

# 2



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

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## Media Literacy Approach

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

What Is Media Literacy?	The Development of Media Literacy
The Three Building Blocks of Media Literacy	Advantages of Developing a Higher Degree of Media Literacy
Skills	Appetite for Wider Variety of Media Messages
Knowledge Structures	More Self-Programming of Mental Codes
Personal Locus	More Control over Media
The Definition of Media Literacy	Summary
Media Literacy Is	Further Reading
Multidimensional	Exercise
Media Literacy Is a Continuum, Not a Category	

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

## What Is Media Literacy?

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

## The Three Building Blocks of Media Literacy

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

## Skills

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

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

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

**TABLE 2.1** ● The Seven Skills of Media Literacy

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Knowledge Structures

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## COMPARE & CONTRAST

### FACTUAL INFORMATION AND SOCIAL INFORMATION

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

- Both are things we learn from exposure to media messages.
- Both are stored in our memories and recalled when we have a need to use them.

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

- Factual information is raw, unprocessed, and context free whereas social

information is composed of lessons that we infer from observing social interactions in context.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Personal Locus

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

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

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

## The Definition of Media Literacy

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

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



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

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

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

### Media Literacy Is Multidimensional

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Media Literacy Is a Continuum, Not a Category

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

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

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

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

## The Development of Media Literacy

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

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

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

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

**TABLE 2.2 • Development of Media Literacy**

Stage	Characteristics
Acquiring Fundamentals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn that there are human beings and other physical things apart from one's self; these things look different and serve different functions</li> <li>• Learn the meaning of facial expressions and natural sounds</li> <li>• Recognize shapes, form, size, color, movement, and spatial relations</li> <li>• Rudimentary concept of time (regular patterns)</li> </ul>
Language Acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize speech sounds and attach meaning to them</li> <li>• Be able to reproduce speech sounds</li> <li>• Orient to visual and audio media</li> <li>• Make emotional and behavior responses to music and sounds</li> <li>• Recognize certain characters in visual media and follow their movement</li> </ul>
Narrative Acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop understanding of differences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiction versus nonfiction</li> <li>• Ads versus entertainment</li> <li>• Real versus make-believe</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Understand how to connect plot elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By time sequencing</li> <li>• By motive-action-consequence</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Developing Skepticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discount claims made in ads</li> <li>• Sharpen differences between likes and dislikes for shows, characters, and actions</li> <li>• Make fun of certain characters even though those characters are not presented as foils in their shows</li> </ul>
Intensive Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong motivation to seek out information on certain topics</li> <li>• Develop a detailed set of information on particular topics (sports, politics, etc.)</li> <li>• High awareness of utility of information and quick facility in processing information judged to be useful</li> </ul>
Experiential Exploring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking out different forms of content and narratives</li> <li>• Focus on searching for surprises and new emotional, moral, and aesthetic reactions</li> </ul>
Critical Appreciation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accept messages on their own terms, then evaluate them within that sphere</li> <li>• Develop very broad and detailed understanding of the historical, economic, political, and artistic contexts of message systems</li> <li>• Ability to make subtle comparisons and contrasts among many different message elements simultaneously</li> <li>• Ability to construct a summary judgment about the overall strengths and weaknesses of a message</li> </ul>

*(Continued)*

TABLE 2.2 • (Continued)

Stage	Characteristics
Social Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take a moral stand that certain messages are more constructive for society than others; this is a multidimensional perspective based on thorough analyses of the media landscape</li> <li>• Recognize that one's own individual decisions impact society, no matter how minutely</li> <li>• Recognize that there are some actions an individual can take to make a constructive impact on society</li> </ul>

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

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

## Advantages of Developing a Higher Degree of Media Literacy

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

### Appetite for Wider Variety of Media Messages

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



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

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

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

### More Self-Programming of Mental Codes

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

## More Control over Media

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

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

## Summary

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

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

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

## Further Reading

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

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

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

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

Silverblatt, A., & Miller, D. C. (2014). *Media literacy: Keys to interpreting media messages* (4th ed.). Westport: Praeger. (340 pages, including index)

This is a mass media book that presents some information about what is needed as far as knowledge about the media. It has the feel of a textbook for an introductory-level course with its use of photographs and exercises for students to undertake.

Tyner, K. (Ed.). (2010). *Media literacy: New agendas in communication*. New York: Routledge. (243 pages, including index)

The 10 chapters in this edited volume deal with how media literacy initiatives have taken place in the past and what they should emphasize going forward. These initiatives are organized into four contexts: community-based settings, K–12 classrooms, higher education, and virtual environments.

## EXERCISE 2.1

### ASSESSMENT OF KNOWLEDGE STRUCTURES ABOUT MASS MEDIA

#### Media Industries

1. Can you list the different mass media according to how old they are? Start with the oldest and continue to the newest one.
2. What does *convergence* mean within the media industries?
3. What are the stages that structure the development of each mass medium as an industry?
4. What are the key characteristics of the media economic game?
5. How can you use your knowledge about the development of the mass media industries and how they play the economic game to increase your level of media literacy?
2. What is the difference between *exposure* and *attention*?
3. In what four exposure states do we experience media messages?
4. Why have media programmers shifted their view from a mass audience to niche audiences?
5. How do media programmers identify niche audiences?
6. What are the key strategies media programmers use to attract and condition audiences?
7. How have children been treated as a special audience?
8. How should young adults also be treated as a special audience?
9. How can you use the knowledge about information-processing tasks, exposure states, attention, niche audiences, and media programmers' strategies to increase your level of media literacy?

#### Media Audiences

1. What are the three key information-processing tasks that occur when we encounter media messages?

[Continued]

(Continued)

### Media Content

1. What is the next-step reality principle?
2. In what ways are reality television programs real?
3. How has the idea of news changed?
4. How should we go about the task of determining who should be regarded as a journalist?
5. What are the ways people judge the quality of news and which of these are faulty?
6. What is the general formula for media entertainment?
7. Can you articulate patterns of how the following topics are portrayed in the media: character demographics, sexual activity, violence, and health?
8. Can you explain in detail the strategies used by advertisers in designing overall campaigns as well as copy platforms?
9. What strategies do electronic gamers use to develop and market their games?
10. How does the design of cooperative experiences differ from competitive experiences on interactive electronic platforms?
11. How can you use the knowledge about the principle of next-step reality, the definition of news, the standards for judging the quality of media messages, and the strategies used by media programmers to increase your level of media literacy?

### Media Effects

1. Explain how the four-dimensional perspective broadens the view of media effects.
2. What are the differences between baseline and fluctuation effects in the process of influence?
3. What are the differences between process and manifest effects?
4. How can you use the knowledge about the four-dimensional perspective and the process of influence to increase your level of media literacy?