one's enemies. And it comes from the mass media. All of this additional programming shapes how we make decisions in our everyday world about what to wear, what to eat, what is important, how to act, and how to spend our resources of time and money. This programming is constantly running in our unconscious minds in the form of automatic routines.

Automatic Routines

The human mind can be wondrously efficient. It can perform many everyday tasks quickly by using **automatic routines**, which are sequences of behaviors or thoughts that we learn from experience and then apply again and again with little effort. Once you have learned a sequence—such as tying your shoes, brushing your teeth, driving to school, or playing a song on the guitar—you can perform it over and over again with very little effort compared to the effort it took you to learn it in the first place. As we learn to do something, we are writing the instructions, similar to a computer code in our minds. That code then runs automatically in our unconscious minds and serves to guide us through the task with very little thought or effort. To illustrate, recall your experience in first learning to type. You had to think of the individual letters in each word, think about which key controlled which letter, and then command a finger to press the correct key. It took you a long time to type out each word. But now, after much practice, your fingers (or thumbs) move over the keyboard quickly as you type out messages in seconds. Now when you message someone, you think only about the message while not having to think at all about the mechanics of typing.

Psychologists refer to this automatic processing of information as **automaticity**. Automaticity is a mental state in which our minds operate without any conscious effort from us. We encounter almost all media messages in a state of automaticity; that is, we put our minds on "automatic pilot" and automatically filter out almost all message options. I realize that this might sound strange, but think about it. We cannot consider every possible message and consciously decide whether to pay attention to it or not. There are too many messages to consider. Over time, we have developed automatic routines that guide this filtering process very quickly and efficiently so we don't have to spend much, if any, mental effort.

To illustrate this automatic processing, consider what you do when you go to the supermarket to buy food. Let's say you walk into the store with a list of 25 items you need to buy; 15 minutes later, you walk out of the store with your 25 items. In this scenario, how many decisions have you made? The easy answer is to say 25 decisions, because you made a separate decision to buy each of your 25 items as you put each item into your cart. But what about all the items you decided *not* to buy? The average supermarket today has about 40,000 items on its shelves. You actually made 40,000 decisions in the relatively short time you were in the supermarket—25 decisions to buy the 25 products and all those other decisions not to buy the remaining 39,975 products. How did you accomplish such an extensive task in such a short period of time? You relied on automatic routines.

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Deciding which brand is best, trying to tune out advertisements, and determining what you want versus what you need—these are all things we encounter when we're out shopping, and when we're engaging with media. How else is shopping in a supermarket similar to consuming media content?

Our culture is a grand supermarket of media messages. Those messages are everywhere whether we realize it or not, except that there are far more media messages in our culture than there are products in any supermarket. In our everyday lives—like when we enter a supermarket—a program is loaded into our mind that tells it what to look for and automatically filters out the rest. This automatic processing guides most—but certainly not all—of our media exposures. With automatic processing, we experience a great deal of media messages without paying any attention to them. Every once in a while, something in the message or in our environment triggers our conscious attention to a media message. To illustrate this, imagine driving in your car; you have music from your smartphone playing through your car's sound system but your attention is on the conversation you are having with your friend who is seated next to you. Then your favorite song starts playing, and your attention shifts from the conversation to the music. Or perhaps your conversation is interrupted when your friend notices that the sound system is playing her favorite song, and she starts singing along with the music. In both scenarios, you are being exposed to a stream of media messages from your car's sound system without paying conscious attention to them, but then something happens that triggers your conscious attention to the music.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The huge advantage of automatic processing is efficiency. When the filtering software is running automatically, it is making thousands of decisions for us without requiring us to expend any effort.

There are, however, some significant disadvantages. When we rely exclusively on our automatic routines, we get into a rut and miss out on paying attention to many messages that may be highly useful to us; we never know what we are missing. When our minds are on automatic pilot, we may be missing a lot of messages that might be helpful or enjoyable to us. We might not have programmed all the triggers we need to help us get out of automatic processing when a potentially interesting message comes our way. Returning to the supermarket example from above, let's say you are very health conscious. Had you been less concerned with efficiency when you went into the supermarket, you would have considered a wider range of products and read their labels for ingredients. Not all low-fat products have the same fat content; not all products with vitamins added have the same vitamins or the same proportions. Or perhaps you are very price conscious. Had you been less concerned with efficiency, you would have considered a wider variety of competing products and looked more carefully at the unit pricing so you could get more value for your money. Thus, when we are too concerned with efficiency, we lose opportunities that expand our experience and that put ourselves in a position to make better decisions that can make us healthier, wealthier, and happier.

Another disadvantage of relying on automatic routines is that over the long run, we start to experience message fatigue. When we feel overwhelmed by too many media messages, we try to protect ourselves by narrowing down our attention and thus filtering out even more messages. Eventually, we end up exposing ourselves to the same type of message over and over, and the value of each message keeps decreasing. This process weakens our ability to concentrate. In 1971, the Nobel Prize–winning economist Herbert Simon observed that "a wealth of information crates a poverty of attention" (Angwin, 2009, p. 239). This is illustrated by a study where experimenters set up a jam-tasting table in a food store. In this experiment, the researchers either offered people samples from six jams or 24 jams. While the table with more jams attracted 50% more visitors and tasters, the table with fewer jams stimulated more sales. Among the visitors to the table with the larger number of jams, only 3% bought some jam, while among the visitors to the table with the smaller number of jams, 30% bought some jam (Anderson, 2006). The lesson here is that while choice is attractive, too much choice can paralyze us into inaction. When we feel overwhelmed, we rely more and more on automatic routines and this leads us into a deeper and deeper rut, where we find ourselves doing the same things over and over.

The Big Question

Given that we live in a culture highly saturated with information and given that we protect ourselves from this flood of information with automatic routines programmed into our minds, the big question is this: Who benefits the most from the way automaticity has been programmed in your mind?

There is no simple answer to this question because many forces have been active in influencing how your code has been programmed over the course of your life so far. Some of this influence has come from parents, siblings, and friends who typically try to help you, so their influence is likely to have been positive. Some of this influence has come from institutions and society, which are typically prosocial influences, but they have also been concerned with pushing you to conform to their ideas of what you should believe and how you should behave. Then there are the media programmers and advertisers who are most concerned about influencing you in order to satisfy their own goals while convincing you that their products are satisfying your needs.

The task of sorting through all these influences requires some considerable analyses. This book will guide you through the media part of that analysis. Each of the 15 chapters in the instructional core of this book will show you how to ask the crucial questions about what you think about the world, what you believe to be true, and your habits of spending your resources of time and money. Through these analyses, you will gradually increase your awareness about the degree to which the media have programmed your automatic codes. This increased awareness will help clarify which parts of your code are not acting in your best interest and are likely training you to waste your personal resources, which leads to frustration, anxiety, and unhappiness. These insights will put you in a position to identify the faulty bits of code and help you to reprogram your existing codes so that they better serve your needs.

People who do not periodically examine the coding that governs their automatic routines are confined to stay in the trap of continually being controlled by outside influences. When we are not consciously paying attention and carefully evaluating our media exposures, the mass media continually reinforce certain behavioral patterns of exposure until they become automatic habits. We mindlessly follow these habits, which are delivering less and less valuable information and experiences. We allow advertisers to increase their influence as they continually program an uneasy self-consciousness into our minds so that we are on the lookout for products that will make us look, feel, and smell better. Advertisers have been very successful in programming many of us into a shopping habit. People in America spend more time shopping than people in any other country. A few years ago, 93 percent of teenage girls surveyed said that shopping was their favorite activity (Schwartz, 2004). Advertising has programed our automatic routines so that we shop even when it would be in our best interest to do other things. When you allow others to dominate the programming of your mind and when your mind runs on automatic pilot, then you end up behaving in ways that achieve the goals of those programmers rather than behaving in ways that would make you more happy.

If you are bothered that the media have been programming your automatic routines in order to satisfy their objectives rather than your personal objectives, then you likely have the motivation to learn how to take more control over this programming process. You will want to learn how to examine the code that has been programmed into your mind and sort through those programs that really do help you while eliminating those programs that make you unhappy. Increasing your personal control is what media literacy is all about.

Summary

We cannot physically avoid the glut of information that aggressively seeks our attention in our culture. Instead, we protect ourselves by psychologically avoiding almost all of the messages in the flood of information. We do this by keeping our minds on automatic pilot most of the time. This automaticity allows us to avoid almost all messages and to do so efficiently.

Automaticity, however, comes with a price. While we are in the automatic state, we allow the media to condition us to form all kinds of habits that consume our time and money. While some of these habits may be beneficial to us, others are not. Learning to tell the difference between the two requires a stronger media literacy perspective.

Gleick, J. (2011). *The information: A history, a theory, a flood*. New York: Pantheon Books. (526 pages, including index)

This is a rather long book that gets very technical in places with mathematical and engineering-type descriptions. But it is worthwhile if you really want to understand the nature of information and how it has changed forms over the years.

Schwartz, B. (2004). *The paradox of choice: Why more is less*. New York: HarperCollins. (265 pages including endnotes and index)

Barry Schwartz writes about how much choice the average person is now confronted with every day. He argues that increasing choice up to a point is a good thing, but beyond that point, increasing choice overwhelms people and they cease to make good decisions.

Silver, N. (2012). *The signal and the noise: Why so many predictions fail—but some don't*. New York: Penguin Press. (534 pages, including index)

The author documents the dramatic increase in information over the last several decades and argues that most of this information is noise, which makes it more difficult—rather than easier—to make good predictions and forecasts.

Wright, A. (2007). *Glut: Mastering information through the ages*. Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press. (252 pages, including index)

The author, who characterizes himself as an information architect, takes a historical approach to showing how humans have evolved in the way they generate, organize, and use information. He argues that all information systems are either nondemocratic and top-down (a hierarchy) or peer-to-peer and open (a network). Tracing the development of human information, he uses perspectives from mythology, library science, biology, neurology, and culture. He uses this historical background to critique the nature of information on the internet.

For some chapters, the material I talk about is very fluid and quickly changes. Therefore, some of the facts and figures I present may be out of date by the time you read a particular chapter. To help you find more up-to-date figures, I have included some sources of information that you can check out to get the most recent figures available.

Infoniac.com (http://www.infoniac.com/hi-tech/)

This site presents data about the growth of information in the world and provides general information about new developments in technologies.

Pingdom (royal.pingdom.com)

This is a blog written by members of the Pingdom team on a wide variety of topics concerning the internet and web tech issues. Begun in 2007, Pingdom is a company that provides internet services to companies around the world.

Statistical Abstract of the United States (https://www.census.gov/library/publications/time-series/statistical_abstracts.html)

Up until 2011, the United States Census Bureau of the Department of Commerce released a new statistical abstract from the data it gathered every year. Since then, this website presents links for reports based on data gathered by other organizations.

2

The media are able to constantly provide us with all kinds of useful information about our world.

David Malan/Getty Images

Media Literacy Approach

Key Idea: Media literacy is a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the media and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter. It is multidimensional and a continuum.

As you learned in the first chapter, we are constantly flooded with a huge number of messages from the mass media. We must screen out all but a tiny percentage. To help us do this screening with the least amount of mental effort, we default to automaticity, where our minds quickly screen out messages without any conscious awareness of this process. This automatic filtering process is governed by a set of procedures—much like a computer program—that runs unconsciously until something in a media message triggers our attention. While this filtering process is largely automatic, it is possible for us to gain greater control over it if we increase our media literacy.

What Is Media Literacy?

The most standard use of the term *literacy* applies to a person's ability to read the written word. However, with the advent of technologies to convey messages in addition to print, the idea of literacy was expanded to also include things such as visual literacy (the ability to process two-dimensional pictures of our three-dimensional world), story literacy (the ability to follow plots in books, film, and video), and computer literacy (the ability to create one's own digital messages, to send them to others electronically, to search for messages, and to process meaning from electronic screens). In this book, we do not focus on any one particular type of literacy but instead take a broad approach that considers all media.

Another characteristic within the writings about media literacy is a focus on the mass media as being harmful; that is, mass media messages expose people to risks of harmful effects. While acknowledging that media messages have the potential to increase the risk of harmful effects, this book attempts to show you that media messages also offer a great potential for positive effects—if we are open minded. To illustrate this point, let's consider the belief that newer forms of technology have harmed people's ability to write well. An illustration of this belief is John Sutherland, an English professor at the University College of London, who has argued that texting

has reduced language into a "bleak, bald, sad shorthand," that Facebook reinforces narcissistic drivel, and that PowerPoint presentations have taken the place of well-reasoned essays (quoted in Thompson, 2009). He says that today's technologies of communication that encourage or even require shorter messages (such as Twitter) have shortened people's attention spans and therefore have limited their ability to think in longer arcs, which is required for constructing well-reasoned essays.

Westend61/Getty Images

Understanding media literacy allows us to adapt to changing technologies and new forms of communication as well as open our minds to new kinds of messages.

Other people, in contrast, regard these newer formats for communication more positively. For example, Andrea Lunsford, a professor of writing and rhetoric at Stanford University, argues that the newer information technologies have actually increased literacy. She says, "I think we're in the midst of a literacy revolution the likes of which we haven't seen since Greek civilization" (quoted in Thompson, 2009). In addition, she argues that these new technologies of communication are not killing our ability to write well but instead are pushing it in new directions of being more personal, creative, and concise. She reached this conclusion after systematically analyzing more than 14,000 student writing samples over a five-year period. She explains that young people today are adept at understanding the needs of their audiences and writing messages especially crafted to appeal to them. For today's youth, writing is about discovering themselves, organizing their thoughts concisely, managing impressions, and persuading their readers.

When we open our minds, we see that there are both positive as well as negative effects of these newer forms of communication. The newer technologies of communication offer fewer opportunities to develop particular skills but increase the opportunities to develop other kinds of skills. Thus, it is faulty to regard the media's influence on our skill set as being either all good or all bad.

In addition to encouraging us to open our minds, media literacy also stimulates us to adapt to our changing world rather than to ignore those changes or to deny that those changes are happening. We adapt by opening ourselves up to a wider variety of messages and then by analyzing those messages for new elements and evaluating those elements so we can appreciate their value.

The Three Building Blocks of Media Literacy

The three building blocks of media literacy are **skills**, **knowledge structures**, and **personal locus**. The combination of all three is necessary to help you build a useful set of perspectives on the media. Your skills are the tools you use to build knowledge structures. Your knowledge structures are the organizations of what you have learned. Your personal locus provides mental energy and direction.

Skills

Many people who write about media literacy primarily consider it a skill, and the term they use to refer to this skill is *critical thinking*. While the term *critical thinking* sounds good, its use creates confusion because everyone seems to have a different meaning for it. Some people regard critical thinking as a willingness to criticize the media; other people define it as the need to examine issues in more depth; still others suggest a meaning of being more systematic and logical when interacting with the media; others imply that it means the ability to focus on the most important issues and ignore the rest—and the list goes on. In order to avoid this conglomeration of meanings, I will not use this term; instead, I will try to be clearer by showing you how media literacy relies on seven specific skills. These are the skills of analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstraction (see Table 2.1).

These skills are not exclusive to media literacy tasks; instead, we use these skills in all sorts of ways in our everyday lives. We all have some ability with each of these skills, so the media literacy challenge is not to acquire these skills; rather, our challenge is to get better at using each of these skills in our encounters with media messages. In the remainder of this section, I will define each of these skills and show how they are applied in a media literacy context. For a more detailed treatment of each of these skills, please see Potter (2019).

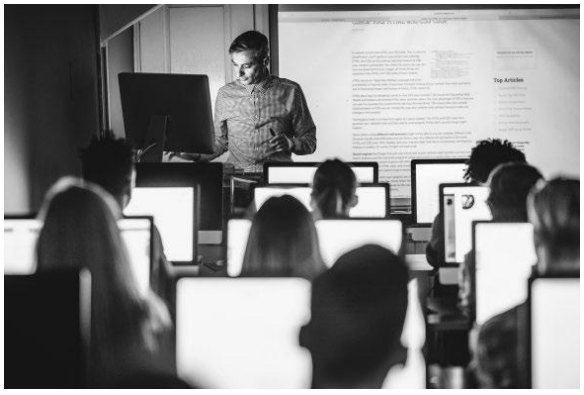
Analysis is the breaking down of a message into meaningful elements. As we encounter media messages, we can simply accept these messages on the surface or we can dig deeper into the message itself by identifying their components and examining the composition of those components that make up the message. For example, with a news story, we can accept what a journalist tells us or we can analyze the story for completeness. That is, we can break the story down into its components of who, what, when,

TABLE 2.1 ● The Seven Skills of Media Literacy

Skill	Definition
Analysis	Breaking down a message into meaningful elements
Evaluation	Judging the value of an element; the judgment is made by comparing a message element to some standard
Grouping	Determining which elements are alike in some way; determining how a group of elements are different from other groups of elements
Induction	Inferring a pattern across a small set of elements, then generalizing the pattern to all elements in the set
Deduction	Using general principles to explain particulars
Synthesis	Assembling elements into a new structure
Abstraction	Creating a brief, clear, and accurate description capturing the essence of a message in a smaller number of words than the message itself

where, why, and how to determine if the journalist has included all these components.

Evaluation is judging the value of an element. This judgment is made by comparing a message element to a standard. When we encounter opinions expressed by experts in media messages, we could simply memorize those opinions and make them our own or we could take the information elements in the message and compare them to our standards. If those elements meet or exceed our standards, then we conclude that the message—and the opinion expressed there—is good; but if the elements fall short of our standard, then we judge the message to be unacceptable.



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Analysis, one of the seven skills of media literacy, breaks down a message into meaningful components. Using this skill, we can be more critical of the media we consume in order to make more informed decisions.

There is a lot of evidence that people simply accept the opinions they hear in media messages without making their own evaluations. One example of this is the widespread opinion that in the United States, the educational system is not very good because children now spend too much time with the media, especially television. To illustrate, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is an agency of the U.S. federal government that uses standardized testing to assess the level of learning of America's youth in reading, science, and mathematics each year; it then compares their levels of learning with youth in 65 other countries. The 2012 Program for International Student Assessment report says that adolescents in the United States are ranked 24th in reading, 28th in science, and 36th in mathematics (NCES, 2012). Critiques of the U.S. educational system use information such as this to argue that adolescents spend too much time with the media and this makes their minds lazy, reduces their creativity, and turns them into lethargic entertainment junkies. If this happens, children will not value achievement and will not do well in school.

This criticism is faulty for several reasons. One reason for its faulty nature is that it blames the media exclusively and fails to acknowledge that academic performance is influenced by complex factors, especially parents' values for education and student motivations. Another reason is that it focuses only on negative effects and recognizes no potential for positive effects that continually accrue from media exposures of all kinds. When we analyze this criticism in a little depth, we can see that it is misleading. To illustrate, let's examine the often-heard criticism that television viewing is negatively related to academic achievement. What makes this faulty is that this relationship is explained better by something else—IQ. School achievement is overwhelmingly related to IQ. Also, children with lower IQs watch more television. It is IQ that accounts for lower achievement and higher television viewing. Research analyses that take a child's IQ into account find that there is no overall negative relationship; instead, there is a much more interesting pattern (see Potter, 1987). The negative relationship does not show up until the child's viewing has passed the threshold of 30 hours per week. Beyond that 30-hour point, the more television children watch, the lower their academic achievement, and that effect gets stronger with the more hours they watch beyond that threshold. This means that academic achievement goes

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As technology and media continue to advance, prolonged media exposure can have both positive and negative effects on children as they develop.

down only after television viewing starts to cut into study time and sleep. But there is no negative effect for less than 30 hours of viewing per week. In fact, at the lowest levels of television viewing, there is actually a positive effect; that is, a child who watches none or only a few hours a week is likely to do less well academically than a child who watches a moderate amount (around 12 to 15 hours per week). Thus, the pattern is as follows: Children who are deprived of the source of information that television provides do less well in school than children who watch a moderate amount of television; however, when a child gets to the point where the amount of television viewing cuts into needed study time, academic performance goes down. Television—as well as the internet and all other forms of media—have potentially positive as well as negative effects. Television exposure can displace constructive behaviors such as studying; but television can expand our experience, teach us valuable social lessons, and stimulate our imaginations. Keeping children from watching television can prevent a potentially negative effect but it also prevents positive effects as well.

When we pose the question, "What effect does viewing television have on a child's academic performance?" we could give the simple, popular answer: There is a negative effect. But now you can see that this answer is too simple—it is simpleminded. It is also misleading because it reinforces the limited belief that media effects are negative and that the media are to blame.

The reason faulty beliefs are such a dangerous trap is because they are self-reinforcing. By this, I mean that as people are continually exposed to faulty information, they feel even more secure that their faulty beliefs are accurate. They feel less and less motivated to challenge them. When someone points out that the information on which their beliefs are based is faulty, they do not accept this criticism because they are so sure that they are correct. Thus, over time, they are not only less likely to examine their beliefs but also less tolerant of the possibility that beliefs other than their own are correct.

Grouping is determining which elements are alike in some way, then determining how a group of elements are different from other groups of elements. This skill is so important that each chapter in the core instructional chapters from this chapter on includes a compare and contrast illustration of key terms so that you can develop a greater appreciation for how pairs of terms share similarities as well as illustrate differences that are key to making these terms distinct from one another.

The key to applying the grouping skill well relies on employing clear rules of classification. The media tell us what classification rules are, so if we accept their classification rules, we will end up with the groups they want us to use. But if we make the effort to determine which classification rules are the best ways for us to organize our perceptions of the world, we will end up with groupings that have more meaning and more value for us.

Induction is inferring a pattern across a small set of elements, then generalizing the pattern to all the elements in a larger set. We see examples of induction all the time—some good examples and some not so good. One example is a public opinion poll. Surveyors ask a few hundred people a question and then generalize the pattern in the answers they receive to the entire population. If the surveyors use a sample of people that represent the entire population, then this use of induction is good. However, if surveyors sample only one particular kind of person, then it is misleading to generalize their findings to the entire population, which is composed of all kinds of people.

We use induction in our everyday lives when we make a few observations and then generalize. For example, we might get sick and go to the emergency room for treatment but have to wait several hours before being seen by a doctor. We get angry and claim that the entire health care system is overburdened and that everyone has to wait too long to get medical care.

Deduction is using general principles to explain particulars, typically with the use of syllogistic reasoning. A well-known syllogism is (1) All men are mortal (general principle). (2) Socrates is a man (particular observation). (3) Therefore, Socrates is mortal (conclusion reached through logical reasoning).

The starting place for deductive reasoning is our collection of general principles. If our general principles are accurate, then we are likely to reach good conclusions. But when we have faulty general principles, we will explain particular occurrences in a faulty manner. One general principle that most people hold to be true is that the media, especially television, have a very strong negative effect on other people. Many people have an unrealistic opinion that the media cause other people to behave violently. Some people believe that if you allow public service announcements (PSAs) on television about using condoms, children will learn that it is permissible and even a good thing to have sex. This is clearly an overestimation. At the same time, people *underestimate* the influence the media have on them. When they are asked if they think the media have any effect on them personally, 88% say no. These people argue that the media are primarily channels of entertainment and diversion, so the media have no negative effect on them. The people who believe this say that they have watched thousands of hours of crime shows and have never shot anyone or robbed a bank. Although this may be true, this argument does not fully support the claim that the media have no effect on them; this argument is based on the false premise that the media only trigger high-profile, negative, behavioral effects that are easy to recognize, such as crimes. But there are many more types of effects, such as giving people the false impression that crime is a more serious problem than it really is or that most crime is violent.

Synthesis is the assembling of information elements into a new structure to reveal new relationships among the elements. This is an essential skill we use when building and updating our knowledge structures. As we take in new information, some of those facts might not fit into an existing knowledge structure, so we must adapt that knowledge structure to accommodate the new information. Thus, the process of synthesis uses our new media messages to keep reformulating, refining, and updating our existing knowledge structures.

Abstraction creates a brief, clear, and accurate description capturing the essence of a message in a significantly smaller number of words (or images, sounds, etc.) than

the message itself. Thus, when we are describing a media message to someone else or reviewing the message in our own minds, we use the skill of abstraction. The key to using this skill well is to be able to capture the big picture or central idea of the media message in as few words as possible.

These seven skills are the tools we use to create, alter, and update our knowledge structures. We use these tools to search through the flood of information to find those key bits we need for some purpose and then transform those bits in some way (judge their worth, look for a pattern, or draw a conclusion) so we can fit them into a meaningful knowledge structure. Also, it is important to know that skills are like muscles; the more you exercise them, the stronger they get. Without practice, skills become weaker.

Knowledge Structures

Knowledge structures are sets of organized information in your memory. If they were simply unorganized piles of random facts, then they would not be very useful. Instead, the information needs to be carefully organized into a structure that helps us see patterns that clarify how our worlds work. We use these patterns as maps to tell us where to get more information and also where to go to retrieve information we have previously encoded into our knowledge structures. To help visualize this, think about your bedroom. Are your books, papers, clothes, food wrappers, and everything else randomly scattered all over your bed, desk, closet, and drawers? If so, is it difficult for you to find things?

Information is the essential ingredient in knowledge structures. But not all information is equally useful in the building of a knowledge structure. Some information is rather superficial. If all a person has is the recognition of surface information such as the lyrics to some popular songs, the names of characters in some videos, the logos of some brands advertised in the media, and the like, then they are operating with a low level of media literacy because this type of information addresses only the question of "What?" The more useful information comes in the form of the answers to the questions of "How?" and "Why?" But remember that you first need to know something about the *what* before you can delve deeper into the *how* and *why*.

In everyday language, the terms *information* and *knowledge* are often used as synonyms, but in this book, they have meanings that are very different from one another. Information is piecemeal and transitory, whereas knowledge is structured, organized, and of more enduring significance. Information resides in the messages, whereas knowledge resides in a person's mind. Information gives something to the person to interpret, whereas knowledge reflects on that which is already been interpreted by the person. Information is composed of facts. Facts by themselves are not knowledge any more than a pile of lumber is a house. Knowledge requires structure to provide context and thereby exhibit meaning. Think of messages as the raw materials and think of skills as the tools you use to build your knowledge structures.

While I'm on the topic of distinguishing information from knowledge, I also need to define a few terms related to the idea of information: **message**, **factual information**, and **social information**. Messages are those instruments that deliver information to us from the media. Information is the content of those messages. Messages

can be delivered in many different media—websites, smartphones, television, radio, video games, books, newspapers, magazines, conversations, lectures, concerts, signs along the streets, labels on the products we buy, and so on. They can be large (an entire Hollywood movie) or small (one utterance by one character in a video).

Messages are composed of two kinds of information: factual and social. **Facts** are discrete bits of information, such as names (of people, places, characters, etc.), dates, titles, definitions of terms, formulas, lists, and the like. For example, when you watch the news and hear messages, those messages are composed of facts. This statement contains facts: *Donald Trump was elected to the office of President of the United States in the fall of 2016.*

Social information is composed of accepted beliefs that cannot be verified by authorities in the same way factual information can be. This is not to say that social information is less valuable or less real to people. Social information is composed of lessons that people infer from observing social interactions. These lessons are inferred from the patterns of actions and consequences we observe.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

FACTUAL INFORMATION AND SOCIAL INFORMATION

Compare: Factual information and social information are the same in the following ways:

Both are things we learn from exposure to media messages.

Both are stored in our memories and recalled when we have a need to use them.

Contrast: Factual information and social information are different in the following ways:

Factual information is raw, unprocessed, and context free whereas social information is composed of lessons that we infer from observing social interactions in context.

Factual information is typically discrete bits, such as names (of people, places, characters, etc.), dates, titles, definitions of terms, formulas, lists, and the like, whereas social information is composed of patterns, such as when we learn about how to dress, talk, and act in order for other people in society to consider us attractive, smart, athletic, hip, and so forth.

With media literacy, we need strong knowledge structures in five areas: media effects, media content, media industries, the real world, and the self. With good knowledge in these five areas, you will be able to make better decisions about seeking out information, working with that information, and constructing meaning from it that will be more useful in serving your own goals.

People who have had a wider range of experiences in the real world have a broader base from which to appreciate and analyze media messages. For example, people

who have played sports will be able to appreciate the athletic accomplishments they observe from the media to a greater depth compared to those people who have not physically tested themselves with those challenges. Those who have helped someone run for political office can understand and analyze press coverage of political campaigns to a greater depth than those who have not had any real-world experience with political campaigns. People who have had a wide range of relationships and family experiences will have a higher degree of understanding and more in-depth emotional reactions to those portrayals in the media.

Knowledge structures provide the context we use when trying to make sense of each new media message. The more knowledge structures we have, the more confident we can be in making sense of a wide range of messages. For example, you may have a very large, well-developed knowledge structure about a particular video series. You may know the names of all the characters in that series. You may know everything that has happened to those characters in all the episodes. You may even know the names and histories of the actors who play the characters. If you have all of this information well organized so that you can recall any of it at a moment's notice, you have a well-developed knowledge structure about that television series. Are you media literate? Within the small corner of the media world where that one video series resides, you are. But if this were the only knowledge structure you had developed, you would have little understanding of the bigger picture about patterns of content across all media platforms. You would have difficulty understanding trends about who owns and controls the media, how the media have developed over time, why certain kinds of content are never seen while other types are continually repeated, and what effects that content may be having on you. With many highly developed knowledge structures, you could understand the entire span of media issues and therefore be able to see the big picture about why the media are the way they are.

Your level of media literacy is determined in large part by how well you have developed knowledge structures in five areas: media audiences, media industries, media content, media effects, and yourself. This book presents structures and information to help you with the first four of these. To make a simple assessment of how well developed your knowledge structures are in these four areas of the media, do Exercise 2.1, which appears at the end of this chapter. Do the best you can in answering the questions in that exercise, but don't be too shocked if you cannot come up with many answers. Think of this exercise as a diagnostic tool that can tell you where you need to add more information, then keep those needs in mind as you actively read through the following chapters of this book. Also, at this point, don't worry about checking your answers for accuracy; you can do that later as you read the book. For now, let this diagnostic exercise simply help you assess where you think you have information.

Personal Locus

In order to develop and use the set of seven skills of media literacy to build useful knowledge structures, you need one more element—a strong personal locus. Your personal locus is composed of goals and drives. The goals shape information-processing tasks by determining what gets filtered in and what gets ignored. The more you are aware of your goals, the more you can direct the process of information seeking. And

the stronger your drives for information are, the more effort you will expend to attain your goals. However, when your locus is weak (i.e., you are not aware of particular goals and/or your drive energy is low), you will default to media control, where you allow the media to exercise a high degree of control over exposures and information processing. The more you know about your personal locus and the more you make conscious decisions to shape it, the more you can control the process of media influence on you. The more you engage your locus, the more you will be increasing your media literacy.

Being media literate, however, does not require that your personal locus be fully engaged every minute of every day. That would be an unreasonable requirement, because no one can maintain a high degree of concentration all the time. Instead, the process of increasing media literacy requires you to activate your personal locus in bursts. During these periods of high concentration, you can analyze your mental programs to make sure that they are set up to achieve your own personal goals rather than the goals of media programmers or advertisers. These periods of analyses will generate new insights about what is working well and where the glitches are. Then you can use those new insights to reprogram your mental code and fix the glitches by correcting faulty information, repairing uninformed opinions, and changing habits that are making you unhappy. Then once these alterations are made to your **mental codes,** you can return to automatic processing, where your newly programmed codes will better help you achieve your goals for information and entertainment.

The Definition of Media Literacy

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Media literacy is defined by a set of perspectives that we actively build so we can better interpret the messages we encounter. How does viewing a landscape change your perspective compared to only seeing a photo of it?

Now that I have laid the foundation for media literacy by setting out its three major building blocks, it is time to present its formal definition. **Media literacy** is a set of perspectives that we actively use when we expose ourselves to the mass media to process and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter. We build our perspectives from knowledge structures. To build our knowledge structures, we need tools, raw material, and willingness. The tools are our skills. The raw material is information from the media and from the real world. The willingness comes from our personal locus.

Notice that the definition begins with "a set of perspectives." What is a perspective? I'll illustrate this with an analogy. Let's say you wanted to learn about the Earth. You could build a platform on a 100-foot-tall tower, climb up to the top, and use that as your perspective to study the Earth. This tower would give you a good perspective that would not be blocked by trees so that you could see for perhaps several miles in any direction. If your tower were in a forest, you would conclude that Earth is covered with trees. But if your tower were in a suburban neighborhood, you would conclude

that Earth is covered with houses, roads, and shopping centers. If your tower were inside the New Orleans Superdome stadium, you would conclude something quite different. Each of these perspectives would give you a very different idea about Earth. We could get into all kinds of arguments about which perspective delivers the most accurate or best description of the Earth, but such arguments miss the point. The Earth is a complex phenomenon that cannot be fully understood by viewing it from one perspective. Increasing your understanding of the Earth requires that you view it from many different perspectives. The more perspectives you use, the more you will be able to understand this planet. This principle also holds with media literacy; that is, the more perspectives you have on the media, the better you will be able to understand the media phenomenon in all its variety.

To illuminate this idea of media literacy further, I need to describe two of its most important characteristics. First, media literacy is a multidimensional concept with many interesting facets. Second, media literacy is a continuum, not a category.

Media Literacy Is Multidimensional

When we build our set of perspectives, we need to ensure that we construct different types of perspectives to maximize the value delivered by a variety of perspectives. Thus, it is useful to think of our perspectives along four very different dimensions—cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral. Each of these four dimensions focuses on a different domain of understanding. The cognitive dimension focuses our attention on factual information—dates, names, definitions, and the like. Think of cognitive information as that which resides in the brain. This is the most fundamental dimension for building media literacy perspectives.

The emotional dimension focuses our attention on how we perceive the feelings of people in media messages and how we read our own feelings as they are triggered by those media exposures. Think of emotional information as that which lives in the heart—feelings of happy times, moments of fear, and instances of joy and confidence as we use the media to make friends and compete in games successfully. Some people have little ability to experience an emotion during exposure to the media, whereas others are very sensitive to cues that generate all sorts of feelings in them. For example, we all have the ability to perceive rage, fear, lust, hate, and other strong emotions. Producers use easy-to-recognize symbols to trigger these stronger emotions, so they do not require a high degree of literacy from audience members in order to perceive and understand those messages. But some of us are much better than others at perceiving more subtle emotions, such as ambivalence, confusion, wariness, mirth from irony, and so on. Crafting media messages that can trigger these more subtle emotions requires a higher level of skill by producers, and perceiving these subtle emotions accurately requires a higher degree of literacy from the audience.

The aesthetic dimension focuses our attention on the art and craft exhibited in the production of media messages. When we look for aesthetic information in messages, we orient toward making judgments about who is a great writer, photographer, actor, dancer, choreographer, singer, musician, composer, director, and other kind of artist. It also helps us make judgments about other products of creative craftsmanship, such as editing, lighting, set designing, costuming, sound recording, graphic layout,

and so forth. The ability to appreciate the aesthetic qualities in media messages is very important to some scholars (Messaris, 1994; Wulff, 1997). For example, Messaris (1994) argues that viewers who are visually literate should have an awareness of artistry and visual manipulation. By this, he means an awareness about the processes by which meaning is created through the visual media. What is expected of sophisticated viewers is some degree of self-consciousness about their role as interpreters. This includes the ability to detect artifice (in staged behavior and editing) and to spot authorial presence (style of the producer/director).

Think of aesthetic information as that which resides in our eyes and ears. Some of us have a good ear for dialog or musical composition. Some of us have a good eye for lighting, photographic composition, or movement. The more perspectives we have constructed from this aesthetic dimension, the finer the discriminations we can make between a great actress and a good one, between a great song that will endure and a currently popular "flash in the pan," between a film director's best and very best work, and between art and artificiality.

The moral dimension focuses our attention on values. Think of moral information as that which resides in your conscience or your soul. This type of information provides us with the basis for making judgments about right and wrong. When we see characters make decisions in a story, we judge them on a moral dimension—that is, the characters' goodness or evilness. The more detailed and refined our moral perspectives are, the more deeply we can perceive the values underlying the messages in the media and the more sophisticated and reasoned our judgments are about those values. It takes a highly media-literate person to perceive moral themes well. You must be able to think past individual characters to focus your meaning making at the overall narrative level. You need to be able to separate characters from their actions—you might not like a particular character, but you can still appreciate their actions in terms of fitting in with (or reinforcing) your values.

When your set of media literacy perspectives is constructed across all four of these dimensions, you can understand and appreciate the media more. But if your perspectives are limited to only one or two of these dimensions, then you will be limiting yourself by operating under a lower ceiling for media literacy. For example, you may be able to be highly analytical when you watch a video and quote lots of facts about the history of the genre, the director's point of view, and the underlying theme. But if you cannot evoke an emotional reaction, you are simply going through a dry, academic exercise.

Media Literacy Is a Continuum, Not a Category

The final characteristic of media literacy I need to emphasize is that media literacy is not like a box where either you are in the category or you are not: for example, either you are a high school graduate or you are not; either you are a college graduate or you are not. In contrast, media literacy is best regarded as a continuum—similar to a thermometer—where there are degrees.

We all occupy some position on the media literacy continuum. There is no point below which we could say that someone has no literacy and there is no point at the high end of the continuum where we can say that someone is fully literate; there is

always room for improvement. People are positioned along that continuum based on the strength of their set of perspectives on the media. The strength of a person's set of perspectives is reflected by the number and quality of knowledge structures. And the quality of knowledge structures is based on the level of a person's skills and experiences. Because people vary substantially on skills and experiences, they will vary on the number and quality of their knowledge structures. Hence, there will be a great variation of media literacy across people.

People operating at lower levels of media literacy have fewer perspectives on the media, and those perspectives are supported by knowledge structures that contain little information and are less organized. Thus, people with lower levels of media literacy have less ability to understand the media, to appreciate the wonderful advantages supplied by the media, and to protect themselves from dangerous risks. These people are also habitually reluctant or unwilling to use their skills, which remain underdeveloped and therefore more difficult to employ successfully.

The Development of Media Literacy

Media literacy is a broad continuum, as you have seen from the previous section. It involves the use of skills, knowledge structures, and personal locus along four dimensions (cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral). In order to illustrate how people can develop their media literacy, it is useful to think of various levels or stages. Table 2.2 displays a scheme with eight developmental stages. The first stage is *acquiring fundamentals*, which occurs during the first year of life. *Language acquisition* occurs during Years 2 and 3, and *narrative acquisition* happens during Years 3 to 5. These are stages that are typically left behind by children as they age into adolescence and adulthood.

The *developing skepticism* stage occurs from about 5 to 9 and the *intensive development* stage occurs shortly after. Many people stay in this stage the rest of their lives because this stage is fully functional; that is, people in this stage feel they are getting exposure to the messages they want and getting the meaning they want out of those messages. They feel they are fully media literate and that there is nothing more they need to learn.

The next three stages can be regarded as advanced because they require the continual use of higher-level skills and the active development of elaborate knowledge structures. People in the *experiential exploring* stage feel that their media exposure has been very narrow, and they seek exposure to a much wider range of messages. For example, people who have watched only prime time action/adventure and situation comedy programs will begin to watch news, PBS documentaries, travelogues, MTV, science fiction, offbeat sports, and so on. They will pick up niche magazines and books about unusual topics. The thrill for these people is to see something they have never seen before. This makes them think about the variety of human experience.

People in the *critical appreciation* stage see themselves as connoisseurs of the media. They seek out messages that offer greater appeal along the four dimensions—cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral. People in this stage exhibit strongly held opinions about who are the best writers, the best web designers, the best news reporters, and so on and they have lots of evidence to support their well-reasoned opinions. They can talk fluently and at length about what makes a good writer and how these elements are exhibited in a particular writer's body of work.

TABLE 2.2 ● Development of Media Literacy

Stage	Characteristics
Acquiring Fundamentals	Learn that there are human beings and other physical things apart from one's self; these things look different and serve different functions Learn the meaning of facial expressions and natural sounds Recognize shapes, form, size, color, movement, and spatial relations Rudimentary concept of time (regular patterns)
Language Acquisition	Recognize speech sounds and attach meaning to them Be able to reproduce speech sounds Orient to visual and audio media Make emotional and behavior responses to music and sounds Recognize certain characters in visual media and follow their movement
Narrative Acquisition	Develop understanding of differences: Fiction versus nonfiction Ads versus entertainment Real versus make-believe Understand how to connect plot elements By time sequencing By motive–action–consequence
Developing Skepticism	Discount claims made in ads Sharpen differences between likes and dislikes for shows, characters, and actions Make fun of certain characters even though those characters are not presented as foils in their shows
Intensive Development	Strong motivation to seek out information on certain topics Develop a detailed set of information on particular topics (sports, politics, etc.) High awareness of utility of information and quick facility in processing information judged to be useful
Experiential Exploring	Seeking out different forms of content and narratives Focus on searching for surprises and new emotional, moral, and aesthetic reactions
Critical Appreciation	Accept messages on their own terms, then evaluate them within that sphere Develop very broad and detailed understanding of the historical, economic, political, and artistic contexts of message systems Ability to make subtle comparisons and contrasts among many different message elements simultaneously Ability to construct a summary judgment about the overall strengths and weaknesses of a message

(Continued)

TABLE 2.2 • (Continued)

Stage	Characteristics
Social Responsibility	Take a moral stand that certain messages are more constructive for society than others; this is a multidimensional perspective based on thorough analyses of the media landscape Recognize that one's own individual decisions impact society, no matter how minutely Recognize that there are some actions an individual can take to make a constructive impact on society

Social responsibility is characterized by people having critical appreciation of all kinds of media messages, but instead of having a primarily internal perspective (as with the previous stage), the perspective here is external. The person at this stage not only asks, "What is best from my point of view and why?" but also is concerned with questions such as "What types of messages are best for others and for society?"

Now think of these eight stages as neighborhoods. You have a home neighborhood where you live, depending on your age, your personal locus, how well you have developed your skills, and how elaborate your key knowledge structures are. You can move around to other neighborhoods, depending on your needs. We are usually able to move up a stage or two from our home neighborhood. But moving up a stage requires a conscious effort; we must expend more energy in order to apply our skills systematically to meet the challenges posed by the higher level. Therefore, we typically do not move up a level unless we are strongly motivated to do so. For example, when you are reading a book that is considered a classic novel for a college course, you may be able to move up to the critical appreciation level. But when you flick on the television and watch MTV's *Pimp My Ride* or *The Hills* to relax, you might sink down to the intensive development level. There is nothing wrong with dropping down a level or two because there are times when we just want to "veg out" and don't want to spend the effort required to operate at a higher stage. However, remember that there is a difference between people who stay at the lower stages because they are unable or unwilling to operate at higher stages and people who are able to operate at all stages but who occasionally choose to take it easier at lower stages.

Advantages of Developing a Higher Degree of Media Literacy

There are primarily three advantages to developing a higher degree of media literacy. First, with increases in media literacy, your appetite for a wider variety of media messages will grow. Second, with increases in media literacy, you learn more about how to program your own mental codes. And third, with increases in media literacy, you are able to exercise more control over the media.

Appetite for Wider Variety of Media Messages

The media offer an incredible array of choices. The internet contains websites on every topic conceivable. Books are published each year on an extremely wide range of

topics. Magazines, with their 10,000 titles published each year, offer a much wider range than any one person can consume. Cable television is a bit more narrow, but with several hundred channels from most cable television providers, the choice is much wider than any one person can keep up with. However, the mass media continually try to direct our choices to a smaller set. For example, with magazines, there are about 10,000 magazines published in this country. When you go into a magazine store—like in an airport—you will see only about 100 magazines on the shelves. You likely do not scan through all 100 before making your choice about which one to buy and take on the plane. Instead, you rely on your automatic filtering to narrow your choice down to about three or four magazines that you have found interesting in the past—that is, the media have conditioned you to like these magazines. Do you have a choice? Yes, of course. But see how the media—first through the bookstore then through media conditioning—have narrowed your choice down considerably; in other words, the decision you made was determined 99.99% by factors other than you. The media have programmed you to think that you have choices when, in fact, the degree of choice is greatly limited. It is rather like parents laying out two pairs of dress pants—one black and the other dark blue—for their four-year-old son and giving him the total power to choose what he will wear today. Whether you regard this as a real choice depends on how much you know about the real range of options. If the boy's perspective on pants is limited to dark dress pants, then he will view his parent's offering of two pairs as a real choice. However, if his perspective is broader and includes knowledge about jeans, cargo pants, skater shorts, bathing trunks, and football pants, then he will think the two dress pants are not much of a choice.

The mass media continually try to constrain your choices so they can condition you into habitual exposure of a few types of media **vehicles**. This makes you more predictable from a marketing point of view.

The media literacy perspective encourages you to be more adventurous and explore a wider range of messages so that you can be more involved in your choices. When you do so, you will likely find that many of those messages are not interesting or useful to you; however, you will also likely find a few types of messages that are highly useful and these surprises will allow you to expand your exposure repertoire in a way that fulfills your needs even better.

More Self-Programming of Mental Codes

The purpose of media literacy is to empower individuals to make more of their own decisions about which messages to expose themselves to and to construct meanings from those messages to serve their own goals. When you operate at higher levels of media literacy, you have more power in programming your mental codes. This means that you reduce the power of the media in programming those codes that limit your media exposures to the habits they have built for you. You can reprogram your mental codes to open yourself up to new experiences. Also, you examine your standards and beliefs to find those that are faulty and replace them with standards and beliefs that are more of your own making. When you apply those more personal standards, you are making evaluations that are more in line with your own goals.

More Control over Media

Increasing your level of media literacy gives you more power to control media exposures and their eventual effect on you. At lower levels of media literacy, you default to media control; that is, the media will use you to achieve their own goals. The mass media are composed of businesses that are very sophisticated in knowing how to attract your attention and condition you for repeat exposures.

There are times when the media's business goals and your personal goals are the same, thus creating a win–win situation for both the media and you. But there are also many times when your personal goals are different from the media's goals; when this occurs, you need to make a decision about whether to go along with the media-conditioned habits or to break away from those conditioned habits to pursue your own goals. Oftentimes, we do not realize there is a decision to make because we are so firmly entrenched in those media-conditioned habits. The media literacy perspective will help you recognize when you have choices, especially in situations where the media's goals are different from your own goals.

Summary

The chapter presents a definition of media literacy as a perspective from which we expose ourselves to the media and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter. Media literacy is not a category; instead, there are degrees of media literacy. Media literacy is also multidimensional, with development taking place cognitively, emotionally, aesthetically, and morally.

Media literacy is composed of three building blocks: skills, knowledge structures, and personal locus. The skills are the tools that we use to work on information in the media messages to build strong knowledge structures. The direction and drive to do this work lies in one's personal locus.

People who are highly media literate are able to see much more in a given message. They are more aware of the levels of meaning. This enhances understanding. They are more in charge of programming their own mental codes. This enhances control. They are much more likely to get what they want from the messages. This enhances appreciation. Thus, people operating at higher levels of media literacy fulfill the goals of higher understanding, control, and appreciation.

Potter, W. J. (2016). *Introduction to media literacy*. Los Angeles: SAGE. (269 pages, including references, glossary, appendices, and index)

I wrote this introductory book by distilling the ideas from an earlier edition of the book you are reading.

Potter, W. J. (2019). *7 skills of media literacy*. Los Angeles: SAGE. (176 pages, including references and glossary)

This book presents a detailed description of the seven essential skills of media literacy along with exercises to help readers develop those skills.