CHAPTER

2

Media Literacy Approach

Key Idea: Media literacy is a perspective from which we expose ourselves to the media and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter. We build our perspective from knowledge structures.

What Is Media Literacy? 12
The Three Building Blocks of Media Literacy 13
Personal Locus 13
Knowledge Structures 13
Skills 15
The Definition of Media Literacy 19
The Typology of Media Literacy 22
Advantages of Developing a Higher Degree of Media Literacy 25
Appetite for Wider Variety of Media Messages 25
More Self-Programming of Mental Codes 26
More Control Over Media 26
Conclusion 26
Further Reading 27

As we 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 put our minds on automatic pilot, where our minds automatically screen out messages without thinking about the process until a particular message triggers our attention. This filtering out and

triggering attention is governed by a kind of mental computer code. While this process of screening is largely automatic, we can exert greater control over it if we increase our media literacy.

WHAT IS MEDIA LITERACY?

Many people have written about media literacy (for an assortment of these ideas, see the list of Further Reading at the end of this chapter). One characteristic about all this thinking about media literacy is that authors will focus on different kinds of media. The most fundamental use of the term *literacy* applies to a person's ability to read the written word. With the advent of additional technologies to convey messages, people have also written about the need for visual literacy, story literacy, and computer literacy, to name a few areas of media focus. In this book, I take a broad perspective that is concerned with people's ability to access and process information from any form of transmission.

Another characteristic of most of the writings about media literacy is a focus on the mass media as being harmful. In this book, I agree that the mass media are capable of producing harmful effects on individuals and on society at large; however, I take a more balanced approach and acknowledge that the mass media also offer many positive effects. To illustrate this point, let's briefly consider the criticism that newer forms of technology have harmed people's ability to write well. On one side of this controversy are people like John Sutherland, an English professor at the University College of London, who argues that PowerPoint presentations have taken the place of well-reasoned essays, that Facebook reinforces narcissistic drivel, and that texting has reduced language into a "bleak, bald, sad shorthand" (quoted in Thompson, 2009). He says that today's technologies of communication that encourage or even require shorter messages, like Twitter, have shortened people's attention spans and therefore their ability to think in longer arcs, which is required for constructing well-reasoned essays. Arguing against this position are people like Andrea Lunsford (2010), who is a professor of writing and rhetoric at Stanford University. Lunsford is convinced 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" and further argues that these new technologies of communication are not killing our ability to write well but instead 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 5-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. The point of this illustration is that the mass media with their forms of information and requirements for producing and processing that information may be reducing some skills, but at the same time the media are also offering opportunities to increase other skills. Thus, it is shortsighted to view the mass media as either all good or all bad. Instead, we need to view this as change, that is, some things deteriorate but other things get better. The key is to avoid looking only at the negative but to also consider the positive and adapt.

In a larger sense, literacy is about being skilled at assessing the meaning in any kind of messages, organizing that meaning so that it is useful, and then constructing messages to

convey that meaning to others. Thus, the idea of literacy incorporates many different skills. Some types of media foster the development of one set of skills while other media help with the development of another set of skills. The key to becoming more literate lies not in arguing for the importance of one set of skills over another set; rather, the key to becoming more literate lies in developing a broad set of skills that can help with any type of message from any type of medium. Skills are the tools that help us gain control over our mental programming. Skills are essential, but we need more.

THE THREE BUILDING BLOCKS OF MEDIA LITERACY

The three building blocks of media literacy are personal locus, knowledge structures, and skills. These three are necessary to build a person's wider set of perspectives on the media. Your personal locus is the energy and your plan. The knowledge structures are the raw materials. The skills are the tools.

Personal Locus

Your personal locus is composed of goals and drives. The goals shape the 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 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 this 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 pay conscious attention to your locus, the more you control the process of information acquisition and usage. The more you engage your locus, the more you will be increasing your media literacy. Being media literate, however, does not mean that the locus is always fully engaged. This is an impossible task because no one can maintain that high a degree of concentration continuously. Media literacy is a process, not a product. Therefore, becoming more media literate means that a person uses the locus more (thus less time with mindless exposures) and uses it more actively.

The locus operates in two modes: conscious and unconscious. When the locus operates in the conscious mode, you are aware of options and can exercise your will in making decisions. In contrast, when the locus operates in the unconscious mode, the decisions are made outside of your awareness and control. In both modes, knowledge structures can get formed and elaborated. However, when you are consciously using your locus, you are in control of the information processing and meaning making, but when your locus is operating in the unconscious mode, the media exert their most powerful effect.

Knowledge Structures

Knowledge structures are sets of organized information in a person's memory. Knowledge structures do not occur spontaneously; they must be built with care and precision. They are

not just a pile of facts; they are made by carefully crafting pieces of information into an overall design. To perform such a task, we rely on a set of skills. These skills are the tools. We use these tools to mine through the large piles of facts, so that we can uncover the particular facts we need and brush away the rest. Once we have selected the facts we need, we shape those facts into information and carefully fit those pieces of information into their proper places in a structure. The structure helps us see the patterns. 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 crafted into our knowledge structure.

Information is the essential ingredient in knowledge structures. But not all information is equally useful to building a knowledge structure. Some information is rather superficial, such as the names of television shows or the melodies of popular music. 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 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 questions of how and why.

In everyday language, the terms *information* and *knowledge* are often used as synonyms, but in this book, they have meanings 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 that which has 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 skills as the tools you use to do something with the raw materials. That "something" is in the service of attaining the goal of pulling the information out of the messages and turning that information into knowledge, that is, to reconstruct the information so that it will contribute to our knowledge structures. A characteristic of higher media literacy is the ability and habit of transforming information into 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. Information is the content of those messages. Messages can be delivered in many different media—television, radio, CDs, video games, books, newspapers, magazines, Web sites, 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 movie).

Messages are composed of two kinds of information: factual and social. A fact is something raw, unprocessed, and context free. For example, when you watch the news and hear messages about terrorism, those messages are composed of facts, such as the following: *Barrack Obama was elected to the office of President of the United States in the fall of 2008.* This statement contains facts. Facts are discrete bits of information, such as names (of people, places, characters, etc.), dates, titles, definitions of terms, formula, lists, and the like.

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 techniques that people learn from observing social interactions. Examples of social information are guidelines we learn about how to dress, talk, and act to be considered 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 knowledge in these five areas, people are much more aware during the information-processing tasks and are therefore more able to make better decisions about seeking out information, working with that information, and constructing meaning from it that will be useful to serve their own goals. The information that makes these awarenesses possible resides in knowledge structures.

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, 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 played sports will be able to appreciate the athletic accomplishments they see on television to a greater depth than those who have not physically tested themselves on those challenges. 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 new media messages. 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 television series. You may know the names of all the characters in that TV show. 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 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, 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.

Skills

Skills are tools that people develop through practice. They are like muscles; the more you exercise them, the stronger they get. Without practice, skills become weaker.

The skills most relevant to media literacy are analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstraction (see Figure 2.1). These skills are not exclusive to media

FIGURE 2.1 The Seven Skills of Media Literacy

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 is 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. Abstracting—creating a brief, clear, and accurate description capturing the essence of a message in a smaller number of words than the message itself

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 as we encounter 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.

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 messages themselves by breaking them down into their components and examining the composition of the elements that make up the messages. 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.

Evaluation is making a judgment about the value of an element. This judgment is made by comparing a message element to some 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, we conclude that the message—and the opinion expressed there—is good, but if the elements fall short of our standard, it is 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 now widespread opinion that in the United States, the educational system is not very good, and a big reason for this is that children now spend too much time with the media, especially TV. 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, mathematics, and science each year, then compares their levels of learning with youth in other countries. The 2009 Condition of Education report says that adolescents in

the United States are ranked 8th out of 28 countries in reading, 24th out of 29 countries in mathematics, and 17th out of 29 countries in science (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Critiques of the U.S. educational system use information like this to argue that adolescents waste 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 belief is faulty because it blames the media, not the child or the parent, for poor academic performance. It also focuses only on the negative effect and gives the media no credit for potentially positive effects. However, when we look carefully at the research evidence, we can see that the typically reported finding is wrong and that when we look more carefully, there are several effects happening simultaneously (see W. J. Potter, 1987a). For example, the typically reported finding is that television viewing is negatively related to academic achievement. And there is a fair amount of research that reports this conclusion. 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. So 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. 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 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 (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.

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 faulty belief that media effects are only negative and polarized 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 desire 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 other beliefs having the possibility of being correct.

Grouping is determining which elements are alike in some way, and determining how a group of elements is different from other groups of elements. The key to doing this well is determining a classification rule. 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 groups that have more meaning and more value for us.

Induction is inferring a pattern across a small number of elements, then generalizing the pattern to all elements in the larger set. When we examine the result of public opinion polls, we can see that many people are using elements in media stories to infer patterns about real life, and this creates faulty beliefs about real life. For example, when people are asked about health care in this country, 90% of adults say that the health care system is in crisis; this is what many news stories and pundits tell the public. But when people are asked about their own health care, almost 90% feel that their health care is of good quality. About 63% of people think other people's doctors are too interested in making money, but only 20% think their own doctor is too interested in making money. People are using elements they have learned in media messages to dominate their perception of a pattern in real life. They accept a faulty belief because they do not take their own real-life experience into account when inferring a pattern; that is, they do not use induction well, instead preferring to use elements from mass media stories and not the elements from their own lives when inferring a pattern.

This faulty use of induction also shows up in other beliefs. For example, in public opinion polls about crime, typically only about one person in six thinks crime is a big problem in their own community, whereas five out of six say that crime is a big problem in society (Whitman & Loftus, 1996). People think this way because most do not experience crime in their own lives and therefore do not think it is a big problem where they live. However, they are convinced that it is a big problem in society. Where could the public get such an idea? From the media's fixation on deviance in the news. Also, the news media prefer to present *sensationalized* events rather than *typical* events. So when a crime is reported, it is usually a violent crime, following the news ethic of "if it bleeds, it leads." Watching evening newscasts with their highlighting of crime and violence leads us to infer that there must be a high rate of crime and that most of it is violent assaults. But in reality, less than 20% of all crime is violent. More than 80% of all crime is property crime, with the victim not even present (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Furthermore, the rate for violent crime has been declining in this country since the mid-1980s, yet very few people are aware of this decline (Whitman & Loftus, 1996). Instead, most people believe that violent crime is increasing because they continually see crime stories and gory images in the media. They have fashioned their opinions on sensationalized events, and this type of information provides no useful basis to infer an accurate picture about crime. As for education, 64% give the nation's schools a grade of C or D, but at the same time, 66% give their public school a grade of A or B. As for religion, 65% say that religion is losing its influence on American life, whereas 62% said religion is becoming a stronger influence in own their lives. As for responsibility, almost 90% believe that a major problem with society is that people don't live up to their commitments, but more than 75% say they meet their commitments to families, kids, and employers. Nearly half of the population believes it is impossible for most families to achieve the American Dream, whereas 63% believe they have achieved or are close to achieving the American Dream. And 40% to 50% think the nation is moving in the wrong direction, but 88% of Americans think their own lives and families are moving in the right direction (Whitman, 1996).

Deduction is using general principles to explain particulars. 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. They have an unrealistic opinion that the media cause other people to behave violently. Some believe that if you allow PSAs (public service announcements) on TV 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 *under*estimate 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 they 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. 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 elements into a new structure. This is the primary skill we use when building our knowledge structures. As we take in new information, we must analyze it or break it down into useful elements. Then we evaluate the elements to determine which are useful, credible, and interesting. The elements that are evaluated positively need to be grouped along with the elements already in our existing knowledge structures; this will often require us to create new groups and look for new patterns. Thus, the process of synthesis is using our new media messages to keep reformulating, refining, and updating our existing knowledge structures.

Abstracting is creating 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.

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 to expose ourselves to the mass media to 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.

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 100-foot-tall tower, climb up to the top, and use that as your perspective to study the Earth. That would give you a good perspective that would not be blocked by trees so that you could see for perhaps several miles in any direction. If your

tower were in a forest, you would conclude that Earth is covered with trees. But if your tower were in a suburban neighborhood, you would conclude that Earth is covered with houses, roads, and shopping centers. If your tower were inside the New Orleans Superdome stadium, you would conclude something quite different. Each of these perspectives would give you a very different idea about Earth. We could get into all kinds of arguments about which perspective delivers the most accurate or best set of ideas about Earth, but such arguments are rather useless. None of these perspectives is better than any other. The key to understanding Earth is to build lots of these towers so you have many different perspectives to enlarge your understanding about what the Earth is. And not all of these towers need to be 100 feet tall. Some should be very short so that you can better see what is happening between the blades of grass in a lawn. And others should be hundreds of miles away from the surface so that you can tell that the Earth is a sphere and that there are large weather formations constantly churning around the globe.

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. Therefore, we need to view it from many different perspectives to appreciate all it has to offer. Second, media literacy is a continuum, not a category.

Media Literacy Is Multidimensional. When we think of information, we typically think of sets of facts such as from a textbook, a newspaper, or a magazine article. But this is only one type of information—cognitive. Media literacy requires that we acquire information and build knowledge in more than just the cognitive dimension but also to consider information from emotional, aesthetic, and moral dimensions. Each of these four dimensions focuses on a different domain of understanding. The cognitive domain refers to factual information—dates, names, definitions, and the like. Think of cognitive information as that which resides in the brain.

The emotional domain contains information about feelings, such as love, hate, anger, happiness, and frustration. Think of emotional information as that which lives in the heart—feelings of happy times, moments of fear, instances of embarrassment. Some people have very 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, so they do not require a high degree of literacy to perceive and understand. But some of us are much better than others at perceiving the more subtle emotions such as ambivalence, confusion, wariness, and so on. Crafting messages about these emotions requires more production skill from writers, directors, and actors. Perceiving these subtle emotions accurately requires a higher degree of literacy from the audience.

The aesthetic domain contains information about how to produce messages. This information gives us the basis for making judgments about who are great writers, photographers, actors, dancers, choreographers, singers, musicians, composers, directors, and other kinds of artists. 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. This appreciation skill is very important to some scholars (Messaris, 1994; Silverblatt, 2007; 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 information we have from this aesthetic domain, the finer discriminations we can make between a great actress and a very 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, between art and artificiality.

The moral domain contains information about 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 information is, the more deeply we can perceive the values underlying messages in the media and the more sophisticated and reasoned are our judgments 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 are able to separate characters from their actions—you might not like a particular character, but you like his or her actions in terms of fitting in with (or reinforcing) your values. You do not focus your viewing on only one character's point of view but try to empathize with many characters so you can vicariously experience the consequences of their actions throughout the course of the narrative.

Your media literacy perspective needs to include information from all four of these domains. For example, you may be able to be highly analytical when you watch a movie 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. Media literacy is not a category—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 an American citizen or you are not. In contrast, media literacy is best regarded as a continuum—like 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 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 overall perspective on the media. The strength of a person's perspective is based on 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 weak and limited perspectives on the media. They have smaller, more superficial, and less organized knowledge structures, which provide an inadequate perspective to use in interpreting the meaning of a media message.

These people are also habitually reluctant or unwilling to use their skills, which remain underdeveloped and therefore more difficult to employ successfully.

THE TYPOLOGY OF MEDIA LITERACY

Remember that media literacy is a continuum. People are positioned along that continuum based on the skills and knowledge they bring to bear (cognitively, emotionally, aesthetically, and morally) for the purpose of gaining control over the meaning process. Along that continuum, we can identify some key positions (see Figure 2.2).

FIGURE 2.2 Typology of Media Literacy

Stage	Characteristics
Acquiring Fundamentals	Learning that there are human beings and other physical things apart from one's self; these things look different and serve different functions
	Learn the meaning of facial expressions and natural sounds
	Recognize shapes, form, size, color, movement, and spatial relations
	Rudimentary concept of time—regular patterns
Language Acquisition	Recognize speech sounds and attach meaning to them
	Be able to reproduce speech sounds
	Orient to visual and audio media
	Make emotional and behavior responses to music and sounds
	Recognize certain characters in visual media and follow their movement
Narrative Acquisition	Develop understanding of differences:
	Fiction vs. nonfiction
	Ads vs. entertainment
	Real vs. make-believe
	Understand how to connect plot elements
	By time sequencing
	By motive-action-consequence

Stage	Characteristics
Developing Skepticism	Discount claims made in ads
	Sharpen differences between likes and dislikes for shows, characters, and actions
	Make fun of certain characters even through those characters are not presented as foils in their shows
Intensive Development	Strong motivation to seek out information on certain topics
	Developing a detailed set of information on particular topics (sports, politics, etc.)
	High awareness of utility of information and quick facility in processing information judged to be useful
Experiential Exploring	Seeking out different forms of content and narratives
	Focus on searching for surprises and new emotional, moral, and aesthetic reactions
Critical Appreciation	Accepting messages on their own terms, then evaluating them within that sphere
	Developing very broad and detailed understanding of the historical, economic, political, and artistic contexts of message systems
	Ability to make subtle comparisons and contrasts among many different message elements simultaneously
	Ability to construct a summary judgment about the overall strengths and weaknesses of a message
Social Responsibility	Taking 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
	Recognizing that one's own individual decisions affect society—no matter how minutely
	Recognizing that there are some actions an individual can take to make a constructive impact on society

The lowest three levels are stages we go through as young children. Acquiring Fundamentals happens during the first year of life; Language Acquisition occurs during years 2 and 3; then Narrative Acquisition happens during years 3 to 5. These are stages that are left behind by children as they age into adolescence and adulthood.

The Developing Skepticism stage occurs from about ages 5 to 9, and the Intensive Development stage is 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 out of those messages they want. 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 better (cognitively, emotionally, aesthetically, and morally) messages. They have strongly held opinions about who are the best writers, the best producers, 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.

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?"

Be careful not to think of these positions as fixed, discrete stages. Rather, these are overlapping stages in a fluid process. They are offered more for purposes of illustration instead of being definitive, fixed positions. You have a typical position on the continuum, but that position is not static. You move up and down depending on what medium you are interacting with, depending on the message, and depending on your motive for the exposure. For example, when you are reading a book that is considered a classic novel for a college course, you may be able to reach the Critical Appreciation level. But when you flick on the television and watch MTV's *Pimp My Ride* or *Beauty and the Geek* to relax, you might sink down to the Intensive Development level. There is nothing wrong with this dropping down on the typology. There are times when we just want to "veg out" and don't want to spend the effort to stay at the highest stages. But remember 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 choose to take it easier at lower stages occasionally.

We all have a stage at which we feel generally at home. This is where we are most comfortable interacting with the media. We are usually able to move up a stage or two from our home base. But moving up a stage requires a conscious effort where we must expend more energy to apply higher level skills. So we don't move up unless we are strongly motivated to do so.

ADVANTAGES OF DEVELOPING A HIGHER DEGREE OF MEDIA LITERACY

What are the advantages of developing a higher degree of media literacy? I will emphasize three. First, media literacy grows one's appetite for a wider variety of media messages. Second, it gives people knowledge about how to program their own mental codes. And third, it provides people with more control over the media.

Appetite for Wider Variety of Media Messages

The media offer an incredible array of choices. The Internet contains Web sites on every topic that humans can conceive. 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 still, but with 500 plus channels from most cable TV 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, although there are about 10,000 magazines published in this country, even a large bookstore is likely to have only about 300 on its magazine shelves. You don't want to have to scan through all 300 magazines, so you rely on your automatic filtering to narrow your choice down to about a dozen magazines that you have found interesting in the past—that is, the media have conditioned you to like these magazines. Your choice is then to buy one or two from this smaller list of 12. Do you have a choice? Yes, of course. But see how the media—first through the bookstore buyer, then through media conditioning—have narrowed your choice down to 12; in other words, the decision you made was determined 99.88% 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 a parent laying out two pairs of dress pants—one black and the other dark blue—for his or her 4-year-old son and giving him the total power to choose what he is to 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 knows about jeans, cargo pants, skater shorts, bathing trunks, and football pants, then he will not think the two dress pants is much of a choice. But what if he only knows about dark dress pants? In this case, he believes he does have a big choice between black and dark blue.

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, and this predictability increases mass media companies' ability to reduce their business risk. However, the choices are still there for you to take advantage of, but most of us prefer our habitual patterns of exposure. Most of us do not explore much of the range in media messages.

The media literacy perspective asks you to be more adventurous and explore a wider range of messages. When you do so, you will likely find many of those messages are not interesting or useful to you. But you will also likely find a few types of messages that are highly useful, and this will expand your exposure repertoire.

More Self-Programming of Mental Codes

The purpose of media literacy is to empower individuals to control media programming. When I use the term *programming* in this sense, I do not mean television programs; instead, I mean the way the mass media in general alter the way you think about things. An individual by himself or herself will not have much influence on altering how the mass media craft or schedule their messages. An individual will never be able to exercise much control over what gets offered to the public. However, a person can learn to exert a great deal of control over the way one's mind gets programmed. Thus, the purpose of media literacy is to show people how to shift control from the media to themselves. This is what I mean when I say that the purpose of media literacy is to help people control media programming.

The first step in shifting control away from the media to the individual is for individuals to understand how the media program them. This programming by the media continually takes place in a two-phase cycle that repeats over and over again. One of these phases of the cycle is the constraining of choices, and the second phase is the reinforcing of experience.

More Control Over Media

The mass media are composed of businesses that are very sophisticated in knowing how to attract your attention and condition you for repeat exposures. The media are very successful in using you to achieve their business goals. Often the media's business goals and your personal goals are the same, so it is a win-win situation. But there are also many times when your personal goals are different from the media's goals; when this occurs, you need to break away from your media-conditioned habits to follow your own goals. The media literacy perspective will help you recognize this divergence of goals and help you take alternative steps. Thus, you are more likely to treat media messages as tools to reach your own goals.

CONCLUSION

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. It is not a category; there are degrees of media literacy. It is multidimensional, with development taking place cognitively, emotionally, aesthetically, and morally.

Media literacy is composed of three building blocks: personal locus, knowledge structures, and skills. 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

Adams, D., & Hamm, M. (2001). *Literacy in a multimedia age.* Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon. (199 pages, including glossary and index)

Coming from an educational technology background, the authors argue that media literacy needs to include media analysis, multimedia production, collaborative inquiry, and networking technologies. They present many practical ideas to help teachers guide their students to learn how to get the most out of messages in all forms of media.

Buckingham, D. (2003). *Media education: Literacy, learning, and contemporary culture.* Cambridge, UK: Polity. (232 pages)

This is a survey of the field of media education. It focuses attention on key debates and controversies, then lays out some guidelines for the future.

Frechette, J. D. (2002). *Developing media literacy in cyberspace: Pedagogy and critical learning for the twenty-first-century classroom.* New York: Praeger. (185 pages)

This book offers a vision of learning that values social empowerment over technical skills. The author argues that media literacy offers the best long-term training for today's youth to become experienced practitioners of 21st-century technology. The author provides guidelines to help educators develop and provide concrete learning strategies that enable students to judge the validity and worth of what they see on the Internet as they strive to become critically autonomous in a technology-laden world.

Johnson, L. L. (2001). *Media, education, and change.* New York: Lang. (182 pages with index and appendices)

Written from a postmodernist perspective, this book examines the core concepts of contemporary media literacy education. The author reports on her observations and interviews with teachers during a 15-week course to train them in basic video production. She draws conclusions about those teachers' experiences in their classrooms and their perspectives on students, learning, and media.

Kubey, R., & Ruben, B. (Eds.). (2001). *Media literacy in the information age: Current perspectives* (Information and Behavior Vol. 6). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers. (484 pages)

This is an edited volume of 22 chapters written by leading media educators from many countries around the world. The focus of most chapters is not just how to deal with technological change in the media but how to create an educational process that will help students become more media literate.

Macedo, D. P., & Steinberg, S. R. (Eds.). (2007). *Media literacy: A reader.* New York: Peter Lang. (710 pages)

The editors say the purpose of this book is to help students develop the ability to interpret media as well as understand the ways they themselves consume and emotionally invest in media. The book is an extensive collection of essays written primarily for people who are not expert in media literacy and want more of an introduction to the topic rather than a scholarly treatment.

Mackey, M. (2007). *Literacies across media* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge. (224 pages)

This book describes an 18-month long project that was designed to study how a group of boys and girls, ages 10 to 14, made sense of narratives in a variety of formats, including print, electronic book, video, DVD, computer game, and CD-ROM. The author's analyses reveal how those children developed strategies for interpreting narratives through encounters with a diverse range of texts and media.

Masterman, L. (1985). *Teaching the media.* London: Comedia. (341 pages, including annotated bibliography and appendices)

Written for teachers of media, this book addresses the following questions: Why teach about the media? What are the best ways to teach about the media? Why are media texts the way they are? It seeks to present a set of general principles for teaching about any mass medium.

McLaren, P., Hammer, R., Sholle, D., & Reilly, S. S. (Eds.). (1995). *Rethinking media literacy: A critical pedagogy of representation.* New York: Lang. (259 pages)

This is an edited book of seven chapters by different college professors, concluding with an interview with the four editors on the topic of strategies for media literacy. The chapters are critical of the media and argue for activism.

Messaris, P. (1994). *Visual "literacy": Image, mind, and reality.* Boulder, CO: Westview. (208 pages)

Paul Messaris, a communications professor at the University of Pennsylvania, argues against some commonly held assumptions about visual literacy. For example, he rejects the popular notion among many scholars that there can be no objective standards to judge the reality of visual images. He says that there are generic cognitive skills that people apply when they experience the pictorial media. His notion of training people to be media literate focuses on helping viewers detect unrealistic visual manipulation.

Metallinos, N. (Ed.). (1994). *Verbo-visual literacy: Understanding and applying new educational communication media technologies.* Montreal, Canada: 3Dmt Research and Information Center. (276 pages)

These 38 chapters are from a symposium of the International Visual Literacy Association. They focus on suggestions about how best to use the emerging new technologies to foster verbal and visual literacy.

Silverblatt, A. (2007). *Media literacy: Keys to interpreting media messages.* Westport, CT: Praeger. (340 pages, including index)

This is a mass media book that presents some chapters with 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. (1998). *Literacy in a digital world: Teaching and learning in the age of information.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. (291 pages with indexes and appendix)

Using a historical approach, Tyner examines how new communication technologies are accepted as well as resisted over time. She also looks at how media education has responded to changes in technologies. She argues there are multiple literacies—visual, informational, and media.

Unsworth, L. (2001). *Teaching multiliteracies across the curriculum: Changing contexts of text and image in classroom practice.* Philadelphia: Open University Press. (306 pages, including index)

The author trains primary and secondary school teachers in Australia. He argues that teachers need to build from traditional literacy, which is print, to the many other literacies across the curriculum.