

Preface

The mass media have been developing and refining an enhanced marketing strategy since the rise of the internet with its substantial interactive characteristics. The widespread use of this enhanced marketing strategy has created a qualitatively different challenge for media literacy. Therefore, this 11th edition of *Media Literacy* is more than an updating of facts and examples; this 11th edition also exhibits a new approach to media literacy that helps readers deal with not just the traditional threat from the media but also to deal with the new enhanced threat.

The previous 10 editions of *Media Literacy* focused on helping readers understand the traditional threat by presenting information and guidelines to help readers make informed choices about exposures as well as about processing the meaning from those messages. The reasoning behind the traditional threat is that the media continually offer an overwhelming flood of messages that vary considerably in the degree of risk of harm to users. Exposures to particular kinds of media messages are likely to cause recognizable harm to certain kinds of users. Thus, for decades, the purpose of media literacy has been to teach users how to protect themselves from these various harms as well as empower them to use the media in ways that can improve the quality of their lives, and by extension, overcome some of the problems arising in society.

While the traditional threat still exists, an enhanced threat has been growing in power and scope over the past few decades as the mass media have been using the interactive capabilities of the internet to access all kinds of information from all individuals, then to use that wealth of information along with a deep understanding of the subconscious processes of the human mind to develop an enhanced strategy that they use to market their expanding list of products. Media businesses have learned to use these interactive capabilities in increasingly powerful ways to achieve their business goals. But this business success has also produced byproducts that are harmful to more people in more dangerously insidious ways than ever before.

This enhanced threat differs from the traditional threat not just quantitatively but also qualitatively. That is, not only does the enhanced threat exert a stronger influence on users in terms of its degree and scope, that influence is also of a different kind. Thus, the challenge for media literacy has expanded.

The growth in the need for media literacy is attributed not just to the increase in media influence, nor can it be attributed solely to the appearance of new media effects (e.g., cyberbullying, flaming, trolling, internet addiction, fear of artificial intelligence) or to the growth in salience of some other media effects that have been relatively rare in the past and have grown in importance (e.g., ghosting, gaslighting, dealing with fake news).

In this 11th edition, the generating idea for media literacy is the need to help people deal with the massive increase in media influence building up over the last several decades. What makes this need so pressing is that people are largely unaware of this increase in influence due to its subtlety. Because this increase in media power takes place in tiny steps, it is impossible to

notice its build-up until it is too late, much like sitting in a pot of water on a low flame where the steady rise in water temperature is so gradual that it is not noticed until it is almost too late. And even more importantly, this increase in influence takes place in our subconscious where our ability to notice it is very limited—unless we are taught how to perceive the way the media's constant conditioning of us has been shaping the way we think and act. Presenting these crucial ideas and showing how those ideas require a new approach to media literacy is the focus of this 11th edition.

New Approach to Media Literacy

This new edition of *Media Literacy* starts with an argument for why an updated approach for dealing with the enhanced threat from the mass media is so important. That is, the way media businesses have been using the interactive capabilities of the internet to enhance their marketing strategy has dramatically increased the power of the media to exert their influence on all of us continually at a subconscious level. Because of these changes, our approach to media literacy needs to change. In Chapter 3, the **Spiral Approach**, which is a reconceptualization of media literacy in a way that better addresses the most important challenges that media literacy now faces. Addressing these challenges starts with the need to understand just how the influence of media literacy has grown so much. Then we need to build a better understanding about the consequences of this influence; doing that requires us to focus more on processes of human thinking than on triggering observable effects. And most importantly, the ultimate challenge is to present a strategy that you can use in your everyday life to start unwinding the years of media conditioning and thereby gain back your agency that has been steadily eroding.

One of the features of this Spiral Approach is the need for people to acquire information in particular areas. In Chapters 4 through 14, I present you with the core information needed in each of three areas: media businesses, media content, and media effects. Another key feature of the Spiral Approach is the need for people to continually improve a set of information-processing skills. Each of the chapters from 4 through 14 concludes with a set of exercises designed to help you use the Spiral Approach in working through a range of media literacy challenges where you are guided through a process of discovering more about yourself, your exposure habits, and their consequences.

My Approach to Writing

You are likely to get more out of reading this book when you know a few things about the perspective I used when writing it.

Negotiating simplicity with complexity. I have tried to balance two competing challenges. One challenge is to present ideas as clearly and simply as possible so that you can quickly comprehend their meaning. The other challenge is to present complex ideas without oversimplifying them. Therefore, it helps if as a reader of this book, you regard the information

I present as an introduction that is designed to stimulate you to want to read more and think more about the nature of the threat from the mass media.

Contextual flow. I try to present individual ideas within a flow of reasoning where each idea increases in value by the way it builds off previous ideas and leads into the next one. Therefore, it is important that you *not* try to simply memorize each idea as a stand-alone unit as if it is complete and enduring; instead, try to absorb their meanings in the context of an unfolding story that is designed to tell you about why media literacy is so important.

Instructional value of metaphors. I will frequently use metaphors to make my points. I do this for two reasons. First, metaphors are helpful in illustrating complex, abstract ideas in simpler, more tangible ways. Second, metaphors can often trigger a flash of insight that can show you connections, which are often hard to grasp in a long, wordy definition. I hope you will find my use of metaphors useful as a way to help you to see abstract patterns in a concrete manner as well as helping you to grasp a complex idea with a simple example.

How to Get the Most Out of Reading This Book

As you read this book, try to avoid thinking about the experience as a forced march through hundreds of pages of fossilized facts that you are expected to scrape off the pages and load into the backpack of your mind. Instead, try to think of the process of reading this book as a guided tour through parts of your everyday world, where I point out things that you have been taking for granted. I hope that reading this book will stimulate you to notice an increasing number of ways that your everyday media exposures have been shaping and reshaping the way you have come to think about yourself, how you spend your time, and what you expect to get out of life. This book was written less as a conveyor belt delivering facts that you need to memorize to do well on tests, and more as a wake-up alarm to remind you that facts are not always facts, and what you think you have been seeing is not always what actually exists.

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 what to expect 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 active in the front of your mind as you read, you will be able to recognize what the most important ideas are and to remember them.

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 answers your questions?

This book is composed of 15 core instructional chapters followed by three 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 into three areas: knowledge about the media industries, knowledge about media content, and knowledge about media effects. 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.

Do not get caught in the trap of thinking that it is sufficient to memorize the facts in each chapter. 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 three 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 examines the growing concern about privacy and how the mass media have been using the interactive capabilities of the internet to collect and use an astonishing amount of information about you without your awareness. The second issue examines the growing concern about the deteriorating quality of news and analyzes why it is such a difficult problem to solve. This section concludes with Issue 3 that focuses on the controversy over how the nature of sports has changed due to the accelerating money cycle.

If you engage these three 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 the issue-generated problems that you previously thought were too big, too complicated, and the fault of other people.

As you read through this book, think of your primary challenge as putting together the pieces of a puzzle. Have you ever done a puzzle that has hundreds of pieces? Getting started is tough, but the picture on the box really helps. I will show you the outlines of such a picture in the first two chapters. This should get you started. Then, beginning with Chapter 3, think about each insight and fact as another piece of a puzzle. As you encounter each new piece, do not simply memorize the information displayed on that piece; instead, fit that piece into a pattern. As you progress through each additional chapter, the overall pattern will become clearer. When you use this metaphor of assembling pieces of a puzzle, the process of reading will become more efficient and more fun. It will also become more rewarding as your vision of media literacy grows more complete.

Now think beyond the task of simply assembling the pieces to try to replicate the picture on the box. Instead, think of your job as being more organic and more fun. Think about creating

your own pieces and fitting them into your evolving knowledge structure. When you finish, the big picture you have is similar to the picture on the box, but it is better because it also includes your own thoughts and experiences. It is a picture that is richer with detail and much more meaningful because it is personal. And finally, think about the picture as not being finished when the course is over. Instead, think of this experience as your start in growing your power to design the best version of your life while using the media as your tools to achieve your goals instead of letting the media use you as a tool for them to achieve their goals.

Additional Teaching Resources

Visit **collegepublishing.sagepub.com** to find the teaching materials designed to accompany this textbook. On this site you will find an array of materials that will save you time and help you keep students engaged, including:

- **Test banks**, aligned to Bloom's Taxonomy, that provide a diverse range of test items, including multiple choice, true/false, and essay questions;
- **PowerPoint® slides** that offer a flexible, accessible, and customizable solution for creating multimedia lectures;
- **Tables and figures from the book** are available to support lecture preparation and class discussions.

Chapter 1

The Need for Media Literacy



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Key Idea: The need for media literacy has grown over the past several decades as mass media businesses have been developing an enhanced marketing strategy that has resulted in a new kind of threat.

Ever since people have been exposing themselves to media messages, there has been a growing concern that these messages could be causing harm to individuals and to society in general. This

concern has stimulated media researchers to test this claim, and over the past century, they have produced a very large research literature of several thousand studies, which provides evidence that when certain kinds of people are exposed to particular kinds of media content, they are susceptible to a wide variety of negative effects (see Potter, 2012, 2021).

As criticism about the media has been increasing along with evidence of potential harms, there has also been an increasing number of people calling for the use of media literacy as a way to educate the public about the potential harms that could arise from media exposures, and more importantly, about the ways that individuals can protect themselves from those potential harms. For the past half century, scholars have been developing an approach of media literacy, which has demonstrated some success in protecting people from experiencing a few particular negative effects by training them in various techniques as well as alerting them to the kinds of content to avoid. This approach to media literacy education has also served to empower some people to become better consumers of media messages so that they can use their exposures to live a better life. However, the ideas in this traditional approach to media literacy do not seem to have much potential to deal with the newer kinds of threats that have arisen over the past several decades as mass media businesses have been using the interactive capabilities of the internet to develop a much more powerful marketing strategy. There are now two kinds of threats—traditional and enhanced—which offer two different kinds of challenges for media literacy.

This chapter shows how the mass media have been significantly increasing their influence over the past two decades. Then the chapter demonstrates why the existing traditional approaches to media literacy have outlived their usefulness because they are not able to be effective in helping media users deal adequately with the increasing influence from mass media businesses. The chapter concludes with an argument for why a fresh approach to media literacy is now desperately needed, and sets up the introduction of such an approach, which is then introduced in the following chapter.

I. Evolution of Media Marketing Strategies

As each new mass medium has been developed (especially radio in the 1920s, broadcast television in the 1940s, cable television in the 1970s, and now the internet starting in the 1990s), the amount of time people spend with the media has continued to increase. In the 1990s, each person was spending a total of about 7 hours per day exposed to the media. With the introduction of **digital media** and mobile devices, media exposure has been increasing until by 2024, people were spending an average of 12 hours, 37 minutes per day with more than 8 of those hours with the digital media (Guttmann, 2024). This significant increase in exposure time throughout the population raises the question: What are mass media businesses doing that leads so many people to keep increasing the time they spend exposing themselves to these media products? To answer this question, we need to examine how mass media businesses have been enhancing their marketing strategy.

To illustrate this change, I will first describe the predominant marketing strategy used by media businesses up until the 1990s, then contrast this **traditional marketing strategy** with

their newly developed strategy, which I call the **enhanced marketing strategy** because it involves an evolution from the traditional strategy that enhances its marketing power through the use of the internet and its interactive characteristics (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 • Marketing Strategies of Media Businesses: Traditional and Enhanced

The Traditional Marketing Strategy	The Enhanced Marketing Strategy
Step 1: Create Products Content experts design and create products they believe will attract a large audience	Step 1: Identify Public Wants - Observe the everyday public discourse to identify what people are concerned about, what they complain about, and what they like - Identify wants that are currently either: - Not being met to audience satisfaction - Not being met at all
Step 2: Select Potential Audience Use various audience segmentation schemes to identify the kinds of people who may be most likely to want exposure to their various entertainment and informational products	Step 2: Develop Products - Create products (messages and platforms) designed to meet the expressed wants - Continually interact with potential users to pilot test products as they are being developed so their value can be maximized
Step 3: Persuasion Place ads in various media to stimulate potential audience members to expose themselves to their new products	Step 3: Construct Niche Audience - Identify potential users of the newly developed product - Attract potential users into a niche audience
Step 4: Build Product Loyalty As the audience for the product grows, persuade those people to keep coming back for habitual exposures	Step 4: Condition Users - Maintain niche audiences by continually shaping the way members think and act - Create a sense of cocooning where members feel pampered and protected - Motivate members to contribute to the media business marketing plan by acting as viral agents

A. Traditional Marketing Strategy

Until the 1990s, mass media businesses had been using a fairly traditional marketing strategy, but since then, media businesses have been developing an enhanced marketing strategy that has made them significantly more successful at attracting audiences to their ever-widening range of

products. In its simplest form, that traditional marketing strategy is composed of four steps. First, media businesses used content experts to design and create their products, which were typically messages that could attract people who wanted entertainment and/or information. Second, they segmented the general population into different audiences in order to identify those audience members who were most likely to want to expose themselves to their media products. Third, they tried to persuade those selected audience segments to expose themselves to their products. And fourth, they tried to build product loyalty as a way to ensure that their current users would continue, and even increase, their usage.

Notice that this traditional marketing strategy relied on content experts to develop products that would attract a large enough audience to warrant the cost required to develop those products. These experts then developed fully formed products, then made them available through various media, such as in print form (books, magazines, newspapers), in audio form (sound recordings, radio shows), and in an audio-visual motion form (movies, broadcast TV, cable TV). Once a product was developed, the marketers had to figure out a way to persuade people to expose themselves to that product in large numbers.

The reliance on experts and persuasion as primary marketing tools was found to have very limited usefulness. Experts were often wrong, because their decisions were still guesses about the fickle tastes of the public for entertainment and information. Even though experts typically studied large databases of audience exposures and relied on years of experience, they were limited to predicting the future by looking in the rearview mirror. Also, trying to persuade people that particular products could satisfy their needs had limited value, because trying to talk people into something often creates an adversarial relationship that becomes a test of wills, with one person being the winner and the other the loser.

Media businesses had been struggling with these limitations for the better part of the 20th century. But with the rise of the internet in the 1990s, media businesses were given an opportunity to work around these limitations by using the interactive capabilities of the internet to eliminate their reliance on experts and greatly increase the attractiveness of their products without having to rely so much on traditional techniques of persuasion.

B. Enhanced Marketing Strategy

Since the late 1990s, media businesses have been making substantial improvements to their marketing practices by taking full advantage of the interactive capabilities of the internet. These interactive features have enabled them to create marketing techniques that make them more successful by improving each of the four steps in the traditional marketing model.

First, the interactive capabilities of the internet provided the media with the ability to generate much better data about the kinds of media products that the public wants, and this helped media businesses reduce their reliance on experts and guesswork. By using the internet, media companies started to eavesdrop on people as they expressed their unvarnished opinions on social networking sites. Businesses were able to monitor actual conversations where ordinary people in everyday life praised or complained about particular movies they saw, videos they liked, news stories that upset them, and on and on. And because the sources of those opinions are always

identified, media companies are able to follow up and ask particular people for clarifications of their opinions and probe their thoughts more in depth.



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.

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Second, media businesses began to create their new products in partnership with people who expressed particular wants by continually pilot testing the features of their products to enhance the things that worked well and eliminate the elements that did not. By developing products in this way, media companies were able to reduce the high level of risk that came with the old product creation method of relying on experts to guess what people wanted.

Third, the enhanced marketing strategy provides media business with much more control over creating and maintaining audiences. Instead of identifying an existing audience, then marketing products to the members of that audience, media business are now able to use the interactive capabilities of the internet to construct new audience groupings from scratch by identifying potential users of their new products, then herding those people together into a new **niche audience**.

Fourth, once media businesses have created their niche audiences of product users, they use the interactive capabilities of the internet to condition those audience members for repeated usage in far more successful ways than were available before the internet. Once they have created a niche audience of users, media businesses continuously monitor those users' experiences so that they can identify potential problems early and quickly fix them. In this **audience conditioning** step, the media try to do more than reward users so that they will continue to grow their exposure habits; media businesses also attempt to shape the way users think about media exposure by using psychological principles to alter users' beliefs about the value of those exposures by nudging them to continually overestimate the payoffs while underestimating their costs. Ultimately, media businesses want to condition those audience members to not just become loyal users but also to become active agents by stimulating their niche audiences to post positive reviews on internet

sites as well as engaging in everyday conversations with their friends where they mention their media products favorably.

Notice that this enhanced marketing strategy has a much more ambitious goal beyond simply stimulating continual exposure to their product. Media businesses also want to stimulate their users to extend the company's marketing influence by willingly becoming active influencers. To achieve this much more ambitious goal, media businesses needed a way to exercise a much higher degree of influence on all media users. The enhanced marketing strategy gives media companies the means to exercise that greater influence, which was good for business, but not so good for the public.

This transformation of marketing strategies from traditional to enhanced is not limited to media businesses. This transformation has been taking place with all commercial businesses who strive to be more successful in marketing their products, and it has spread to noncommercial entities who want to market ideas. Thus, the use of the enhanced marketing strategy by media businesses is greatly amplified as virtually all companies and organizations involved in any marketing efforts have greatly increased their reliance on media businesses to help them achieve tasks in all four of the steps in the enhanced marketing strategy.

II. Changes in the Nature of the Threat From Media Exposures

The media businesses' use of the enhanced marketing strategy has transformed the nature of the threat posed from exposures to media content. The change in the threat is not just an increase in the number of effects on individuals and society. Nor is it just an increase in marketing influence. Instead, the enhanced marketing strategy has created a change in the very nature of the threat. To illustrate this change, I will first describe the nature of the **traditional threat** posed by exposure to media content up until the 1990s, then contrast that with the **enhanced threat** posed by exposure to media content since that time (see Table 1.2).

Table 1.2 ■ Comparing the Traditional Threat With the Enhanced Threat

Traditional Threat	Enhanced Threat
1. Focus on effects • Media influence is evidenced by the occurrence of manifestations • Typically manifested during or immediately after exposure • Typically negative	1. Focus on processes • Media influence is a process of shaping how people think and act • The process might or might not result in observable manifestations – The absence of a manifestation does not mean there was no influence

Traditional Threat	Enhanced Threat
2. Consequences are variable • Threat is stronger with particular kinds of media content • Threat is stronger on particular kinds of individuals	2. Consequences are uniform • Everyone has their thinking shaped by the threat – Exposure to different kinds of content does not matter – Differences across people do not matter; everyone is susceptible • All individuals are constantly experiencing media influence • It is difficult to perceive the consequences of the threat because they are so gradual, and they occur largely within a person's subconscious.
3. Threat is direct • Media influence flows from media content to the individual • Particular characteristics of the media content and the individual can increase or decrease the degree of media influence	3. Threat is widely diffused • The threat works its influence whenever individuals are exposing themselves to any kind of media message or experience. • Because the threat re-shapes how people think and act, whenever people express their thoughts or commit an action, the influence of the threat moves virally to all other people, groups, and institutions. • The threat has moved outward from the media industry to all other industries composed of businesses that want to be more successful in designing and marketing products that will attract consumers more efficiently and more effectively.
4. Implications for media literacy • Because the source of the threat is particular kinds of media content, people can prevent experiencing negative effects by avoiding exposure to those particular kinds of content • People who experience a negative effect can be trained in the use of techniques to reduce the severity of effects	4. Implications for media literacy • Because the threat works so subtly at an unconscious level, the first task of media literacy is to educate people about how to be able to perceive its influence. • Because the threat has been gradually altering how people think and act for decades, it will take a long-term strategy to identify those alterations, then to unwind them.

A. The Traditional Threat

From the earliest days of the mass media, critics and people in general have been concerned about the effects of exposure to media content. When examining the public criticism along with the research it generated as well as how educators have been trying to help people deal with media effects, three salient characteristics emerge as indicators of the thinking about the nature of the threat from the media.

First, the traditional threat is focused on effects. These effects are typically observable during or immediately after a media exposure, are typically negative, and are typically regarded as a sudden change. For example, the effects can appear as a change in attitude, an emotional reaction, a physiological change (e.g., an increase in heart rate, salivation, galvanic skin response), or a sudden manifestation of an emotion (e.g., anger, frustration, etc.). And most typically the effect is a manifestation of a behavior (e.g., aggression, etc.). While this traditional thinking about media effects does not consciously rule out consequences that are positive or that take a long time to manifest, the criticism rarely mentions these, and researchers rarely test for them.

Second, the consequences of the traditional threat are variable. That is, different kinds of media content are believed to lead to different kinds of effects. For example, exposure to an action/adventure film with wall-to-wall violence is likely to trigger an increase in a viewer's physiological arousal and often aggressive behavior. A news program that presents biased stories will lead to viewers incorporating faulty facts into their memory banks. Also, effects vary across different kinds of people. For example, when young children are exposed to a horror movie, they are likely to experience intense fear, but this effect is much less common among teenage boys who have already been exposed to many horror films. And the false information presented in biased news reports is more likely to be accepted as true by viewers who have a political orientation that is displayed in the biased news reports.

Third, media influence is primarily regarded as a direct influence that triggers the effects. When people who are more highly susceptible to a particular effect expose themselves to a particular kind of media content, media exert a direct influence that is likely to trigger the occurrence of the effect. Although there are hundreds of media effects studies where the designers have tested for dozens of intervening variables (those possible influences that serve to increase or decrease the power of the direct effect), researchers have yet to find any variable that consistently changes the direct effect in any substantial way.

B. The Enhanced Threat

The power of the enhanced marketing strategy is not generated by the businesses increasing their ability to persuade you. That is, they have not figured out a way to be more skilled in using rhetorical devices to talk you into exposing yourself to messages that you do not want to see. Instead, the power of their influence comes from their ability *to make you want* to develop particular exposure habits that end up benefiting those businesses' goals. This is not to say that users of the media are being trained to want to help marketers reach their goals; instead, marketers are training users to think in certain ways and to engage in certain behaviors that users are

conditioned to believe are in their best interests while not recognizing that such thoughts and behaviors are serving the needs of media businesses more so than their own needs. By shaping how you think about things, media businesses are convincing you to believe that your decision to use their products is your idea and that you are actively choosing their content because you believe that doing so is in your own best interest. By using psychological principles to fashion a particular kind of reward structure, the media are constantly creating the conditions where you will consistently find value in the general concept of media exposure. Thus, they no longer are just trying to attract you to their next media product; instead, they are conditioning you over the long run to want to seek out and value the manipulated comfort of media exposure in general. To help you understand how the enhanced threat is different from the threat that people traditionally thought, I will emphasize three ideas.



Media businesses influence you to believe that your decision to use their products is your idea and that you are actively choosing their product because you believe that doing so is in your own best interest.

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First, with the enhanced threat, media influence is oriented much more on shaping the process about how we think and how we make decisions about how to act. This shaping influence can eventually lead to observable effects; however, when observable effects fail to occur, this does not mean that there has been no media influence. A way to understand this point is to think about the adage: Give people a fish and you feed them for one day; teach people how to fish and you feed them for life.

Second, the enhanced threat works with the constant application of influence that eventually builds up to an effect that can be manifested, but the individual changes in that sequence that lead up to an effect are so tiny that they are not noticeable in day-to-day comparisons. To illustrate this point, think about people who have crooked teeth and go to an orthodontist to have their teeth straightened. The orthodontist does not insert a pair of pliers to yank each tooth into alignment in one session so that suddenly all your teeth manifest perfect alignment. Instead, the orthodontist installs devices on your teeth that exert a tiny amount of pressure each day over a period of a year or longer until one day your teeth eventually manifest perfect alignment.

Because the change to your teeth is so tiny each day, you will likely conclude that the treatment is having no effect unless you take a much longer-term perspective on expecting change. With the enhanced threat, the influence is applied in such tiny steps that it cannot be observed at any given time, but over a long period of time, there are changes that emerge. Also, with the enhanced threat, those changes occur at a subconscious level, which also makes them difficult to observe. Thus, the enhanced threat is constantly working by shaping the way you think and act, rather than suddenly triggering a clear change in your behavior.

Third, media influence is so widespread that it affects everyone. It does not matter what content you expose yourself to; the media influence is still subtly shaping the process. It does not matter how you differ from other people; the influence of shaping the process is still the same. Even if you are able to avoid all direct exposure to media messages, you are still being constantly influenced by the enhanced threat indirectly if you interact with other people who have been undergoing direct conditioning that is constantly changing the way they think and act.

The threat has moved outward from the media industry to all other industries. When commercial businesses advertise their products in mass media messages and on media platforms, they become part of the threat as those businesses see a way to be more successful in designing and marketing their own products that will attract consumers more efficiently and more effectively.

The influence from the enhanced threat is so widespread and constant that it has become “background noise” in the environment. We have learned to tune it out, much like we do with things like the hum of an air conditioner. But tuning it out does not mean that the threat is no longer working; it simply means that we are unaware of it until it finally accumulates into something we can observe.

As you can see, the enhanced threat is very different from the traditional threat. The enhanced threat differs from the traditional threat not just because it exhibits an increased level of influence but more importantly, the enhanced threat is a very different way to think about how exposures to media products exert that increased influence. Therefore, we need a different way to think about media literacy.

III. Need for a New Approach to Media Literacy

Media literacy has always been regarded as a tool that can help people deal with the potential threats to their well-being that can arise from exposure to media messages. Until relatively recently, the threat was typically regarded the same way even when newer forms of the mass media were added every few decades throughout the 20th century. But then in the 1990s with the rise of the internet with its interactive capabilities, a new kind of threat emerged. While the techniques used by media literacy have shown some limited success in dealing with the older type of threat, those traditional techniques do not seem useful to address the threat that is now emerging. The challenge for media literacy has changed (see Table 1.2).

A. The Role of Media Literacy With the Traditional Threat

The traditional threat that the media have posed for decades is the same kind of threat that is posed by most products; that is, consumers could experience harm if they misuse products. Media messages are like other manufactured products (e.g., automobiles, toasters, lawn mowers, etc.) in the sense that when products are misused, consumers increase their risk of experiencing a harmful consequence. Also, with many manufactured products, consumers need to be trained to understand the proper usage of them so that consumers can avoid risk of harm while they enjoy the benefits they expected when they bought the product.

Media literacy has dealt with this traditional threat in two different ways. Some media literacy practitioners—those who have a protectionist perspective on media literacy—focus their efforts on helping people avoid media exposure situations that are likely to trigger a harmful effect on them. Protectionists deliver instructional lessons that are designed to train people to use techniques that help them either (a) avoid exposures to certain kinds of content that might lead to the manifestation of a negative effect or (b) interpret the meanings in media messages in an alternative manner. While these interventions have been found to deliver some value in helping people deal with the traditional threat, they have little potential value to help people deal with the enhanced threat.

Another group of media literacy practitioners hold a more macro perspective on the value of media literacy by speculating on ways that long-term educational efforts can help the general population use their media exposures to improve their lives and thereby help improve society and its institutions (e.g., Buckingham, 2003; Freire, 1970; Masterman, 1994). Their decades of persuasion have started to pay off, because many countries (e.g., Finland, England, Canada, Portugal) now teach media literacy in their public education. By the end of 2023, there were 21 states in the United States that had taken legislative action to institute media literacy instruction in K–12 public education (Fromm, 2024). While all of these efforts to teach media literacy have worthy goals like helping students to become critical thinkers and to develop the skills needed to improve their ability to process information, designers of the actual curricula have encountered serious limitations with translating these idealistic goals into practical methods. For example, if your intention is to teach all students to improve their skills of information processing, you need to develop diagnostic tools to assess where each student's levels of skills are, then create a sequence of challenges that is individualized to each student, then train teachers to be able to coach each student in a different way in order to give each an appropriate sequence of increasing challenges at different speeds and to be able to create a different feedback mechanism for each student in order to keep motivating them. But the current focus of public education is to treat all students in a class the same as far as lessons, speed, and evaluation of performance. Also, if your goal is to teach each student to think for themselves rather than to allow them to accept **messages** at face value, then you could no longer use objective-type testing (true/false and multiple-choice questions) that are based on the belief that one and only one answer to each question is correct.



Many countries such as England now teach media literacy in their public education.

christopher jones/Alamy

B. The Role of Media Literacy With the Enhanced Threat

The enhanced threat poses a very different challenge to media literacy because its harm to individuals arises less from the occasional occurrence of particular effects and much more from the subtle and constant process of shaping the way people think and act. Because the enhanced threat has been conditioning media users consistently over the past two decades, its changes on the ways people think and behave have become firmly entrenched. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that a short intervention that simply provides some information would offer much help to people in dealing with the enhanced threat. Because the threat is latent in all media content, an intervention that warns media users to avoid particular kinds of content or experiences is also of little value. Because the threat is so subtle, interventions that simply warn people about the threat are not sufficient; people have to gradually develop skills over time in order to be able to perceive the threat for themselves before they will believe it exists, much less than understand how powerful, constant, and widespread the threat is. Clearly, a new approach to media literacy is needed.

C. Challenges for a New Approach to Media Literacy

In order to be useful in helping people deal with the enhanced threat, a new approach to media literacy needs to deal with five significant challenges. First, it must avoid offering a quick fix to such a serious and complex problem. Second, it needs to be able to unwind much of the conditioning that has been shaping how people think and act. Third, it needs to shift much of the influence that the media are now exerting back into the hands of individuals. Fourth, it must deal with the reality that most media exposure takes place in a state of automaticity. And fifth, it must appear to be worthwhile.

1. Avoid proposing a quick fix

A new approach to media literacy needs to avoid oversimplifying the threat by proposing a quick fix, such as recommending that people avoid certain kinds of media content or that people should reduce their amount of exposure. Quick fixes such as these have no chance of making a difference because they trivialize the influence of the threat. Suggesting that some changes in behaviors can help people reduce the influence from the enhanced threat on them is simpleminded and has no chance of making a difference unless people are first shown how their thinking has been conditioned over time to make them want to continue and to increase their exposures to media products.

The fundamental reason why none of the quick fixes nor any of the traditional approaches to media literacy have the ability to help people deal with the enhanced threat in a meaningful way is because they all focus on peripheral characteristics of the media's influence and ignore the engine that drives the enhanced threat. That engine is a **reward structure** that has been so successful in continually making us feel satisfied in our media exposure flows while we are being conditioned to think and behave in ways that allow media businesses to steadily increase their use of our time to achieve their commercial goals.

2. Begin unwinding media conditioning

We all expose ourselves to a variety of media content for massive amounts of time because **media conditioning** has trained us to expect certain payoffs that their content has been designed to provide. Then, after years of having those implanted expectations repeatedly rewarded, we have acquired a high level of trust that the media will continue to satisfy our expectations. Our dependency on those rewards prevents us from seriously considering the thought of altering our entrenched exposure patterns in any way, except for increasing the amount of time we spend in those exposure flows. Therefore, in order for any approach to media literacy to have value, it needs to start with a focus on the reward structure that underlies all media content.

When we focus on the reward structure, there are three possible options about how to proceed. The first option is to convince the designers of media content to stop building in the rewards that have been so successful in conditioning us to habitual exposure of their products. Of course, this option is unrealistic. There is no way to convince media companies to alter their marketing strategy in order to decrease their ability to attract more users and to condition those users to increase their exposure sessions.

A second option is that we find alternative ways to spend our time that would deliver rewards that are stronger and more consistent than what media exposures provide. This is also unrealistic because if we knew what these alternatives were and were convinced that they would deliver more valuable rewards than the media do, then we would already be using them much more.

The third option is that we analyze those reward structures in order to identify the ways in which those rewards orient us toward doing things that make our lives better while identifying the ways in which those rewards manipulate us to do things that benefit the media companies at the expense of benefiting our personal goals. Clearly, this third option is the only one that is realistic. However, this third option raises our costs because we have to learn how to do this, as

well as continue applying what we learn over the long haul in order to counteract the constant conditioning that the media are likely to continue applying.

3. Shift agency back to individuals

The enhanced marketing strategy of media businesses is designed to condition audiences to think and act in ways that contribute to their business goals. Thus, their success in using this strategy is keyed to the degree to which they divert us from thinking for ourselves so that their flow of influence is not interrupted, challenged, or even noticed.

The intention of the conditioning step in the mass media's enhanced marketing strategy is to make users feel more and more comfortable in their exposure habits, which makes it more and more difficult for them to break out of this default condition. Media conditioning is designed to nestle you in a comfortable cocoon structured with familiar patterns of media exposures that reinforce familiar habits of thinking and behaving. They continually narrow the choices presented to you so that making decisions becomes easier, then they subtly shape the path that leads to decisions that are inevitable and thereby always feel right. The narcotic attraction of defaulting to this cocoon becomes more appealing as the conditioning continues unchecked. We come to believe that it is much more efficient to rely on others to do our thinking for us because that enables us to avoid having to invest cognitive effort as well as helps us avoid the risk of experiencing unpleasant emotional reactions, such as dissonance and fear of making the wrong decision. When the media make our exposure flows comfortable for us, we feel so good that while the payoffs are usually just okay, the costs are so low that it continues to be rewarding to stay in this default.

Enjoying these benefits in the short term, however, puts us on a trajectory that we become more and more comfortable with avoiding the cognitive effort required when we take the risk of thinking for ourselves. There are constantly too many choices to make confident decisions about media exposures. And if we want to think for ourselves to get past the trap of rejecting the surface meanings of messages, then we are faced with an overwhelming number of alternative meanings possible. The challenges involved in rejecting media conditioning seem insurmountable, so we remain cocooned in the comfort of the default mode. However, the belief that those challenges are insurmountable is an illusion that the media created in order to keep you in the default mode.

Agency is like a muscle in the sense that the more you exercise it, the stronger it becomes. But exercising it requires you to spend more time and effort in a conscious state and paying more attention to what you think and do. It requires you to continually examine your life goals and realistically assess whether you are prepared to invest the effort required to attain them. You must be willing to stretch yourself with bigger challenges where you are likely to fail, and when you do fail, you must generate the motivation to analyze the failure in enough depth so that you can transform it into a valuable learning experience. As you can see, this path is a rocky road, but the obstacles along the way are what enable you to grow and to make your journey more worthwhile.

4. Dealing with automaticity

The most important challenge for media literacy is to develop a practical way to help media users deal with **automaticity**, which is a cognitive state where the brain is on automatic pilot and is constantly making decisions for people subconsciously. To understand what the state of automaticity is and why it is so important, think of the human brain as a piece of hardware, like a computer, that is capable of performing a great many different functions. However, in order to perform any of these functions, the hardware must be programmed; that is, there needs to be software that tells it what functions to perform and how to perform those functions. When we are born, our brains already have some software running that tells the brain to monitor the environment and to keep the body running properly (e.g., beating of the heart, breathing, digestion, etc.).

As we accumulate experiences in life, our brains acquire additional programming in the form of **automatic routines**, which are sequences of behaviors or thoughts that we learn from experience and then apply again and again with little effort. Some of these lines of code have been programmed by entities who implanted particular coding to serve their purpose, and often these lines of code can create harm by guiding us to think and behave in ways that are not in our best interests; instead, those faulty lines of code guide us to think and behave in ways that serve the purposes of the entities who implanted them. One of those entities consists of the mass media businesses who are constantly shaping the way we think and act, so that we are transformed into pawns that they can move into positions to meet their business. By training us to increase our media exposures, they are able to increase their revenue by renting our exposure to various advertisers who are then training us to increase our use of their products. As these commercially driven entities increase the lines of code in our minds, they are training us to automatically think and behave in ways that increasingly benefit them. However, the threat is that when we subcontract our thinking challenges out to others, especially when we are largely unaware that this is happening, we gradually lose the ability to control the path of our lives.

In order to be useful, an approach to media literacy needs to help people understand how this enhanced threat from the mass media works by adding lines of coding to the software that shapes how we think and act. It then needs to help people develop a way to recognize when the coding implanted by the mass media leads us to think and act in ways that are not in our best interest and may be nudging us down a path where the harm to us gradually but constantly increases. And most importantly, a new approach to media literacy needs to show us how to avoid these harms by recognizing the faulty lines of code, eliminate them, and replace those faulty lines of code with alternative coding that will run automatically in a way to make our lives more happy and successful by orienting us toward achieving our personal goals rather than mindlessly being swept in directions that serve to meet the goals of the media businesses.

5. Appear worthwhile

As you likely imagine from reading about the challenges of raising the level of personal agency and dealing with the state of automaticity, a new approach to media literacy will need to ask people to invest considerable resources if they are to increase their media literacy. Therefore, it



Like computers, our brains acquire additional programming throughout our lives. Some of the acquired “code” has been programmed by commercial entities to serve their purposes, guiding us to think and behave in ways that are not always in our best interests.

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is essential that a new approach to media literacy appear to be worthwhile so that the required increase in resources of time and effort invested will be paid back with the delivery of large benefits.

a. Practical. A new approach to media literacy needs to be practical, that is, it needs to convince users that it has a clear outcome that is worthwhile, and that the effort expected of users to achieve that outcome is reasonable. Thus, the procedure needs to begin with a relatively simple set of tasks that are designed to keep the costs as low as possible. Then, as the procedure moves forward by requiring users to invest more time and cognitive energy, it needs to continually demonstrate a pattern of increasing payoffs. That is, it needs to continually convince users that the payoffs are increasing at a rate at least as much as the costs are. Creating and maintaining a positive perception of the procedure’s value is crucial to reinforcing users’ motivation.

There will likely be an initial reluctance for users to start the process because the payoffs that can be promised initially are rather abstract. If an approach to media literacy is to be successful, it needs to develop alternative ways to attract users into the process. Once users are into the flow of the process, they will start to see things that they have previously taken for granted; it is important to reinforce these perceptions by making users feel that they are gradually increasing their power of perception, which will lead to increases in other abilities.

b. Flexible. A new approach to media literacy also needs to be flexible enough to accommodate the many differences across individuals. One of the shortcomings of the traditional approaches to media literacy is that they tend to treat everyone as having the same vulnerabilities and abilities. Media literacy practitioners who design interventions assume that everyone has the same problem (e.g., lack of some specific knowledge or all hold some faulty belief). While it is efficient to design

one intervention and expect everyone to benefit from it the same way, it is not realistic to expect such uniformity across individuals.

A media literacy approach that treats everyone the same will have very limited value. People are profoundly different in their information-processing abilities, interests, and motivations. Media literacy needs to be regarded not as a goal for everyone but instead as a set of tools that everyone can use in different ways in order to achieve their own goals in their personal lives.

IV. Conclusion

Because the mass media are primarily economic entities, their fundamental purpose is to increase their own value. In order to achieve this goal, media businesses continuously develop practices that are able to reduce their risk and thereby increase their profit. In the 1990s as the internet grew in popularity, media businesses began using its interactive characteristics to enhance their marketing strategy. The development of an enhanced business strategy has helped media businesses become more successful by reducing their risks, generating more revenue streams, and training users to become more habitual in their exposure patterns. However, because the commercial goals and practices of the media businesses are often different from the personal goals of media users, this difference can lead to media users experiencing negative consequences unless they are able to recognize when these differences occur as well as being able maintain their personal agency (see Box 1.1).

Box 1.1: Analogy of Media Messages and Automobiles

In order to explain the difference between two kinds of threats that media messages pose, I will draw an analogy between media messages and automobiles.

Automobiles offer many positive uses, but they also offer risks of harm. In order to ensure that drivers are alerted to possible harms, governments require drivers to be educated about how to use automobiles safely. They require drivers to take a test in order to ensure that all licensed drivers know the rules of the road.

Now, let's imagine that an automobile company started manufacturing cars that were driven by a computer program rather than a human. When riders get in one of these cars, they tell the computer where they want to go, and the computer's program accesses some GPS services to tell it what routes are available. As a default, the computer is programmed to select the shortest route from among the alternatives.

The automobile company markets its car as being highly convenient because these cars allow the riders to relax and concentrate on other tasks besides driving. This marketing campaign is successful, and the company sells a lot of these cars. But over time, the company decides it wants to generate more revenue beyond the money generated through sales of the cars. In order to develop a second stream of revenue from their product, they add some route selection procedures, which allow them to alter the routes

by using other considerations and not be limited to selecting the shortest route. The automotive company tells its dealerships to high sales staffs to persuade local businesses to incorporate their cars into their local advertising strategy by paying the local car dealership a fee that will increase traffic past their business locations. Lots of local retailers would like this feature because it increases traffic past their locations where riders can view their signage and thereby increase the probability that they will stop in and buy something on impulse. The local auto dealerships like this feature because it gives them a reason to hire more salespeople and to increase their revenue. The auto manufacturer would like this feature because it incentivizes local dealerships to sell more units of these cars. But consumers reap no benefits from this feature; to the contrary, they end up continually spending more time in their vehicles that are programmed not to take the most direct route. As a consumer, you are not likely to notice much of a difference in travel time, so the car's computers are reprogrammed to allow for more paid detours, which increases the commercial benefits to all the businesses involved, but these increases in business outcomes increase the cost to consumers without increasing any of their benefits. In order to prevent consumers from noticing, much less complaining, about the creeping increases in travel times, the car's interiors are designed to deflect riders' attention away from these increases by conditioning them to feel more and more comfortable during the traveling. And as the conditioning continues, your feelings of comfort continue to deflect your attention away from what this programming is doing, and over time your ability to notice the increases in travel times erodes as the auto industry steadily reduces the value of your time to you while steadily increasing the value of your time to them.

As the practices of media businesses have been evolving into an enhanced business strategy, the existing approach to media literacy has remained static. This traditional approach to media literacy can still be successful in helping particular kinds of people deal with some specific effects, but it is far too limited to help people deal with the far more general and subtle consequences from the enhanced effect. An alternative approach to media literacy is needed. Such an approach is introduced in Chapter 3. But before I introduce that newer approach, I need to provide a strong foundation by presenting four key ideas in Chapter 2.

Further Reading

Nelson-Field, K. (2024). *The attention economy: A category blueprint*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan. (386 pages, including references)

This book provides an in-depth look into the world of marketing and advertising, where human attention is the most desired commodity. It is written for industry professionals, who want to learn how to stimulate human attention and hold it. Throughout its chapters, the book catalogs cutting-edge research and tackles critical issues such as attention measurement metrics, prediction, distraction, data quality, and the ethical use of attention data, ultimately piecing together the intricate puzzle and offering clarity for industry professionals. While it was written to help marketing professionals seeking to understand the evolving landscape of advertising, it is a fascinating read for non-professionals who want to understand the current nature of marketing.

Potter, W. J. (2012). *Media effects*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE. (377 pages, including index)

I wrote this book to try to organize all the many different effects that have been attributed to media influence. The heart of the book is an organization of mass media effects on individuals into six categories (physiological, cognitive, belief, attitude, affective, and behavioral effects) and the types of macro-level effects into three categories (on the public; on institutions; and on society, culture, and mass media).

Potter, W. J. (2021). *Digital media effects*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield. (253 pages, including index)

In this book, I update the *Media Effects* book by reviewing the huge literature of research on media effects that had been conducted since the rise of the internet created all kinds of new ways for media to market their messages and platforms.

Wu, T. (2016). *The attention merchants: The epic scramble to get inside our heads*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. (403 pages, including references and index)

This book provides an examination of how companies try to “harvest” our attention in a world where there are so many people and organizations competing aggressively to attract attention. Wu argues, “In nearly every moment of our waking lives, we face a barrage of advertising enticements, branding efforts, sponsored social media, commercials and other efforts to harvest our attention. Over the last century, few times or spaces have remained uncultivated by the ‘attention merchants,’ contributing to the distracted, unfocused tenor of our times.” While acknowledging that there have been a few efforts to limit the aggressive practices of businesses and try to claw back some power for consumers to limit their practices (invention of TV’s remote control, FDA regulations, and Apple’s ad-blocking OS), the attention merchants have grown increasingly sophisticated in their methods.

Keeping Up to Date

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.

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.

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Chapter 2

Foundational Ideas



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Key Idea: Knowing how the human mind processes information during exposure to media content is foundational to understanding the enhanced threat from the enhanced marketing strategy.

The previous chapter showed you that the mass media businesses have been developing an enhanced marketing strategy in order to be more successful in achieving their business goals.

While this enhanced strategy has resulted in positive consequences for media businesses, the consequences of this new enhanced marketing strategy pose a serious enhanced threat to users of the media. In order to help you better understand this enhanced threat, I will elaborate it in the next chapter. In order to prepare you for this upcoming elaboration, I will use this chapter to clarify eight foundational ideas. To achieve clarity and efficiency, these foundational terms will be presented in four pairs of contrasting ideas.

I. Media Exposure and Attention

In everyday conversations, people typically use the terms **exposure** and **attention** as synonyms. However, when we ignore the differences between these two terms, we lose the opportunity to recognize something very important about how the human mind works.

A. Key Difference

As humans we are constantly being exposed to all kinds of stimuli coming from our environments. Our brains are hardwired to be constantly processing this stimuli, but almost all of this processing takes place subconsciously, which means that we are not aware of it. For example, the brain is continuously monitoring all the stimuli coming from sources within the human body so that it can regulate all the necessary functions such as breathing, transfer of oxygen from the lungs into the blood stream, the beating of the heart to circulate the blood, and on and on. As humans, we have five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste) that constantly collect stimuli from outside the body. The human brain is hardwired to monitor our surrounding environments for possible threats that could harm us. This monitoring is performed automatically so that we do not need to be aware of any of it in order for it to function properly.

Exposure does not require cognitive awareness, but attention does. In *The Psychology of Attention* (1998), Harold Pashler explains that “at any given moment, awareness encompasses only a tiny proportion of the stimuli impinging on a person’s sensory systems” (p. 3). While the human brain can process a great deal of information subconsciously, it cannot process more than a tiny fraction of the incoming information in an attentional state. Cognitive psychologists have estimated that human brains are constantly processing about 11 million pieces of information from the body’s five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste) every instant, but that we are able to be consciously aware of only about 40 of these pieces of information at any given moment (Wilson, 2002). Because human attention has such a limited capacity, it presents a major challenge to our ability to reason and make good decisions (Broadbent, 1958).

Media exposure is a subset of all exposure. Given the key difference between exposure and attention, it might seem that when we are exposing ourselves to a media message that only the information that we pay attention to gets processed, and the rest gets ignored. But that is not entirely accurate. When we are in an exposure flow of media messages, we are likely paying attention to certain stimuli, which means that we are consciously processing that information.

However, the stimuli that we are not paying attention to still gets processed, but that processing is not done consciously. This is called **automaticity**.

To understand automaticity, think of the human brain as piece of hardware—like a computer—that is capable of performing a great many different functions very quickly. However, in order to perform any of these functions, the hardware must be programmed, that is, there needs to be software that tells it what functions to perform and how to perform those functions. When we are born, our brains already have some software running that tells the brain to monitor the environment and to keep the body running properly (e.g., beating of the heart, breathing, digestion, etc.).

As we accumulate experiences in life, our brains acquire additional programming in the form of **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 our daily tasks 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.

This programming of our automatic routines comes from many sources. When we are infants, the programming comes from our parents and siblings. It also comes from our contact with 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 that are constantly showing us how the world works through news; how people experience all sorts of problems and work to solutions in entertainment type stories; how to look good, smell good, and how to have fun through advertising messages. All of these layers upon layers of programming shape 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.

As we age, our minds accumulate a great number of **lines of code**. Some of these lines of code have been programmed by entities who implanted particular coding to serve their purpose, and often these lines of code can create harm by guiding us to think and behave in ways that are not in our best interests; instead, those faulty lines of code guide us to think and behave in ways that serve the purposes of the entities who implanted them. One of those entities consists of the mass media businesses who are constantly shaping the way we think and act, so that we are transformed into pawns that they can move into positions to meet their business. By training us to increase our media exposures, they are able to increase their revenue by renting our exposure to various advertisers who are then training us to increase our use of their products. As these

commercially driven entities increase the lines of code in our minds, they are training us to automatically think and behave in ways that increasingly benefit them. However, the threat is that when we subcontract our thinking challenges out to others, especially when we are largely unaware that this is happening, we gradually lose the ability to control the path of our lives.

When we are passive, the media recognize the opportunity to exert their influence unchecked. And most of our media exposure takes place when we are in the passive state of automaticity. That is, when we are not actively thinking about what we are doing and controlling our decisions, we default to the passive state of automaticity where the automatic routines that reside in our subconscious take over.

B. Two Models of Exposure

Every media exposure session requires a flow of decisions—deciding which medium to use, which message to access, then following the flow of information presented during that exposure session, and ultimately when to bail out of the exposure session. If we are in an attentional state throughout the exposure session, then we are aware of each required decision that needs to be made, we actively think about the decisions, identify options, weigh the merits of each available option, select one, monitor the value of the unfolding payoffs and costs in the exposure flow, and decide when to end the exposure session. This active processing of information describes the conscious model of exposure.

Most of our everyday exposure to the media, however, does not follow these steps in the conscious model; instead, we are much more likely to be in the nonattentional state of automaticity where we are not exercising our agency and controlling the decisions. If we are not actively making decisions, then how do all those required decisions get made? The answer is automatic routines that we have previously learned and that we store in our memories. Think of these automatic routines as computer programs that are stored in our memories, much like the computers we use have many computer programs stored in their memories. When we turn on a computer, the machine automatically activates certain programs that allow it to function efficiently.

These codes include triggers that have either been hardwired into all humans (e.g., the orienting reflex where threats in a person's immediate environment trigger their attention) or have been acquired by an individual through their experience with the media. When something in a person's environment activates one of these triggers, the person's attention is directed to that something. Thus, the selection of an exposure is done automatically when a particular sound (e.g., initial notes of a popular song) or an image (e.g., picture of a favorite celebrity) triggers the user's attention.

One type of decision about the media that we have to make many times every day is **filtering**. The mass media provide an overwhelming number of exposure choices. We cannot possibly pay attention to all the media messages constantly clamoring for our attention, so we must filter out most of them. However, this filtering task would be much too massive to handle consciously, so for the sake of efficiency, these filtering decisions are made unconsciously by automatic routines. To illustrate this automatic processing, consider what you do when you go to the supermarket



Have you ever arrived somewhere in your car but did not remember making the decision to drive there? This is an example of an automatic routine: a habit that we have previously learned and that we store in our memories.

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to buy food. Let's say you walk into the store with a list of 25 items that you need to buy, and 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.

Our minds also have automatic routines that make all kinds of decisions about how we follow the flow of information presented in media messages as well as how we interpret the meanings presented in those exposure flows. This raises the question of who programmed those routines. If it was you who fully programmed these automatic routines, then they are following only your commands. But what if some of the coding in those routines was programmed by agents other than you? If this is the case, then you have let those other agents exercise some control over your media exposure decisions.

II. Meaning Matching and Meaning Construction

Every time we are in an exposure flow, information processing is constantly taking place, either consciously or automatically. When we are consciously aware of the decisions we must make to arrive at meanings in those messages, then we are in control of the process. Otherwise, the information processing is done automatically, which means that our prior programming is guiding the process and determining the meaning. This does not mean that conscious processing

is superior or that automatic processing should be avoided. Instead, think of both as being important processes.

Automatic processing is a necessary tool to human thinking because it allows for significant efficiency. Once we have learned how to do something, that learning becomes part of our computer code that can be accessed whenever we need to perform that task again in the future. If we were not able to store our learning so we could use it later again and again, then each time we were confronted with the same task, we would have to start from scratch and relearn it anew each time, which would be highly inefficient. In this section, I will show you how this automatic processing delivers great efficiency with the information-processing task of **meaning matching**, then contrast that with **meaning construction**.

A. Meaning Matching

Meaning matching is the automatic process of recognizing elements in media messages, then efficiently accessing our memory to find the meaning we have memorized for each of those elements. While it might require a good deal of effort to learn to recognize symbols in media messages and to memorize the standard meanings for those symbols, once you have invested that effort to learn those things, you benefit from great efficiency in being able to use that learning over and over with almost no effort each time. To illustrate, think back to when you first learned to read. You had to learn how to recognize words printed on a page. Then you had to memorize the meaning of each word. The first time you saw the sentence “Dick threw the ball to Jane,” it required a good deal of mental effort to recognize how the letters composed words and to recall the meaning of each word. With practice, you were able to perform this process more quickly and more easily. Learning to read in elementary school is essentially the process of being able to recognize printed words and to memorize their **denoted meanings**. When we are young, we also learn how to recognize other elements in messages (numerals, symbols, pictures, sounds, etc.) and memorize the denoted meaning of those elements.

When your cell phone makes a particular sound, you know that means you have received a text. You look at the screen and see a name and know which friend has sent you that text. You tap a specific icon on your screen, and your text message is revealed. That message has words and emoticons that convey meaning to you. In this example, the sound, name, icon, words, and emoticons are each symbols that have a specific meaning that you have learned in the past and are now able to match with a learned meaning with almost no effort. This task is accomplished automatically because you have acquired those competencies.

Oftentimes, the process of meaning matching is all we need to satisfy ourselves that we have processed the full meaning of a message. But in many instances, meaning matching is not enough; we feel there is more meaning that we can derive from a message, so we are motivated to engage in meaning construction.

B. Meaning Construction

In contrast to meaning matching, meaning construction is a much more challenging task. It is not an automatic process; instead, it requires us to think about moving beyond the standard

denoted meaning and to create meaning for ourselves by using the skills of induction, deduction, grouping, and synthesis. We engage in a meaning-construction process either when we have no denoted meaning for a particular message in our memory banks or when the denoted meaning does not satisfy us and we want to arrive at a different meaning.

Let's say you get a text from your friend Christopher who has just broken up with his girlfriend Christine and the text message says, "Chris is not happy with your help. Thanks a ton." This message is too ambiguous for meaning matching. For example, does the Chris in the message refer to the sender or his ex-girlfriend? Is the sender being sarcastic when he says, "Thanks a ton" because he resents your interference? Or is he sincere because you helped him break up when he couldn't do it himself? To answer these questions, you need context about your friendship with Christopher, about his relationship with Christine, his intention to break up with her or not, and so on. You need skills rather than competencies to analyze the situation, evaluate his intention, see how this message fits into the pattern of your relationship, and synthesize an appropriate response.

Many meanings can be constructed from any media message; furthermore, there are many ways to go about constructing that meaning. Thus, we cannot learn a complete set of rules to accomplish this task; instead, we need to be guided by our own goals, and we need to use skills (rather than competencies) to creatively construct a path to reach our goals. For these reasons, meaning construction rarely takes place in an automatic fashion. Instead, we need to make conscious decisions when we are constructing meaning for ourselves. Also, every meaning-construction task is different, so we cannot program our minds to follow the same procedure automatically when we are confronted with a variety of meaning-construction tasks.



Decoding an ambiguous text message is an example of meaning construction.

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Much of our processing of media messages utilizes meaning construction. There is a large body of research that clearly shows that each of us brings a considerable number of factors with us to any media message exposure and that these factors constitute a **frame** that we use to

interpret the message. For example, Kepplinger et al. (2012) conducted a study to see how people constructed meaning in news stories. They wanted to see if the way the media presented the story influenced how viewers interpreted the events and people in those stories. The researchers found that the way the media told the story did indeed influence the respondents' interpretation of meaning but that the meaning was also strongly influenced by the personal frames of the individual respondents.

C. Delineating the Distinction

The difference between meaning matching and meaning construction can be traced to different conceptions of the human mind. Some people believe the human mind is like a mechanical device such as a clock with gears and levers that all work together in an intricate design. When everything is working properly, it tells the correct time. Under this conception of the human mind, the process of thinking is orderly and systematic. When engaged in a media exposure session, the human mind follows a process of looking for symbols, then searching memory banks for the previously learned meaning for that symbol. It repeats this process over and over throughout the entire exposure session. Thus, the process focuses on identifying a series of associations at a micro level and builds up from those micro units layer by layer to arrive at more general attributions of meaning. This is the process of meaning matching. Other people, in contrast, think of the human mind more like a cloud because of its constantly changing and unpredictable nature that allows for divergent thinking and creativity. It relies on flashes of insight and creativity. If you think of this distinction as a debate between two very different conceptions of the human mind, then you will miss its value as you try to decide which side is correct. Instead, this distinction is much more valuable when we are able to appreciate the wondrous complexity of the human mind that is capable of doing many different things.

The two processes of meaning matching and meaning construction do not take place independently from one another; they are intertwined. To construct meaning, we first have to recognize symbols and understand the sense in which those symbols are being used in the message. Thus, the meaning-matching process is fundamental because the product of the meaning-matching process then is imported into the meaning-construction process.

III. Competencies and Skills

In everyday language, the terms *skills* and *competencies* are used as synonyms. Yet it is important to make a distinction here. Competencies are essential to meaning matching, while meaning construction relies on skills.

A. Competencies

Competencies are cognitive tools that are categorical; that is, either people are able to do something, or they are not able. Competencies are relatively easy to learn, and once you have learned them, they typically stay with you the rest of your life.

Education at the elementary school level is focused on teaching students to recognize all kinds of symbols and to memorize their denoted meanings. This kind of learning is required in order for communication among humans to exist. That is, we need to recognize the sounds of words and agree that certain sounds denote particular meanings that have been determined by experts. We need to recognize that letters in particular combinations denote certain words and that large groups of people agree that each word has a meaning that is shared among all members of the group. Developing competencies with words as well as the conventions of spelling, grammar, and the construction of sentences and paragraphs is what is required in order for people to read. Developing competencies in arithmetic requires the ability to recognize another set of symbols along with their meanings. For example, when you see the phrase $2 + 3$, you either recognize that the 2 and the 3 are symbols that refer to particular quantities, or you do not. You either recognize the + symbol as referring to addition, or you do not. You can either perform this mathematical operation and arrive at the answer of 5, or you cannot. Working with these symbols does not require—or allow for—individual interpretation and creative meaning construction. Competencies are our abilities to recognize standard symbols and recall the memorized denoted meanings for those symbols. If we did not have a common set of symbols and shared meanings for each of these symbols, communication would not be possible. We also learn competencies about how humans tell stories, which makes it possible for us to read novels and watch fictional stories in films and videos.

Think of competencies as the basic building blocks of information processing. While each competency is dichotomous (either you can recognize a symbol and its meaning or you cannot), the number of competencies you have acquired exists along a wide continuum; the more competencies you have, the stronger your foundation for information processing.

B. Skills

Skills, in contrast to competencies, are not categorical. Instead, skills offer a wide continuum of performance. However, that does not mean that you have reached a level of perfection in using them; they can always be improved. No one has a zero level of information-processing skills, and no one has a perfect level; there is a considerable range of levels.

We are not born with the skills we need to process information; instead, we develop them through experience and practice. We start developing these skills when we are infants and have to deal with the flood of stimuli coming through our five senses into our brains. We use these skills to make sense of all these stimuli and continue to use them to learn everything we know about the world. By the time you have reached college age, your skills have undergone considerable development.

In order to continue improving your skills, you need guidance and practice. I can provide you with the guidance, but because skills are like muscles, you need to continue using them in dealing with increasingly challenging tasks if they are to grow stronger. This book presents you with a series of exercises to help you improve each of these seven skills of media literacy. At the end of each chapter (from 3 to 14), there are exercises that have been designed to give you opportunities to practice using those skills. The more you use the exercises, the more you will be

improving our skills as tools to help you understand more layers of meaning in your exposure flows as well as using that information to make decisions about how to use those media exposures in ways that serve your needs more than the needs of the media businesses.



Skills, like muscles, require time and increasingly challenging tasks in order to grow. Think of it like lifting weights: You start with a low weight but gradually increase over time as you get stronger.

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C. Differences

Competencies are categorical; that is, either you have a competency, or you do not. However, skills are not categorical; on any given skill, there is a wide range of ability. That is, some people have little ability whereas other people have enormous ability. Also, skills are similar to muscles. Without practice, skills become weaker. With practice and exercise, they grow stronger.

It's important to avoid getting the two mixed up. Consider the example of a physics exam in which the professor asks students how they could use a barometer to measure the height of a building. If the professor is treating this as a meaning-matching task, then he is trying to measure his students' competency; that is, did the student memorize the one example he gave in lecture that was (1) to take a reading of barometric pressure at the foot of the building, (2) take a reading of the barometric pressure while standing on the roof of that building, and (3) use his mathematical formula to translate the difference in barometric pressure into number of feet.

But what if a student is creative and can think of other ways to use the barometer to measure the height of the building? This is what Neils Bohr did on a physics exam at the University of Copenhagen in 1905. Bohr answered the question by saying that he would go up onto the roof of the building, tie a string to the barometer, lower the barometer to the ground, and then measure how long the string was. The professor gave him an F. When Bohr went to talk to his professor and explain his reasoning, the professor did not change the grade. Bohr then explained that there were many ways to answer the exam question, such as throwing the barometer off the roof and counting the number of seconds it took to hit the ground and calculating the distance

from that data or measuring the length of the shadow of the barometer and the building and then calculating the ratio. While all of these alternative methods could yield an accurate measure of the height of the building, the professor did not care because he was looking for one particular answer that required matching the problem to the one solution he taught in his physics class. Bohr took the F that day but continued to use his creative mind to become a very successful physicist, winning the Nobel Prize in physics in 1922 for his contributions to atomic structure and quantum mechanics.

D. Skills of Media Literacy

What is the skill of media literacy? While many definers of this term offer no name for the skill they are arguing for, many do offer a name—typically “critical thinking.” Although 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 and on. In order to avoid this conglomeration of meanings, I avoid using this term; instead, I will try to be clearer by showing you how media literacy relies on seven specific skills: analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstraction. See Table 2.1 for brief descriptions of these skills. For a more detailed treatment of each of these skills, please see Potter (2019).

These seven skills on which I focus are essential to media literacy, but that does not mean that they are used exclusively in dealing with media literacy type challenges. Instead, these are generic skills that we all use 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. Let’s examine each of these in detail.

1. **Analyzing** is the breaking down of a message into meaningful elements. As we encounter media messages, we can simply accept a surface meaning for each message, or we can dig deeper into the message itself by breaking it down into its components and examining how those components work together to deliver some intended meaning. 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 *who, what, when, where, why*, and *how* to determine if the story is complete or not by looking for elements in the story that fit into each of these containers.

The key to using the skill of analysis well is to select the most useful analytical dimensions. Another analytical dimension for news stories is bias, where we examine the story to determine if all sides of an issue are covered, and if so, if that coverage is balanced across all sides. Therefore, the key to using analysis well is to select the most useful analytical dimension, then to perceive how elements in the message array themselves on that analytical dimension.

Table 2.1 ■ The Seven Skills of Media Literacy

Skill	Analyzing	Evaluating	Grouping	Induction	Deduction	Synthesizing	Abstracting
Purpose	Breaking down a message into meaningful elements	Making judgments about the value of an element; the judgment is made by comparing the element to some standard	Determining which elements are alike in some way; determining which elements are different in some way	Inferring general patterns from the observation of particulars; generalizing those patterns to larger aggregates; and the continual testing of those patterns	Using general principles to explain particulars in a process of logical reasoning	Assembling elements into a novel structure to solve some problem or complete some partially specified task	Assembling elements into a brief, clear, and accurate description of a message
Algorithm	1. Select an Object to Analyze 2. Determine Purpose -Breadth approach -Depth approach -Combination approach 3. Select Appropriate Analytical Dimension 4. Identify the Elements	1. Select Elements 2. Select a Standard 3. Determine the Most Appropriate Criteria Set(s) 4. Compare Elements to Standards 5. Construct a Summary Judgment	1. List all Possible Classification Schemes 2. Determine Your Purpose for the Compare/Contrast 3. Select the Most Appropriate Classification Scheme(s) 4. Classify Each Element 5. Examine Configurations in the Groupings	1. Formulate a Question 2. Determine the Element to Observe 3. Make Observations 4. Infer a Pattern 5. Generalize the Pattern 6. Continue to Test Your Claim	1. Begin With an Observation 2. Identify a Relevant General Principle 3. Use the Two Premises and Reason to a Conclusion	1. Determine Purpose 2. Gather Information 3. Filter for Acceptable Elements 4. Assemble Selected Elements Into a Whole	1. Determine Length 2. Analyze the Focal Object 3. Write an Umbrella Sentence 4. Apportion Additional Words in an Equitable Manner 5. Review Abstract

2. **Evaluating** is the skill of making a judgment about the value of some element by comparing the element to a relevant standard. If the element meets the chosen standard, we conclude that the element is okay; if the element exceeds the standard, we conclude that it is excellent; and if it falls short of the standard, we judge it to have unacceptable value. Therefore, the key to using the skill of evaluation well is to select the most useful and appropriate standards.
3. **Grouping** is the determining of which elements are alike in some way, then determining how a group of elements are different from other groups of elements. The key to applying the grouping skill well relies on employing the most useful classification rules. The media often present us with a set of classification rules they use. For example, the media typically classify entertainment type messages as either being comedies or dramas. 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.

4. **Induction** is the skill of inferring of a pattern across a limited number of elements, then generalizing that pattern to all elements in the 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 results 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, perceive a tentative pattern across those observations, then generalize. For example, we decide to check out a new service that streams entertainment videos. Let's say we spend an evening checking out a half dozen different shows and are not able to feel excited by any of them. So, we tell our friends not to use that service because all their videos are boring.

5. **Deduction** is the skill of 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 general principles. If our general principles are faulty, then we are not likely to reach good conclusions even if we are very systematic in our logical reasoning. For example, let's say your general principle is: All adult men have beards. If you observe a clean-shaven adult man, you might reach the conclusion that he is not mortal.

6. **Synthesizing** is the skill of assembling elements into a new structure. Because this skill is rather abstract, I'll use a concrete example to illustrate it. Let's say you drive an old classic car, and it begins to exhibit problems, so you take it apart to check on each component and then put all the pieces back together just like they were before. This reassembly of existing parts is not synthesis. Instead, let's say that instead of putting all the pieces back together, you realize that some pieces are faulty and you throw them away and find other new parts to substitute; then you decide to assemble the combination of old and new pieces in a way that you are creating a new car that will be able to do more things and different things than your old car could do. Because the resulting configuration is new—and better—it is an example of synthesis.

When we use synthesis in the context of the media, we are not constructing a new media message; instead, we are constructing a newer and better understanding of the media. As you read through this book, you will be picking up new ideas and bits of information. If you take apart your old way of understanding the media, throw out the

faulty parts, then reassemble your old ideas with the new ideas you are now acquiring, you are engaging the skill of synthesis.

- 7. **Abstracting** is the skill you use to create a brief, clear, and accurate description capturing the essence of a message in a significantly smaller number of words 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 abstracting. 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 sort through the flood of information to find those key bits we need for some purpose, 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. Skills are like muscles; the more you exercise them, the stronger they get. Without practice, skills become weaker.

IV. Information and Knowledge

The words *information* and *knowledge* are typically used as synonyms in everyday conversations. But in this book, they have two very different meanings (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 ■ Contrasting Information With Knowledge

Information	Knowledge
Piecemeal	Structured and organized
Transitory	Enduring
Resides in messages	Resides in a person’s mind
Raw material	Constructed from raw material
Value lies in accuracy	Value lies in context and meaning
Focused on individual facts	Focused on meaning arising from connections

A. Information

Information is typically a list of facts. Each bit (I will refer to those individual elements as “infobits”) is an individual idea (e.g., a fact, an opinion, a claim, a characteristic) that is presented in a relatively uncontextualized manner (i.e., not presented as being associated with other ideas in a network that conveys its meaning). When each infobit is presented as a stand-alone fact, its usefulness is very limited. But when infobits are assembled into a structure that shows how they

are related to one another, the value of each infobit increases because each is positioned within a context of meaning.

B. Knowledge

Knowledge is a set of information that is organized in a way that shows how the infobits in the set are related to one another either hierarchically or sequentially. The pattern in a **hierarchical organization** (e.g., an outline) tells us which ideas are the most important and where the secondary ideas are nested. The pattern in a **sequential organization** serves as a map that reveals a path that can take us from where we are now to where we want to be instead. When infobits are assembled into a knowledge structure, the pattern can reveal gaps that tell us what kind of information is missing and why those gaps are important. The pattern can suggest a system of explanation by the way ideas are related to one another. And the pattern can serve as a map that tells us what needs to be done next. To help visualize this, think about your bedroom. Does it look like your books, papers, clothes, food wrappers, and everything else is randomly scattered all over your bed, desk, closet, and drawers? If so, perhaps you perceive an organization to all these items so that you are able to find anything very quickly, whereas your roommate only sees an unorganized mess. In this case, you have knowledge of all your possessions while your roommate sees only a large number of individual items that exist independently from one another.

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 lyrics to television show theme songs, names of characters and actors, settings for shows, and the like, he or she is 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*.

The tools we use to construct them are skills. Thus, the more developed our skills are, the better our tools are to create and revise our knowledge structures. As we add new information, the knowledge structure becomes more elaborate and detailed. This makes it more useful to us. If the new information reveals that old information in our existing knowledge structure is out of date, we cut out the old and insert the new.

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, think about what you know about your favorite TV series. You likely know the names and personalities of all the main characters, the plot lines of many episodes, and even how characters have changed over several seasons. 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 TV show resides, you are. But if this were the only knowledge structure you had developed, you would have little understanding of the content produced by the other media. You would have difficulty understanding trends about who owns

and controls the media, about how the media have developed over time, about why certain kinds of content are never seen while other types are continually repeated, and about 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.

Summary

This chapter presented eight foundational ideas that were defined and contrasted in pairs. The idea of exposure was shown to be very broad and inclusive while the idea of attention is very narrow. Meaning matching and meaning construction are both important processes to media literacy as are both competencies and skills. And the more competencies a person has along with the more developed their media literacy skills are, the more likely they are to be able to transform the information to which they are exposed into useful knowledge structures that are important to meaning matching and essential to meaning construction.