2

HOW TO THINK ABOUT MEDIA LITERACY

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 rely on automatic routines where our minds efficiently filter out media messages without thinking about the process until a particular message triggers our attention. This automatic processing is governed by mental codes that have been influenced by your history of media exposures. Becoming more media literate enables you to understand these codes better and to reprogram them so that you can use the media and their messages much better to achieve your own goals in life.

This chapter will show you what media literacy is. But first, we need to examine some of the assumptions people make about media literacy so we clear away the faulty **beliefs.**

TAKING OUT THE TRASH: CLEARING AWAY FAULTY BELIEFS ABOUT MEDIA LITERACY

Everyone holds many beliefs about the media. Some of these beliefs are accurate but many are faulty. The faulty beliefs can get us into trouble, because they trap us into thinking about the wrong things and they make us think that we are powerless to change. These traps lead people to talk in circles, and this prevents them from moving forward to a

Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to do the following:

1. Analyze faulty ideas about the media and media literacy so that you can avoid falling into the traps of that faulty thinking.

2. Explain the proactive definition of media literacy.

3. Define the three key components of media literacy.

4. Describe seven skills that can be used as tools for building useful knowledge structures.

5. Assess your own knowledge structures about the mass media.

point where they can use media literacy to improve their own lives. Let's examine five of these traps. Once you see what these traps are, you can avoid being caught in faulty reasoning.

Media Are Harmful

Perhaps the most prevalent trap is getting caught in the belief that the media are harmful so that the purpose of media literacy is to get us to avoid all media or at least help us avoid the risks of harm. The trap lies in believing that the media are *only* harmful. Of course there are risks with media exposures, like there are risks with many things we do in our everyday lives. But there are also many wonderful benefits that can be acquired through media exposures. Therefore, the purpose in media literacy is not to help people avoid all media or even any particular kind of message; instead, the purpose of media literacy is to help people recognize the difference in messages between potential harm and potential benefits.

This trap is frequently seen when a new medium captures the public's attention and critics complain only about the dangers of that new medium and ignore the potential for positive advantages. For example, the newest media have stimulated criticism from people like John Sutherland, an English professor at the University College of London, who argues 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 limited their ability to think in longer arcs, which is required for constructing well reasoned essays.

Fortunately there are sometimes people who take a more optimistic position with the arrival of each new mass medium and point out its positive effects. For example, Andrea Lunsford, who is a professor of writing and rhetoric at Stanford University, 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." In addition, she 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 much more 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.

Media literacy is not just about fearing the media and worrying about protecting one's self and others from their potentially negative effects. Media literacy is also about developing an appreciation for the many positive things the media offer us and developing our abilities to take advantage of those positive things. Thus, we need to develop a balanced perspective on the media and their influence. Media literacy is also about *adapting* to our changing world rather than *ignoring* those changes or *denying* that those changes are happening.

▶ Media literacy increases a person's ability to access a wide variety of messages, no matter what technology is used to transmit them.

Media Literacy Will Destroy My Fun With the Media

Another trap in thinking about media literacy is that it requires a lot of dry analysis and that this will destroy a person's experience of fun with the media. People who fall into this trap use the analogy of analyzing a joke by arguing that when we analyze why a joke is funny, we lose the humor. Or when we overanalyze what our favorite characters do in movies, we reduce our liking of those characters. With these people, analysis is regarded as an acid that eats away at their fun, so they try to avoid analysis.

This is a trap because media literacy is not about dissolving messages with academic discourse; instead, it focuses on digging below the surface to see more things in the message. This can more often lead to greater appreciation of the messages rather than less fun.

Media Literacy Requires the Memorization of a Great Many Facts

It is a trap to think that media literacy focuses on the acquisition of a large number of facts. This is faulty for several reasons. One faulty reason is that media literacy is more focused on knowledge than on 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. Facts are ephemeral, while knowledge is enduring. Facts go out of date quickly. If your education is simply about the acquisition of a large number of facts, then your education will lose value each year as more and more facts go out of date. But if your education has shown you how to transform facts into knowledge, then you have a structure of meaning that increases in value each year. A characteristic of higher media literacy is the ability to transform information into **knowledge structures** and the willingness to exercise that ability.

Another reason that this belief is faulty is because media literacy requires more than knowledge; it requires the strengthening of a person's **skills** and the person's **personal locus.** This is because knowledge cannot be memorized; instead, it has to be constructed by you. And the construction process relies on tools (which are your skills) and a plan (which is your personal locus).

Media Literacy Is a Special Skill

People often talk about media literacy as if it is "critical thinking." This term has little usefulness in defining media literacy because it has so many different meanings. Some people think critical thinking is simply being critical of the media, while other people have many different meanings (see Box 2.1). While each of these definitional elements has value to increase understanding of media literacy, when we load them all onto one term it gets confusing.

In a larger sense, it is a trap to think that media literacy is any one particular kind of skill; instead, benefits come from the use of a cluster of skills. Furthermore, the skills that are the most useful to media literacy are skills that we already have to various degrees and already use every day.

These are the skills of analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstraction (see Figure 2.1). 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.

Media Literacy Requires Too Much Effort

A fifth trap in thinking about media literacy is to believe that it requires too much effort because there is so much involved in becoming media literate. This is a trap if you think that media literacy is a category, rather than a continuum. It is faulty to think that you have to do 1,000 difficult things in order to enter the category of media literacy.

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 have a driver's license or you do not. Instead, 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 of the continuum where we can say that someone is fully literate; there is always room for improvement.

There is always *opportunity* to improve. Many of these opportunities require very little effort. When you understand the media literacy perspective (to be explained in the next section), you will begin to see all sorts of opportunities to improve your level of media literacy in your everyday lives.

BOX 2.1 : CRITICAL THINKING

There are many different meanings for critical thinking:

* Criticizing the media and not accepting many of their practices

* Becoming more open-minded

* Analyzing media messages in more depth to appreciate the craft of production

* Thinking more broadly about the media and their effects on society

* Elevating one's quality of experience with the media

* Becoming more aware of the economic and political impact of the media

* Regarding the media in a more cultural context

* Becoming more skeptical of the media and their influence on individuals

* Developing a more refined aesthetic sense of quality in media messages

* Being more active in processing media messages rather than taking things for granted
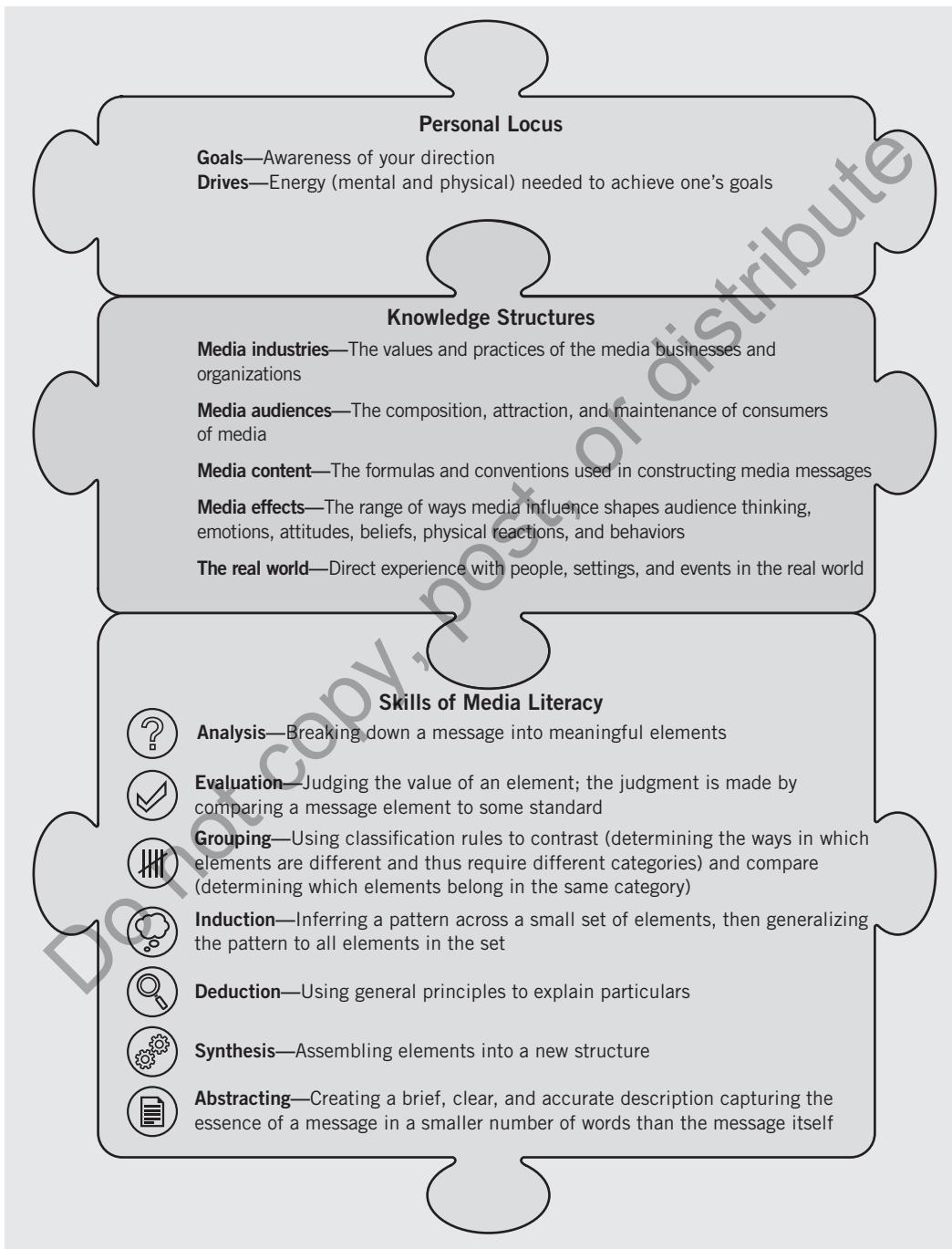
INCREASING MEDIA LITERACY

Now that you have seen the traps in thinking about media literacy and how to avoid them, it's time to focus on what media literacy is. In this section, I present you with the core set of ideas that includes a definition and its three key components.

The 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

Figure 2.1 The Three Components of Media Literacy

Personal Locus

Goals—Awareness of your direction
Drives—Energy (mental and physical) needed to achieve one's goals

Knowledge Structures

Media industries—The values and practices of the media businesses and organizations

Media audiences—The composition, attraction, and maintenance of consumers of media

Media content—The formulas and conventions used in constructing media messages

Media effects—The range of ways media influence shapes audience thinking, emotions, attitudes, beliefs, physical reactions, and behaviors

The real world—Direct experience with people, settings, and events in the real world

Skills of Media Literacy

Analysis—Breaking down a message into meaningful elements

Evaluation—Judging the value of an element; the judgment is made by comparing a message element to some standard

Grouping—Using classification rules to contrast (determining the ways in which elements are different and thus require different categories) and compare (determining which elements belong in the same category)

Induction—Inferring a pattern across a small set of elements, then generalizing the pattern to all elements in the set

Deduction—Using general principles to explain particulars

Synthesis—Assembling elements into a new structure

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

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 the earth is covered with trees. But if your tower were in a suburban neighborhood, you would conclude that the earth is covered with houses, roads, and shopping centers. If your tower were inside the Mercedes-Benz Superdome in New Orleans, you would conclude something quite different. Each of these perspectives would give you a very different idea about the earth. We could get into all kinds of arguments about which perspective delivers the most accurate or best set of ideas about the earth, but such arguments are rather useless. None of these perspectives is better than any other. The key to understanding the 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. The more perspectives you have from which to experience the media, the more you will be able to see and appreciate in the media, their messages, and their effects on you.

The Big Three

The three key components of media literacy are personal locus, knowledge structures, and skills. These three are necessary to build your wider set of perspectives on the media. Your personal locus provides mental energy and direction. Your knowledge structures are the organizations of what you have learned. Your 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 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.

KNOWLEDGE STRUCTURES Knowledge structures are sets of organized information in your memory. Knowledge structures do not occur spontaneously; they must be

▶ Exercising media literacy transforms the many discrete pieces of information you encounter through messages into an organized knowledge structure.

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constructed with care and precision. They are not just a pile of facts; they are constructed by carefully crafting pieces of information into an overall design. The structure helps us see patterns. We use these patterns as maps to tell us where to get more information and also where to go to retrieve information that we have previously built into our knowledge structures.

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. If all a person has is the recognition of surface information such as lyrics to TV show theme songs, names of characters and actors, settings for shows, and the like, he or she is operating at 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*.

With media literacy, we need strong knowledge structures in five areas: media industries, media audiences, media content, media effects, and the real world. 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.

In this book, I will help you get started on the first four of these knowledge structures. These four are focused on a different major facet of the media: industries, audiences, content, and effects. The fifth knowledge structure—the real world—is just as important. However, in order to build your knowledge structures about the real world, you need to seek out your own direct experiences rather than rely on what the media tell you. For example, the best way to learn about political campaigns is not to read about them in books or websites or to watch news reports. The best way to learn about political campaigns is to run for office yourself. When you run for a major office—or even when you help someone else run—you acquire a wealth of real-world information that will help you make good assessments about the credibility of media messages about political campaigning. Likewise, people who have played sports will be able to appreciate the athletic accomplishments they see on TV to a greater depth than those who have not physically tested themselves with 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 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 TV 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 TV series. Are you media literate? Within the small corner of the media world where that one TV show resides, you are. But if this were the only knowledge structure you had developed, you would have little understanding of the content produced by the other media. You would have difficulty understanding trends about who owns and controls the media, about how the media have developed over time, about why certain kinds of content are never seen while other types are continually repeated, and about what effects that content may be having on you. With many highly developed knowledge structures, you could understand the entire span of media issues and therefore be able to "see the big picture" about why the media are the way they are.

Let's see how well developed your knowledge structures are about the mass media (see Applying Media Literacy 2.1). If you are not able to answer many of these questions, don't worry too much about it. Most people struggle with these questions. However, this struggle should be taken as an indicator that your knowledge structures could be a lot better when it comes to the mass media. The following six chapters will help you acquire a great deal of the information you need to make these knowledge structures a lot stronger.

SKILLS To construct our knowledge structures, we need to use skills. What skills are most important to media literacy? Many people answer this question with this fuzzy phrase: critical thinking. This term is very popular within writings about media literacy but it creates a problem because everyone seems to have a different definition for what this is (see Box 2.1). While each of these definitional elements is important and useful, putting them all together into one term creates a lot of confusion. You can avoid this problem of fuzzy thinking by focusing on seven specific skills that can be used as the essential tools for building useful knowledge structures. These are the skills of **analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis,** and **abstracting.** 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 sets of information and carefully fit those pieces of information into their proper places in a knowledge structure.

Assessing Your Knowledge Structures

Let's do a quick assessment of your knowledge structures about the mass media. For now, don't worry about whether your answers are correct or incorrect; you will find that out as you read through the book. Instead, think about how many of these 20 questions you feel confident in answering. Even if you are not able to answer more than a few—or any—of these questions with confidence, that is okay. For now! You are not expected to have any of this information in your memory banks.

Mass Media Industries

1. How many mass media are there?
2. Can you list the mass media ordered by how old each is?
3. What is the most dominant mass medium today?
4. What is the most influential force shaping the mass media today?
5. Why is advertising regarded as the engine that powers the mass media industries?
6. How do the mass media businesses maximize their profits?
7. Why is risk so high in the mass media industries?

Mass Media Audiences

8. What is long tail marketing?
9. Why do the mass media businesses no longer seek large, general audiences?
10. What are the major segmentation schemes used by mass media businesses?
11. How is audience exposure different from audience attention?
12. What is the transported exposure state?
13. How do audiences typically make filtering decisions?
14. How is meaning matching different than meaning construction?

Mass Media Content

15. What is the most important content formula used by mass media message producers?
16. Do you know what a genre is? If so, how many genres of content can you name?
17. What are the three meta-genres of mass media content?

Mass Media Effects

18. Can you tell the difference between process effects and manifested effects?
19. What is the difference between an attitudinal effect and a physiological effect?
20. How many factors of influence that lead to media effects can you name?

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 breaking them down into their components and examining the composition of the elements 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 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, 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 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, science, and mathematics each year and then compares their levels of learning with youth in 65 other countries. The 2012 Student Assessment report says that adolescents in the United States are ranked 24th in reading, 28th in science, and 36th in mathematics (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). Critiques of the U.S. educational system use information like 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 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 even more carefully, there are several effects happening simultaneously. For example, the typically reported finding is that TV 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
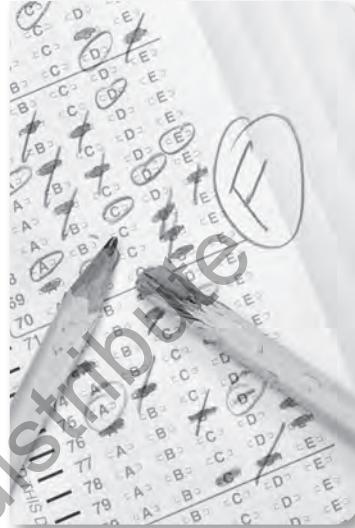
▶ Evaluation is an essential media literacy skill. Weigh the evidence against popular opinions on a possible link between children's media consumption and their academic performance.

related to IQ. Also, children with lower IQs watch more TV. So it is IQ that accounts for lower achievement and higher TV 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, 1987a). 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 TV 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 TV 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 TV 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 TV provides do less well in school than children who watch a moderate amount of TV; however, when a child gets to the point where the amount of TV viewing cuts into needed study time, academic performance goes down. TV—as well as the Internet and all other forms of the media—have potentially positive as well as negative effects. TV exposure can displace constructive behaviors such as studying, but TV can expand our experience, teach us valuable social lessons, and stimulate our imaginations. Preventing children from watching TV can prevent a potentially negative effect, but it also prevents positive effects as well.

When we pose the question, "What effect does viewing TV 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 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 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 the skill we use to put elements into categories. It essentially requires us to compare and contrast across elements to determine how the elements are different (contrasting) so that we can create the groups. Then we need to determine how the elements are the same (comparing) so that we can put similar elements together into the same group.

The key to using the grouping skill well is constructing one or more classification rules, which tell us which characteristics to look for in the elements when doing the comparing and contrasting. For example, if we want to group content on TV, one classification rule might be the intention of the programmer, so we look for characteristics in TV messages to tell us whether the programmer's intention was to entertain us, to inform us, or to persuade us.

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 number of elements and 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

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▶ Faulty reasoning can lead to false beliefs. For example, many people think that violent crime is more prevalent than crime rates indicate, following exposure to frequent media reports of sensationalized crimes.

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, public opinion polls about crime for years have shown that 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, 2013). 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. 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 U.S. 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 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—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).

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 TV, have a very strong negative effect on other people. They have an unrealistic opinion that the media cause other people to behave violently. Some people 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 an essential skill we use when building and updating our knowledge structures. As we take in new information, it often does not fit into an existing knowledge structure, so we must adapt that knowledge structure to accommodate the new information. 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.

KEY IDEAS

- The five key traps you need to avoid when thinking about media literacy are as follows:

  o The media are always harmful.
  o Increasing my media literacy will destroy my fun with the media.
  o Increasing my media literacy will require me to memorize a great many facts.
  o Media literacy is a special skill.
  o Increasing my media literacy will require too much effort.

- 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.

- The three key components of media literacy are personal locus, knowledge structures, and skills.

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.

Potter, W. J. (2013). *The skills of media literacy*. Las Vegas, NV: Knowledge Assets, Inc. (224 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.

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▶ Video content has adapted from being watched on a traditional TV to being watched on laptops and other mobile devices through websites such as YouTube, founded by Chad Hurley and Steven Chen (pictured).

Test Your Knowledge: True or False

Before reading this chapter, think about which of the following statements you believe to be **true** and which you believe to be **false**.

1. Although civilization is more than 4,000 years old, the mass media have been around for less than two centuries.

2. Film is the oldest of all the mass media.

3. The mass media as a whole employ one of the largest workforces in the U.S. economy.

4. There are currently more women than men working in the mass media industries.