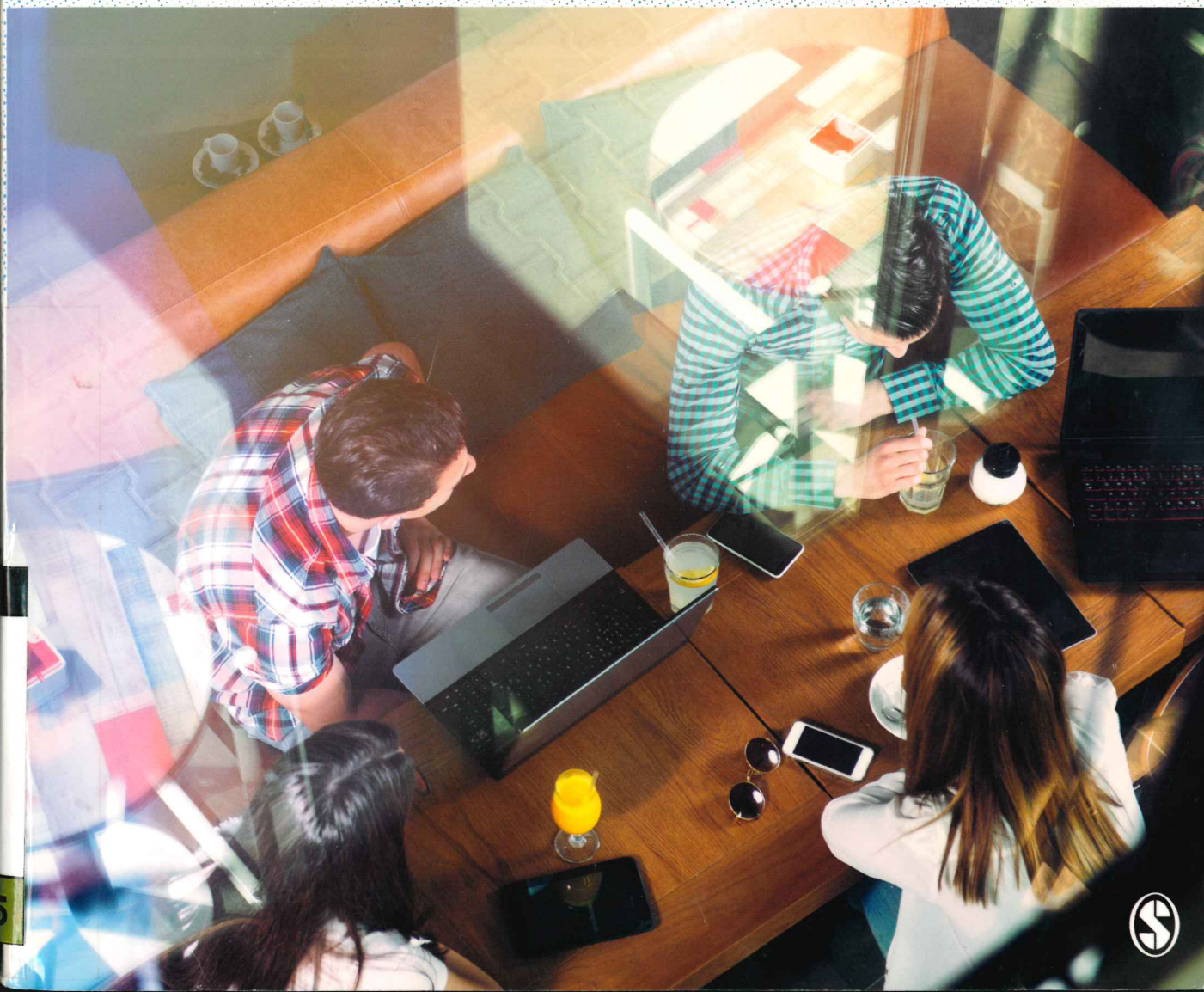


W. JAMES POTTER

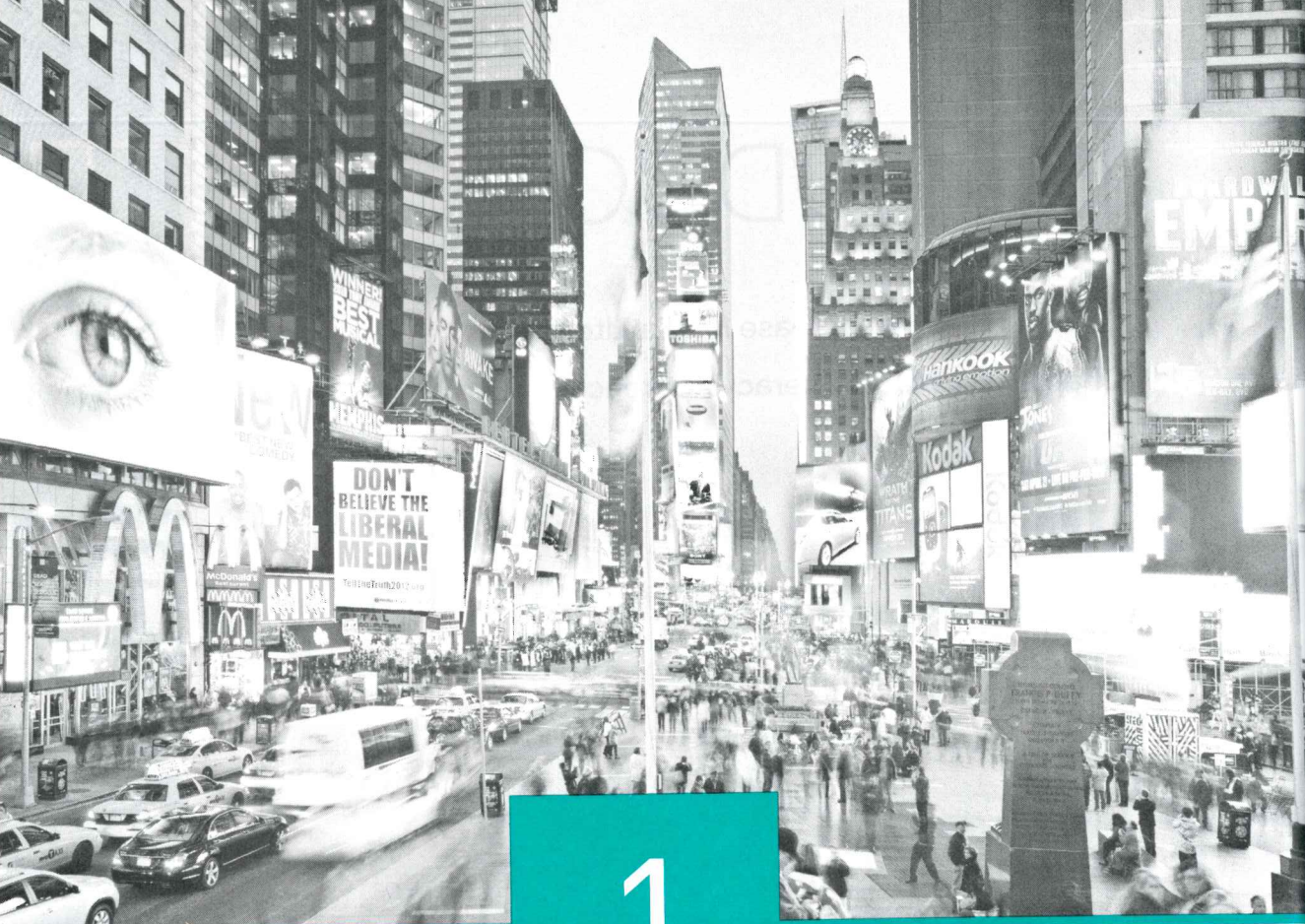
EDITION

9

# MEDIA LITERACY







iStock/Xavier Arnau

# WHY INCREASE MEDIA LITERACY?

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

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

The Information Problem  
 Growth Is Accelerating  
 High Degree of Exposure  
 Keeping Up  
 Dealing With the Information Problem  
 Our Mental Hardware  
 Our Mental Software  
*Automatic Routines*  
*Advantages and Disadvantages*

The Big Question  
 Summary  
 Further Reading  
 Keeping Up to Date

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

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

In this chapter, I will show you the big picture of our media environment so that you can see how enormous the information problem is. The way you deal with this problem typically works well on a day-to-day basis, but its effectiveness is questionable over the long run. That is, the disadvantages in the long term greatly outweigh the advantages in the short term.

## THE INFORMATION PROBLEM

Our culture is saturated with media messages—far more than you may realize. Hollywood releases more than 700 hours of feature films each year, which adds to its base of more than 100,000 hours of films it has already released in previous years. In addition, a video platform such as YouTube has more than 1 billion videos available for viewing and users are uploading more than 300 new hours of video *every minute of every day* (YouTube, 2018). Commercial television stations generate about 48 million hours of video messages every year worldwide, and radio stations send out 65.5 million hours of original programming



NurPhoto/Getty Images

Apple produces new technology in every iteration of its phones, watches, and other products.





Social media continues to be the fastest growing area for media exposure, being consumed mostly on smartphones and other mobile devices.

each year. We now have more than 140 million book titles in existence, and another 1,500 new book titles are published throughout the world each day. Then there is the World Wide Web, which has been estimated to have almost 2 billion websites (Internet Live Stats, 2018a) but is so huge that no one knows how big it really is.

### Growth Is Accelerating

Not only are we already saturated with media messages, the rate of that saturation is growing at an accelerating pace. More information has been generated since you were born than the

sum total of all information throughout all recorded history up until the time of your birth. And the rate continues to accelerate! In 2012, Silver estimated that the amount of information was doubling every year and by now the rate of growth is even higher.

Why is so much information being produced? One reason is that there are now more people producing information than ever before. Half of all the scientists who have ever lived are alive today and producing information. Also, the number of people in the United States who identify themselves as musicians has more than doubled in the last 4 decades, the number of artists has tripled, and the number of authors has increased fivefold (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Another reason is that the technology now exists to provide easy-to-use platforms to share information. Thus everyone can generate and share information with large numbers of people every day. You no longer need to be a musician to create songs; you can use GarageBand or other computer synthesizers. You don't need to be signed to a recording contract by a record company to distribute your songs. You can also be a journalist, a fiction writer, a photographer, a filmmaker, or even a video game designer as a hobby and make your messages easily available to millions of people, just like professional artists. Or you can generate and share smaller forms of information such as e-mails and tweets. There are now 3.2 billion Internet users worldwide, and they send and receive 300 billion e-mail messages each day; Twitter users generate more than 500 million tweets per day; and Facebook reports that 100 million photos are uploaded each and every day (Pingdom, 2017).

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

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

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

### High Degree of Exposure

The media are highly attractive, so we increase the time we spend with media messages each year. Over the last 3 decades, every new survey of media use has shown that people on average have been increasing their exposure time every year. For example, in 2010, people spent an average of 10 hours and 46 minutes with all forms of the media each day, and this increased to 12 hours and 14 minutes by 2014 (eMarketer, 2014). By 2017, people were spending more time with the media than with anything else, with the average person spending 12 hours and 1 minute per day on media (eMarketer, 2017b).

It is clear that the media are an extremely important part of our everyday lives. In our information-saturated culture, we are constantly connected to our friends, our society, and the entire world through the media.

### Keeping Up

How do we keep up with all this information? One thing we try to do is multitask. For example, a person can listen to recorded music, text friends, and watch video on a pop-up window all at the same time—thus experiencing 3 hours of media exposure for each hour of clock time.

Multitasking, however, is not a good enough strategy for helping us keep up with the flood of information. If you wanted to view all the videos uploaded to YouTube in just 1 day, it would take you an entire year of viewing and you would have to multitask by watching 20 screens with no breaks! While multitasking helps increase our exposure, it is not enough to help us keep up with even a tiny fraction of media messages in the everyday flood of information.

## DEALING WITH THE INFORMATION PROBLEM

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

### Our Mental Hardware

The most remarkable piece of hardware on Earth is the human brain. Although the human brain is relatively small (weighing less than 4 pounds), it has a remarkable capacity to take in information from the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell), process all that information by storing it or filtering it, and then make decisions that result in action. The human brain is composed of 100 billion neuron cells, which is the



Multitasking, like using your smartphone while watching online videos, has increased the average young person's daily quantity of media exposure.





iStock/andresr

The human brain is capable of taking in and processing large amounts of information about our surroundings.

## Our Mental Software

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

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

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

As we accumulate experiences in life, our minds accumulate additional programming that tells our brains how to perform additional functions, such as solving math problems, reasoning logically, working through moral problems, controlling one's emotions, and expanding and growing one's skills that would lead to rewarding careers and relationships. This additional programming initially comes from one's parents

number of stars in the Milky Way (Storr, 2014). Each cell is linked by synapses to as many as 100,000 others. That means your brain has created over 500 trillion string-like fibers called axons and dendrites that connect with other neurons at junctions called synapses. "These synapses constantly form and dissolve, weakening, and strengthening in response to new experiences" (Haven, 2007, p. 22).

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

and siblings. It also comes from one's contact with cultural institutions, such as education, religion, politics, and government. It comes from one's friends, acquaintances, and even enemies. And it comes from the mass media. All of this additional programming shapes how we make decisions in our everyday world about what to wear, what to eat, what is important, how to act, and how to spend our resources of time and money. This programming is constantly running in our unconscious minds in the form of automatic routines.

## Automatic Routines

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

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

To illustrate this automatic processing, consider what you do when you go to the supermarket to buy food. Let's say you walk into the store with a list of 25 items you need to buy, and 15 minutes later you walk out of the store with your 25 items. In this scenario, how many decisions have you made? The easy answer is to say 25 decisions, because you made a separate decision to buy each of your 25 items as you put each item into your cart. But what about all the items you *decided not to buy*? The average supermarket today has about 40,000 items on its shelves. So you actually made 40,000



iStock/tisskin

The human brain not only oversees autonomic functions like breathing, but also manages our reactions to the environment and social well-being.



decisions in the relatively short time you were in the supermarket—25 decisions to buy the 25 products and all those other decisions not to buy the remaining 39,975 products. How did you accomplish such an extensive task in such a short period of time? You relied on automatic routines. See how these automatic routines govern your buying habits?

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

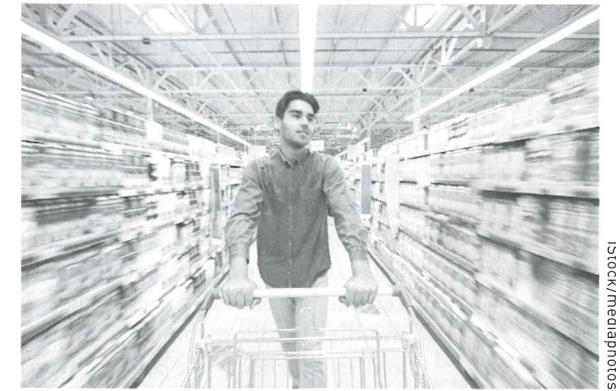
### Advantages and Disadvantages

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

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

Another disadvantage is that over the long run we start to experience message fatigue. When we feel overwhelmed with too many media messages, we try to

protect ourselves even more by narrowing down our focus and thus filtering out even more messages. Eventually we end up exposing ourselves to the same type of message over and over, and the value of each message keeps decreasing and we lose the ability to concentrate. In 1971, Nobel Prize-winning economist Herbert Simon observed that “a wealth of information crates a poverty of attention” (Angwin, 2009, p. 239). This is illustrated by a study where experimenters set up a jam tasting table in a food store. Half the time, they offered 6 jams, and the other half the time, they offered 24 jams. While the table with more jams attracted 50% more visitors and tasters, the table with fewer jams stimulated more sales. Among the visitors to the table with the larger number of jams, only 3% bought some jam, while among the visitors to the table with the smaller number of jams, 30% bought some jam (Anderson, 2006). The lesson here is that while choice is attractive, too much choice can paralyze us into inaction. When we feel overwhelmed, we rely more and more on automatic routines and this leads us into a deeper and deeper rut of doing the same things over and over.



istock/mediaphotos

How is shopping in a supermarket similar to consuming media content?

## THE BIG QUESTION

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

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

The task of sorting through all these influences requires some considerable analyses. This book will guide you through the media part of that analysis. Each of the 15 chapters in the instructional core of this book will show you how to ask the crucial questions about what you think about the world, what you believe to be true, and your habits of spending your resources of time and money. Through these analyses, you will gradually increase your awareness about the degree to which the media have programmed your automatic codes. This increased awareness will make



it clear to you which parts of your code are not acting in your best interest and are likely training you to waste your personal resources, which leads you into frustration, anxiety, and unhappiness. This will put you in a position to reprogram those faulty bits of code. Those revisions to your code change the way it runs so that you will be much more likely to achieve your own personal goals and experience more happiness.

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

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

## SUMMARY

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

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

## Further Reading

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Keeping Up to Date

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

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

This site presents information about the growth of information in the world and more generally it provides information about new developments in technologies.

Pingdom (<http://royal.pingdom.com>)

This is a blog written by members of the Pingdom team on a wide variety of topics concerning the Internet and web tech issues. Begun in 2007, Pingdom is a company that

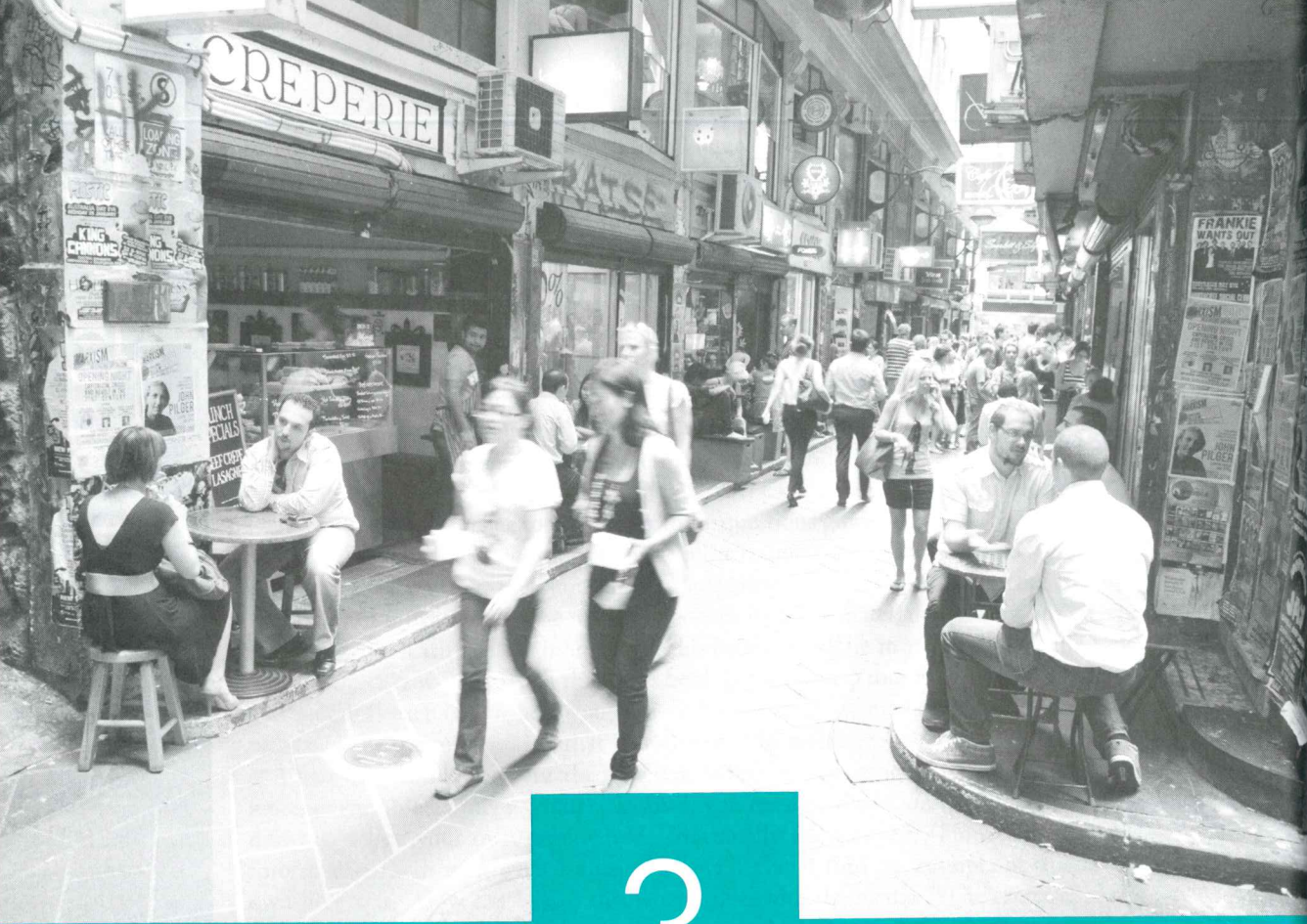


provides Internet services to companies around the world.

Statistical Abstracts of the United States ([https://www.census.gov/library/publications/time-series/statistical\\_abstracts.html](https://www.census.gov/library/publications/time-series/statistical_abstracts.html))

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





## 3

getty/David Hill

## AUDIENCE: INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

*Key Idea: In our information-saturated culture, individuals are constantly processing media messages as they make decisions either consciously or automatically about filtering, meaning matching, and meaning construction. They continually are making these decisions in one of four exposure states: automatic, attentional, transported, and self-reflexive.*

The human brain has enormous capacity for information but can only pay attention to a relatively small number of stimuli at a given time.

### Information-Processing Tasks

Filtering  
Meaning Matching  
Meaning Construction

### Analyzing the Idea of Exposure to Media

#### Messages

Exposure and Attention  
*Physical Exposure*  
*Perceptual Exposure*  
*Psychological Exposure*  
*Attention*

### Exposure States

*Automatic State*  
*Attentional State*  
*Transported State*  
*Self-Reflexive State*

### The Media Literacy Approach

Summary  
Further Reading  
Exercise

Harry and Ann are discussing their relationship over lunch on campus.

*“Harry, you never pay attention to what I say!”*

*“How can you say that? We spend almost all day together every day and you are constantly talking,” Harry replies. “I hear what you say.”*

*“Maybe, but you don’t understand what I say.”*

*“Yes, I do. I know a lot about you. I know the names of all your brothers and sisters, and where you went to high school, and your favorite color and —”*

Ann interrupts, *“Those are facts about me. They are not me! You don’t seem to know me.”*

*“I know the meaning of every word you say. I don’t need a dictionary!”*

*“There is more to meaning than the definitions of the words I use!”*

In interpersonal conversations, we often get ourselves into trouble if we are not careful to make a distinction between literal meaning—the dictionary-type meanings we all share for common words and phrases—and the deeper meaning that resides in how we say things, which engages a more complex process. To help make sense of all this complexity, this chapter will show you that there are three generic information-processing tasks—filtering, meaning matching, and meaning construction—as we continuously encounter media messages in our everyday environments. Once you understand these three information-processing tasks, we will move on to the distinction between exposure and attention. Finally, the chapter will show you how you can use this knowledge to increase your media literacy and thereby control these processes to a higher degree.



## INFORMATION-PROCESSING TASKS

We are constantly engaged in a series of three **information-processing tasks** every day. These tasks are **filtering**, **meaning matching**, and **meaning construction** (see Table 3.1). First, we encounter a message and are faced with the task of deciding whether to filter the message out (ignore it) or filter it in (process it). If we decide to filter it in, then we must make sense of it—that is, recognize the symbols and match our learned definitions to the symbols. Next, we need to construct the meaning of the message.

### Filtering

As you saw in Chapter 1, there has been a huge increase in the amount of information generated, which has led to media companies competing much more aggressively for our limited attention. While the human brain has enormous capacity for processing information, the way it functions (or at least the way we currently understand how it functions) limits our ability to pay attention to a relatively small number of stimuli at any given moment. While the human mind can take in 11 million pieces of information in an instant, our awareness is limited to only about 40 of these pieces of information at any given moment (Wilson, 2002). This means that the brain has the capacity to track a

TABLE 3.1 ■ Three Tasks of Information Processing

	Filtering Messages	Meaning Matching	Meaning Construction
Task	To make decisions about which messages to filter out (ignore) and which to filter in (pay attention to)	To use basic competencies to recognize referents and locate previously learned definitions for each	To use skills in order to move beyond meaning matching and to construct meaning for oneself in order to personalize and get more out of a message
Goal	To attend to only those messages that have some kind of usefulness for the person and ignore all other messages	To access previously learned meanings efficiently	To interpret messages from more than one perspective as a means of identifying the range of meaning options, then choose one or synthesize across several
Focus	Messages in the environment	Referents in messages	One's own knowledge structures

huge amount of stimuli in our environments but provides us with a very limited ability to be aware of all that activity. While our brains are constantly processing an enormous amount of stimuli from our environments, only a tiny percentage of all that stimuli makes it into our conscious awareness; the rest of the stimuli are being processed unconsciously with the use of automatic routines.

The automatic routines that run in our minds are like the automatic routines that run on our computers, where this programming guides your computer through thousands of complicated tasks without continually pausing to ask you dozens of bothersome questions about how you want that program to run. To illustrate this point, think about your e-mail account. Your e-mail provider uses **spam filters** to screen out all those e-mails that they determine are coming from spammers. Research has shown that 45% of the 14.5 billion e-mails sent each day are spam (Bauer, 2018). Because the average response rate is one reply to every 12.5 million spam e-mails sent, spammers regularly send out tens of millions of e-mails each day to find those few people who will buy things like pseudo-wonder drugs, pet rocks, and other products that 99.99% of us would never buy. Spam filters are automatic routines that do a considerable amount of filtering for you without asking you whether you want to receive e-mails from various addresses. However, because you don't see the tens of thousands of addresses that the automatic filter is using as spammers' addresses, you don't know whether the spam filter is blocking out some messages you might want to read. For the sake of efficiency, we don't make the considerable effort to check the long spam address list; instead, we let our spam filters run automatically.

Our minds also have programmed filters that guide the processing of messages. This raises the question of who programmed those filters; that is, who decided which messages to filter out? If it was you who fully programmed this code, then the filter is automatically following only your commands. But what if some of the filtering code was programmed by someone else? If this is the case, then you have let that someone else determine what you see and what you do not get to see.

Some media services do a significant amount of filtering for us. For example, when we shop for a book on Amazon, the keywords we use might generate a list of several thousand possible books, but Amazon shows us a screen of perhaps a dozen books. When we do a search for information on Google, the search might result in several million hits, but Google displays a screen with its top choices to save us from spending all day going through thousands of screens. For example, if you Google "information overload," you may get 4.28 million results in .4 seconds. While this is helpful in going from the 30 trillion webpages that Google says it searches down to 4.28 million pages, it still leaves you with far too many choices to process in a reasonable amount of time.



Stock/Przykhodov

Media search engines like Google use personal preferences to guide our searches.



These services proclaim they are providing us with efficiency, which is true. But they are also exercising considerable control over the filtering process. And they are continually seeking ways to increase their control over those filtering processes by claiming to “personalize” our searching and shopping experiences. Google CEO Eric Schmidt said that Google’s goal was to guess what you are interested in. In December 2009, Google changed its algorithm to personalize searches. This means that your Google searches are not guided exclusively by the keywords you use; those searches are also guided by information Google has gathered about your personal preferences (to test this, do Exercise 3.1). In 2010, Google rolled out Google Instant, which guesses what you are searching for as you type in the keyword. Former Google Vice President Marissa Mayer said that the company hoped to make the search box obsolete; Google wants to guess at what you want to search for so that you won’t even need to type a keyword (Pariser, 2011).

Where do these companies get their information about you in order to direct your choices? They collect some of the information themselves by recording your interactions with them; they also can buy a tremendous amount of information about you—all your financial transactions and your media usage, including how often you use social media, e-mail, and text as well as what you talk about. For example, Acxiom is a large marketing research firm that has a database of half a billion people worldwide including 96% of all Americans. The information that database has about you includes about 1,500 items including the names of your family members, your current and past addresses, how often you pay your credit card bills, whether you own a dog or cat and its breed, whether you are right-handed or left-handed, and what kinds of medication you use based on your pharmacy records (Pariser, 2011). These large marketing data firms collect even more information on individuals than the government. Remember the terrorist attack on the World Trade Towers on 9/11? The major U.S. intelligence agencies (FBI, CIA, DEA, etc.) worked around the clock to identify the terrorists and 3 days later announced that they had identified 11 of the 19 terrorists involved—names, past addresses, current and past associates. Those intelligence agencies received most of their information from Acxiom (Pariser, 2011).

Internet companies employ sophisticated algorithms to churn through all the information they have about you in order to infer conclusions about what you like, then use those inferred conclusions to direct you to particular products while walling you off from other products in the name of efficient filtering. Because these powerful algorithms direct your attention to a narrow range of products and media messages, they serve to limit your experiences. And they do this without your awareness.

The media create much of our filtering code for us. They do this primarily by conditioning us for repeat exposures of the messages we like. This conditioning creates and reinforces exposure habits. When we follow our exposure habits, we leave no time to explore other media or other types of messages.

### Meaning Matching

Meaning matching is the process of recognizing elements (referents) in the message and accessing our memory to find the meanings we have memorized for those elements. This is a relatively automatic task. It may require a good deal of effort to learn to recognize symbols in media messages and to memorize their standard meanings, but once

## BOX 3.1

### IMPLICATIONS OF FILTERING ALGORITHMS

Imagine the following scenario. Let’s say a marketing company assembles a huge database about college students by pulling together information from Facebook pages, credit history, health history, parents’ income level, and so on. Then someone in that marketing company develops an algorithm that churns through all that data and rank orders all the college students on potential for success and economic wealth.

Now, imagine that the marketing company’s algorithm ranks you at the bottom as a loser but ranks your roommates at the top as potential winners. The marketing company sells its rankings to advertisers who then send your roommates all kinds of great offers for low-interest credit cards, coupons for exciting trips, opportunities to network with successful professionals, and so on. Meanwhile, you are ignored by these advertisers because you are regarded as an undesirable target audience.

Your roommates go on to live very successful and happy lives because of all the opportunities

offered by advertisers who bought data that told them that your roommates were highly desirable targets. Your roommates get higher-paying jobs at graduation than you because employers looked at the rankings. Your roommates get bigger raises and promotions, have better health care plans, travel more and meet more interesting people, and so on. Marketers can set people off in different life paths by the opportunities they offer certain people and not others.

### Questions

Do you think this is fair?

Should advertisers offer the same opportunities to everyone?

In a society where people’s needs are so varied and fragmented, does it make sense to expect all advertisers to spend the money necessary to send their messages to everyone when they know that many of those people will never buy their products?

learned this process becomes routine. To illustrate, think back to when you first learned to read. You had to learn how to recognize words printed on a page. Then you had to memorize the meaning of each word. The first time you saw the sentence “Dick threw the ball to Jane,” it required a good deal of work to divide the sentence into words, to recall the meaning of each word, and to put it all together. With practice, you were able to perform this process more quickly and more easily. Learning to read in elementary school is essentially the process of being able to recognize a longer list of referents and to memorize their **denoted meanings**. Some referents in media messages were words, some were numbers, some were pictures, and some were sounds.



The relatively automatic task of meaning matching allows you to connect elements to meaning—for instance, recognizing the particular sound your cell phone makes when you’ve received a text message.



This type of learning develops **competencies**. By competency, I mean that either you are able to do something correctly or you are not. For example, when you see the phrase “2 + 2,” you either recognize the “2” referents as particular quantities or you do not. You either recognize the “+” referent as addition or you do not. You can either perform this mathematical operation and arrive at 4 or you cannot. Working with these referents does not require, or allow for, individual interpretation and creative meaning construction. Competencies are our abilities to recognize standard referents and recall the memorized denoted meanings for those referents. If we did not have a common set of referents and shared meanings for each of these referents, communication would not be possible. Education at the elementary level is the training of the next generation to develop the basic competencies of recognizing these referents and memorizing the designated meaning for each one.

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

## Meaning Construction

In contrast to meaning matching, meaning construction is a much more challenging task. It is not an automatic process but instead it requires us to think about moving beyond the standard denoted meaning and to create meaning for ourselves by using the skills of induction, deduction, grouping, and synthesis. We engage in a meaning construction process either when we have no denoted meaning for a particular message in our memory banks or when the denoted meaning does not satisfy us and we want to arrive at a different meaning.

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

Many meanings can be constructed from any media message; furthermore, there are many ways to go about constructing that meaning. Thus, we cannot learn a complete set of rules to accomplish this task; instead, we need to be guided by our own goals, and we need to use skills (rather than competencies) to creatively construct a path to reach our

goals. For these reasons, meaning construction rarely takes place in an automatic fashion. Instead, we need to make conscious decisions when we are constructing meaning for ourselves. Also, every meaning construction task is different, so we cannot program our minds to follow the same one procedure automatically when we are confronted with a range of meaning construction tasks.

Much of our processing of media messages utilizes meaning construction. There is a large body of research that clearly shows that each of us brings a considerable number of factors with us to any media message exposure and that these factors constitute a **frame** that we use to interpret the message. For example, Kepplinger, Geiss, and Siebert (2012) conducted a study to see how people constructed meaning in news stories. They wanted to see if the way the media presented the story influenced how viewers interpreted the events and people in those stories. The researchers found that the way the media told the story did indeed influence the respondents’ interpretation of meaning but that the meaning was also strongly influenced by the personal frames of the individual respondents.

While meaning matching relies on competencies, meaning construction relies on skills. This is one of the fundamental differences between the two tasks of meaning matching and meaning construction. Competencies are categorical; that is, either you have a competency or you do not. However, skill ability is not categorical; on any given skill there is a wide range of ability. That is, some people have little ability, whereas other people have enormous ability. Also, skills are like muscles. Without practice, skills become weaker. With practice and exercise, they grow stronger. When the personal locus has strong drive states for using skills, those skills have a much greater chance of developing to higher levels.

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

It’s important to avoid getting the two mixed up. Consider the example of a physics exam where the professor asks students how they could use a barometer to measure the height of a building. If the professor is treating this as a meaning matching task, then there is one sanctioned answer: Take a reading of barometric pressure at the foot of the building and again at the roof then, using a particular formula, translate the differences in readings into feet, thus computing the height of the building. But what if a student is creative and can think of other ways to use the barometer to measure the height of the building, such as what Niels Bohr did in a physics exam at the University of Copenhagen in 1905? Bohr



Richard Levine/Alamy Stock Photo

Research shows that how a media message such as a news story is framed, or presented, will influence how an audience interprets the message.



answered the question by saying that he would go up onto the roof of the building, tie a string to the barometer, lower the barometer to the ground, then measure how long the string was. The professor gave him an F. When Bohr went to talk to his professor and explain his reasoning, the professor did not change the grade. Bohr then explained that there were many ways to answer the exam question. For example, he could throw the barometer off the roof, count the number of seconds it took to hit the ground, and then calculate the distance; or he could measure the length of the shadow of the barometer and the building, and then calculate the ratio. While all of these alternative methods could yield an accurate measure of the height of the building, the professor did not care, because he was looking for one particular answer that required matching the problem to the one solution he taught in his physics class. Bohr took the F that day but continued to use his creative mind to become a very successful physicist, winning the Nobel Prize in physics in 1922 for his contributions to atomic structure and quantum mechanics.

## BOX 3.2

### METAPHORS FOR HOW THE HUMAN MIND WORKS

Philosophers have been speculating for millennia how the human mind works, and scientists have been conducting research tests of the human mind for perhaps a century. However, we are still in the early stages of understanding this wonderfully complex phenomenon. Thus it helps to think about the human mind metaphorically. Two popular metaphors have been clocks and clouds (Brooks, 2011).

Clocks are self-contained, orderly systems that can be examined in a reductive manner; you can take apart a clock into component pieces and see how they all fit together in one and only one way. This metaphor captures what neurologists do; they focus on the parts of the human brain and how they function.

Clouds, in contrast to clocks, are irregular, dynamic, and idiosyncratic. They change minute to minute and can be formed in many different ways. The essence of clouds cannot be captured in numbers or fixed structures. The cloud metaphor reflects how humanists regard the human mind.

There are scholars who continue to debate which conception of the human mind is more

accurate. But as you can see, both are useful ways to think about what the human mind does.

When we take a broad perspective on media literacy, we can see there are times when the human mind seems to act like a clock and there are other times when it appears more as a cloud. With meaning matching tasks, the human mind acts more like a clock as it automatically clicks through the routine of recognizing symbols and accessing their meanings that are connected to the symbols in memory. With meaning construction tasks, the human mind acts more like a cloud as it makes associations in a more amorphous and constantly changing manner

#### Questions

Can you think of examples in your life where your mind acted more like a clock?

Can you think of examples in your life where your mind acted more like a cloud?

Which metaphor describes the way your mind works better?

## ANALYZING THE IDEA OF EXPOSURE TO MEDIA MESSAGES

In everyday language, the terms **exposure** and **attention** are often used synonymously. However, now that you have seen that we are exposed to a great number of media messages without paying attention to them, it is important to highlight the difference in meaning across these two terms.

### Exposure and Attention

As we clarify the difference between exposure and attention, it is helpful to analyze the idea of exposure and see that there are several kinds. Let's look at a sequence of three types of exposure: **physical exposure**, **perceptual exposure**, and **psychological exposure** to media messages.

#### Physical Exposure

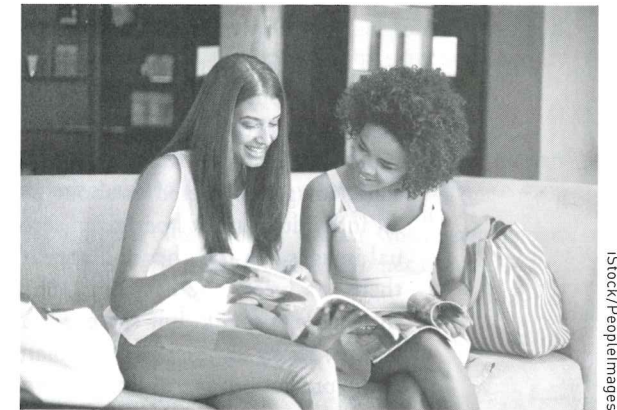
The most foundational criterion for exposure is physical presence. A person must experience some proximity to a message in order for exposure to take place. Physical exposure means that the message and the person occupy the same physical space for some period of time. Thus space and time are regarded as barriers to exposure. If a magazine is lying face up on a table in a room and Harry walks through that room, Harry is physically exposed to message on the cover of the magazine but not to any of the messages inside the magazine unless he picks it up and flips through the pages. Also, if Harry does not walk through that room when the magazine is on the table, there is no physical exposure to the message on the cover of the magazine. Likewise, if a TV is turned on in the lunch room during the noon hour then is turned off at 1 p.m., anyone who walks through that room after 1 p.m. is not physically exposed to TV messages.

Physical proximity is a necessary condition for media exposure, but it is not a sufficient condition. A second necessary condition is perceptual exposure.

#### Perceptual Exposure

The perceptual consideration refers to a human's ability to receive appropriate sensory input through the visual and auditory senses.

We are constantly immersed in a wide range of stimulus elements, but we perceive only a small fraction of these elements because of the limits on our sense organs and processing ability. We live in a world where information is encoding on each of billions of different frequencies along the electromagnetic spectrum. One of these frequencies is called light and our eyes are sensitive to perceive some of that information on that frequency. At other



istock/PeopleImages

Three types of exposure—physical, perceptual, and psychological—are needed before we pay attention to a media message.



frequencies (e.g., television signals, radio signals, cell phone signals, etc.) we cannot hear that encoded information, but we have invented devices to translate that information into a form where it occurs within our ability to perceive it (e.g., radio receivers translate that information into sound waves within our range of hearing).

## COMPARE & CONTRAST

### MEANING MATCHING AND MEANING CONSTRUCTION

**Compare:** Meaning matching and meaning construction are *the same* in the following ways:

- Both are essential tasks in the process of information processing.
- Both are mental tasks triggered when people notice an element in a media message.

**Contrast:** Meaning matching and meaning construction are *different* in the following ways:

- Meaning matching is largely an automatic process relying on competencies where

media symbols are efficiently matched with previously learned meanings.

- Meaning construction is a process requiring a person's attention and engagement of cognitive processes involving skills where people move beyond simply accepting the previously learned meaning of symbols and infer (or create) fresh meanings that fit better with the context of the present situation and/or the person's own needs for meaning.

The perceptual criterion, however, has a feature beyond simple sensory reception; we must also consider the sensory input–brain connection. Frequently, when the sensory input gets to the brain, it must be transformed into something that we can understand. For example, when we watch a movie in a theater, we are exposed to individual static images projected at about 24 images per second. But humans cannot process 24 individual images per given second in a conscious manner; instead, those individual images run together and appear as continuous motion. Also with film projection, there is a brief time between each of those 24 individual images every second when the screen is blank, but the eye-brain connection is not quick enough to process the blanks, so we do not see those blanks as blanks; instead we only see smooth motion. If the projection rate of images were to slow down to under 10 images per second, we would begin to see a flutter; that is, our brains would begin to see the blanks, because the replacement of still images is slow enough for the eye-brain connection to begin processing them.

Stimuli that are outside the boundaries of human perception are called subliminal. Subliminal messages can leave no psychological trace because they cannot be physically perceived; that is, humans lack the sensory organs to take in stimuli and/or the hardwiring in the brain to be sensitive to them.

There is a widespread misconception that the media put people at risk for “subliminal communication.” This belief indicates confusion between the terms *subliminal* and *subconscious*. There is an important distinction that needs to be made between subliminal and subconscious, because they are two very different things and they have two very different implications for exposure. Subliminal refers to being outside a human's ability to sense or perceive; thus it is always regarded as non-exposure. However, once media stimuli cross over the subliminal line and are able to be perceived by humans, this is regarded as exposure. However, this does not mean that all exposure is conscious, and this brings us to the third criterion in our definition: psychological.

## BOX 3.3

### LIMITS OF HUMAN PERCEPTUAL ABILITY

**Seeing:** With the human eye, we have three kinds of cones in the retinas at the back of our eyes. One code recognizes red, one blue, and one green. Thus, the human eye perceives three primary colors, and every color we see is a combination of these three.

Some animals, such as skate fish, have no cones, so they experience the world only in white and black (presence of light and absence of light).

Some birds and insects have up to six types of color receptors (Storr, 2014), so they can perceive much more of a range of color than we can.

**Hearing:** Human sensitivity to sound frequency extends from around 16 Hz and 20,000 Hz, but sounds are heard best when they are between 1,000 Hz and 4,000 Hz (Metallinos, 1996; Plack, 2005).

A dog whistle is pitched at a frequency higher than 20,000 Hz, so humans cannot perceive that sound; that is, it is outside their range of human sensitivity to sounds.

Bats have very poor sight compared to humans, but their hearing is much more developed, so they live in a world of sounds.

**Smelling:** Many animals have a much more sensitive perceptual ability to experience a wider range of smells. For example, dogs have a much better sense of smell than do humans, so they live in a world of smells much more than do humans.

#### Questions

Can you think of other ways in which your human senses are better than other animals?

Can you think of other ways in which your human senses are more limited than other animals?

### Psychological Exposure

In order for psychological exposure to occur, there must be some trace element created in a person's mind. This element can be an image, a sound, an emotion, a pattern, and so on. It can last for a brief time (several seconds in short-term memory then cleared out) or a lifetime (when cataloged into long-term memory). It can enter the mind consciously (often called the central route), where people are fully aware of the elements in the exposure, or it can enter the mind unconsciously (often called the



peripheral route), where people are unaware that elements are being entered into their minds (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Thus there is a great variety of elements that potentially can meet this criterion for psychological exposure. The challenge then becomes organizing all these elements into meaningful sets and explaining how different kinds of elements are experienced by the individual and how they are processed as information.

### Attention

In order for attention to occur, a person must first clear all three of the exposure hurdles described above—physical, perceptual, and psychological exposure. However, these three things alone do not guarantee attention; something else must also occur. That something else is conscious awareness of the media message. As you can now see, there are a lot of things that have to happen in order for us to “pay attention” to a media message. For this reason, it is rare for a media message to achieve attention. Harold Pashler, who wrote *The Psychology of Attention* (1998), explains that at any given moment, awareness encompasses only a tiny proportion of the stimuli impinging on a person’s sensory systems. Furthermore, while we are paying attention to one thing, our attention can be distracted away to another thing. Pashler says there are times when “attention is directed or grabbed without any voluntary choice having taken place, even against strong wishes to the contrary” (p. 3). For example, when you are paying attention to a conversation with your roommate, your attention can be grabbed by a sound or an image that pops up on your computer screen and you shift your attention away from your roommate to the screen.

### Exposure States

Thus far I have made a distinction between automatic processing and paying attention to particular media messages. This suggests two **exposure states**, but to understand better the experience of media exposure, we need to consider two additional exposure states. Thus, the four media literacy exposure states are **automatic**, **attentional**, **transported**, and **self-reflexive**. Each of these states is a qualitatively different experience for the audience member. By this I mean that these four are not arrayed along a single continuum where they are distinguished simply by the degree of attention. Instead, crossing the line from one state to another results in a qualitatively different experience with the message.

### Automatic State

In the automatic state of exposure, people are in environments where they are exposed to media messages but they are not aware of those messages; that is, their mind is on automatic pilot as it filters out all the messages in the environment. This screening out continues automatically with no effort until some element in a message breaks through people’s default screen and captures their attention.

In the automatic processing state, message elements are physically perceived but processed automatically in an unconscious manner. This exposure state resides above the threshold of human sense perception but below the threshold of conscious awareness.

The person is in a perceptual flow that continues until an interruption stops the exposure or “bumps” the person’s perceptual processing into a different state of exposure or until the media message moves outside of a person’s physical or perceptual ability to be exposed to it.

In the automatic state, people can look active to outside observers, but those people are not thinking about what they are doing. A person in the automatic state can be clicking through a series of websites without paying attention to the messages on those sites. While it may appear to an observer that the person is actively searching the web, the person may be just randomly clicking through webpages while thinking about something else. Even when there is evidence of exposure behavior, this does not necessarily mean that people’s minds are engaged and that they are “making” decisions. Rather the decisions are happening to them automatically.

Exposure to much of the media is in the automatic state. People have no conscious awareness of the exposure when it is taking place, nor do they have a recollection of many of the details in the experience if they are asked about it later. This is especially the case when people are multitasking. Someone might be listening to music, surfing the web, and talking to a friend on the phone; while the person may be paying attention to the phone conversation, he is in an automatic exposure state with regard to the music and the webpages. If his attention suddenly shifts to an image on a webpage, then he slips into the automatic state with the phone conversation and no longer pays attention to what his friend is saying. Multitasking severely reduces a person’s cognitive advantages (i.e., ability to concentrate on a particular message) but enhances emotional gratifications (i.e., receiving pleasure from more than one thing at a time) (Wang & Tchernev, 2012).

### Attentional State

Attentional exposure refers to people being aware of the messages and actively interacting with the elements in the messages. This does not mean they must have a high level of concentration, although that is possible. The key is conscious awareness of the messages during exposures.

Within the attentional state there is a range of attention depending on how much of a person’s mental resources one devotes to the exposure. At minimum, the person must be aware of the message and consciously track it, but there is a fair degree of elasticity in the degree of concentration, which can range from partial to quite extensive processing depending on the number of elements handled and the depth of analysis employed.

### Transported State

When people are in the attentional state but then are pulled into the message so strongly that they lose awareness of being apart from the message, they cross over into



Stock/By\_Nicholas

In the transported state, people are pulled into the message so strongly that they lose their sense of separateness from the message.



the transported state. In the transported state, audience members lose their sense of separateness from the message; that is, they are swept away with the message, enter the world of the message, and lose track of their own social world surroundings. For example, when we watch a movie in a theater, we often get so caught up in the action that we feel we are involved with that action. We experience the same intense emotions as the characters do. We lose the sense that we are in a theater. Our concentration level is so high that we lose touch with our real-world environment. We lose track of real time. Instead we experience narrative time; that is, we feel time pass like the characters feel time pass. This transported state typically occurs when people are playing video and computer games.

The transported state is not simply the high end of the attentional state. Instead, the transported state is qualitatively different than the attentional state. While attention is very high in the transported state, the attention is also very narrow; that is, people have tunnel vision and focus on the media message in a way that eliminates the barrier between them and the message. People are swept away and “enter” the message. In this sense, it is the opposite of the automatic state, where people stay grounded in their social world and are unaware of the media messages in their perceptual environment; in the transported exposure state, people enter the media message and lose track of their social world.

### Self-Reflexive State

In the self-reflexive state, people are hyperaware of the message *and of their processing of the message*. It is as if they are sitting on their shoulder and monitoring their own reactions as they experience the message. This represents the fullest degree of awareness; that is, people are aware of the media message, their own social world, and their position in the social world while they process the media message. In the self-reflexive exposure state, the viewer exercises the greatest control over perceptions by reflecting on questions such as these: Why am I exposing myself to this message? What am I getting out of this exposure and why? Why am I making these interpretations of meaning? Not only is there analysis, but there is meta-analysis. This means that the person is not only analyzing the media message, but she is also analyzing her analysis of the media message.

While the self-reflexive and transported states might appear similar because both are characterized by high involvement by audience members, the two exposure states are very different. In the transported state, people are highly involved emotionally and they lose themselves in the action. In contrast, the self-reflexive state is characterized by people being highly involved cognitively and very much aware of themselves as they analytically process the exposure messages.

## THE MEDIA LITERACY APPROACH

The ideas presented in this chapter will help you understand how you can increase your media literacy. That is, you can get better at making decisions about filtering, meaning matching, and meaning construction. This does not mean that you must encounter all media messages in a state of attention or self-reflexivity in order to make better decisions;

instead, you can alter your decision algorithms so that when they run in an automatic state or transported state they will deliver better choices.

As for the filtering task, you can periodically examine your media exposure habits and ask yourself why you are spending time with particular media and particular messages while ignoring others. If you have good reasons for your habits, then it is likely that those filtering habits are helping you achieve your own goals. But if you are puzzled by some of your habits, it is time to think about changing those habits to see if your needs can be met better through exposure to different media and different kinds of messages.

As for meaning matching, you can periodically check some of the meanings you have memorized. Perhaps you have acquired some of those meanings by simply memorizing the opinions of so-called experts, such as newscasters, pundits, cultural critics, and so on. Perhaps the experts were later found to be wrong, yet you still hold onto a memorized opinion that is now faulty. Or perhaps you should not have memorized an expert’s opinion but instead constructed your own opinion that fits better with your own personal beliefs and experiences. It is likely that your large set of memorized meanings contains elements that are out of date, are causing friction with what you now believe, or are faulty in some way. If you don’t identify them and clear them out of your “mental dictionary,” you will automatically continue to use those meanings, and this can take you further away from your goals.

As for meaning construction, you can identify areas where decisions are most important in your life. As you use the media messages to gather more information, ask yourself if you are simply accepting that information as is or are transforming it to fit into your needs and goals. The more you work on transforming the raw material of information into knowledge that helps achieve your own goals, the more your meaning construction process will operate under your control.

The meaning of media messages is not always the way it might seem on the surface. There are often many layers of meanings. The more you are aware of the layers of meaning in messages, the more you can appreciate all the options for meaning construction that are available. And when you recognize multiple options for meaning construction, you can exercise more control over selecting the meanings that are most useful to you.

Some people perform these information-processing tasks better than others and are therefore more media literate than other people. Increasing one’s level of media literacy requires a strong personal locus. We need to be aware of our personal goals and needs, then exert the drive energy to take control of our meanings.

We also need tools to execute our plans. Those tools are competencies and skills. Competencies are the tools people have acquired to help them interact with the media and to access information in the messages. Competencies are learned early in life, then applied automatically. Competencies are categorical; that is, either people are able to do something or they are not able. For example, either people know how to recognize a word and match its meaning to a memorized meaning or they do not. However, having competencies does not make one media literate, but lacking these competencies prevents one from being media literate because this deficiency prevents a person from accessing particular kinds of information. For example, people who do not have a basic reading competency cannot access printed material. This will greatly limit what they can build



into their knowledge structures. This will also suppress the drive states in the personal locus; people who cannot read will have very low motivation to expose themselves to printed information.

In addition to competencies, people need a set of media literacy skills, especially with the task of meaning construction. Skill development is what can make a large difference in a person moving from lower to higher levels of media literacy. People who have weak skills will not be able to do much with the information they encounter. For example, if their skill of analysis is weak, they will not be able to dig out the good information from media messages. If their skill of evaluation is weak, they will not be able to judge the quality or usefulness of information well, so they cannot tell which information is good and which is faulty. If their skills of grouping/induction are weak, they will not be able to see patterns across different messages. If their skills of abstraction are weak, they will struggle to see the “big picture” in a message. And if their skills of deduction and synthesis are weak, they will have great difficulty incorporating new information into their knowledge structures. They will organize information poorly, thus creating weak and faulty knowledge structures. In the worst case, people with weak skills will try to avoid thinking about information altogether and become passive; as a consequence, the active information providers (such as advertisers, entertainers, and news workers) will increase their power as the constructors of people’s knowledge structures and will take control over of how people see the world by altering their beliefs and by giving people faulty standards that they then use to create their attitudes.

Skills and competencies work together in a continual cyclical process. With certain information-processing tasks, some skills or competencies may be more important than others. For example, with the task of filtering, the skills of analysis and evaluation are most important. With the task of meaning matching, the competencies are most important. And with the task of meaning construction, the skills of grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstracting are most important. However, the value of the individual skills and competencies varies by particular challenges presented by different types of messages.

## SUMMARY

As we encounter the flood of media messages each day, our brains engage in three interlocking information-processing tasks of filtering, meaning matching, and meaning construction. The task of filtering is performed automatically where almost all messages are processed unconsciously and only a very few break through into consciousness. The meaning matching task is also performed unconsciously like a machine, where message stimuli (such as words, sounds, and images) are matched with recalled meanings. In contrast, the meaning construction task requires a conscious process using skills to create novel meanings for the messages we encounter.

Because so much of the information processing takes place automatically, we need to periodically examine the mental codes that govern that processing to determine if they are operating in our best interests. It is important to analyze our media habits

periodically so that we can identify which habits are working to achieve our goals and which are diverting our time and attention away into wasteful or harmful practices. Once we can make this distinction clearly, we can reprogram our automatic codes so that when we return to the state of automaticity and our minds make thousands of decisions while on automatic pilot, those decisions will make us smarter, happier, and more productive.

## Further Reading

Brooks, D. (2011). *The social animal: The hidden sources of love, character, and achievement*. New York, NY: Random House. (424 pages, including index and endnotes)

This is an easy-to-read book about the human brain. It presents a lot of interesting information about what is known, and what scientists think they now know, about this complex organ.

Konnikova, M. (2013). *Mastermind: How to think like Sherlock Holmes*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. (273 pages, including index)

This book is a blend of psychological text, literary analysis, and self-help. Konnikova, who is a fan of the Sherlock Holmes stories and has a Ph.D. in psychology, examines how Holmes thinks and how he solves his mysteries. She shows readers how the well-known fictional detective uses psychological principles and thinking skills to solve crimes. This easy-to-read book shows readers how they can apply the same skills to solve problems in their everyday lives. Konnikova focuses on the skills of induction and deduction, which are two of the key skills of media literacy. Its eight chapters are organized in four sections: (1) Understanding Yourself, (2) From Observation to Imagination, (3) The Art of Deduction, and (4) The Science and Art of Self-Knowledge.

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: How the new personalized web is changing what we read and how we think*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. (294 pages with index and endnotes)

In this fascinating book, Pariser provides many examples of how the mass media are making filtering decisions for you.

Potter, W. J. (2018). *The skills of media literacy*. Santa Barbara, CA: Knowledge Assets. (224 pages, including references and glossary)

In this book, I show you a step-by-step approach to improving each of the seven skills of media literacy. This book presents lots of examples and exercises for each skill.

Storr, W. (2014). *The unpersuadables: Adventures with the enemies of science*. New York, NY: The Overlook Press. (355 pages, including index and endnotes)

Storr is a journalist who has interviewed people who hold beliefs at odds with scientific evidence (creationists, Holocaust deniers, etc.) to find out why they hold their beliefs. He concludes that all of human reasoning and knowledge is based on stories that we tell ourselves and that it is too psychologically troubling to change our stories, so we deny all those versions of the truth that do not conform to what we believe.



## EXERCISE 3.1

### CONDUCT A GOOGLE SEARCH TO OBSERVE THE RESULT OF PERSONALIZED SEARCHES

1. Get together with some friends in a group.

While this exercise can be performed with as few as two people, it works better with a larger number. Also, this exercise works better when the group is composed of people with a wider divergence of interests.

2. Brainstorm a list of searches.

The list of searches should be specific; that is, the searches should refer to specific interests and hobbies of the different people in the group.

3. Develop a list of keywords for the searches.

Try to use words that have more than one meaning. For example, the word *fish* could refer to the action of trying to catch food from a boat, searching for information, the victim in a con game, and so on. The word *green* could refer to a color, a person who is new at something, a person's last name, and so on.

4. Conduct the searches simultaneously on Google.

Each person should be connected to the Internet on his or her own device (laptop, notebook, smartphone, etc.), be on the Google search page, and enter the exact same keyword at the same time.

5. Analyze the results of each search.

Notice differences in the time of search, number of hits, and sites ranked highest.

Can you explain the differences in search results by the personal characteristics of the different people who conducted the searches?

6. Repeat the process above with relatively general terms, such as *news*, *clothing*, *advertising*, *reality*, and *effect*.

Analyze the results of each search on a general term. Are there as many differences across people when you use a general term compared to when you use a specific term?



# 4

FilmMagic/Getty Images

## AUDIENCE: INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

*Key Idea: The mass media segment the general population into marketing niches then construct niche audiences by creating special content to attract certain kinds of people to each niche so that access to those audiences can be sold to advertisers.*

Some members of the cast of HBO's *Game of Thrones* at the 2017 San Diego Comic Con, one example of a niche media audience.





## 8

ABC/Photofest

## MEDIA CONTENT AND REALITY

*Key Idea: The media spin reality to make it appear more exciting and thus attract people away from their real lives.*

Host Chris Harrison (right) stands with *The Bachelor* season 19 star Chris Soules as he addresses a room full of contestants. The popular television show blends reality and fantasy media messages.

Role of Reality in Media Content Formulas  
 Complex Judgment  
*Magic Window*  
*Multiple Dimensions of Reality*  
*Differences Across Individuals*  
 Organizing Principle: Next-Step Reality  
*Audience's Perspective*  
*Programmers' Perspective*

Reality Programming as a Genre  
 The Importance of Media Literacy  
 Summary  
 Further Reading  
 Keeping Up to Date  
 Exercise

*"This is a great idea for a show I call Act Real," said Cosmo as he started his pitch for a reality television show to Sylvia, who was a television network vice president of reality programming. "So Sylv, my idea is to get about 8 to 10 aspiring young actors and stick them in a house in downtown New York City. Every few days they audition for a part in a major Broadway show or TV show. After each round of auditions, only one gets hired and that person moves out of the house. The rest of them stay in the house and we hear them complain and get all depressed. Each week the number of actors in the house goes down and we are left with the actors who feel more and more like losers."*

*"Well, then where's the payoff?" asked Sylvia.*

*"Get this, Sylv, the payoff is that the last guy ends up getting the best acting job of all of them. But he doesn't know that until the last episode when he is the most depressed and the most pissed off because all the other actors who he thinks are not as good as him are all given jobs. It's beautiful!"*

*"What kind of support do you need from the network?"*

*"First, I want you to put out a casting call for actors for a new show on your network. We should get thousands of applications. We choose the most unstable actors, the real drama queens. Then we need to hire some writers to give the actors cool nicknames and backstories. Also the writers should write some lines here and there for the actors so we get some feuds going. We need your best editors to cut down all our footage because we will have cameras in every room in that house and end up with about 3,000 hours of footage."*

*"Sounds like a lot of production. What makes this a 'reality' show?"*

*"We don't pay the actors!"*

*"I don't know about that. The actors' union will not allow that."*

*"Yes they will, Sylv. These guys are actors in real life but on our show they are just ordinary people who want to be hired as actors. We don't have to pay ordinary people to be on a reality show. It's beautiful!"*



A popular way to group media messages has been to put them into two categories: reality and fantasy. These two categories appear to be very different from one another, so it should be an easy task to group media messages. However, the task of grouping becomes very difficult when we start analyzing media messages and find a blend of reality and fantasy in almost all those messages. And this distinction between reality and fantasy seems to break down totally when we analyze the content from the newest television genre of “reality programming.”

In this chapter, we will examine the role of reality in media content formulas where scholars have been trying to figure out how audiences make judgments about what is real in media messages. Then we will analyze patterns across television shows within the emerging genre of reality programming.

## ROLE OF REALITY IN MEDIA CONTENT FORMULAS

Reality is one of the most difficult concepts to define in any context. Philosophers have been trying to define it for millennia, and ever since the field of psychology was founded more than a dozen decades ago, psychologists have been focused on the fundamental problem of how the human mind encounters the world and seeks to make sense of what is real. The more that scholars study this idea, the more it becomes clear that determining what is reality requires a complex judgment that involves many criteria and differs across individuals.

### Complex Judgment

With media studies, it would seem as if the task of delineating reality would be easier by simply drawing the line of reality between the media world and the real world. The real world is real, and the media world is fantasy. But this is far too easy a distinction, and drawing the line in this way would be highly inaccurate and misleading. Still, we do have to make a distinction because developing a sophisticated understanding of the nature of reality is very important when trying to gain control over media effects. Let’s begin by examining how scholars have analyzed how people make this distinction.

### Magic Window

For years, media scholars assumed a clear distinction between reality and fantasy in media messages. Early thinking was that the media, especially television, simply held a window up to the actual world when it covered real events and real people. Thus news and informational shows were considered reality and everything else, which was fiction, was considered fantasy. They used this simple distinction to argue that children initially believed that all of television was a **magic window** that showed literal reality and that until children learned how to tell the difference between reality and fantasy, they were vulnerable to many negative effects. The results of early research on this topic claimed that very young children (younger than 3 years of age) regarded television as a magic window, but as children’s minds mature cognitively (as you saw in Chapter 5), they developed a skepticism—called the adult discount—about the literal reality of media

messages, and they were better able to distinguish reality from fantasy (Taylor & Howell, 1973). As they accumulate more experience with the media, children increase their skepticism and fully embrace the adult discount by about age 12 (Hawkins, 1977).

Subsequent research, however, began to show that not all people apply an adult discount consistently by the time they reach age 12. For example, van der Voort (1986) found that although children’s perceptions of reality decreased from ages 9 to 12 for fantasy programs, there was no change in their perceptions of the reality of so-called reality programs. It appears that children base their perceptions of reality not on the *accuracy* of portrayals or information but on the *probability* that something could occur in their lives. This suggested that people were making judgments about the reality of media messages not simply using a magic window distinction, but that they used multiple criteria for judging the reality of media messages.

### Multiple Dimensions of Reality

Researchers have found that while the beginning point of judging reality is usually with an assessment of whether a portrayal actually happened, people frequently use more criteria, such as factuality, perceptual persuasiveness, social utility, identity, emotional involvement, plausibility, typicality, and narrative consistency (Cho, Shen, & Wilson, 2014; Dorr, 1981; Hall, 2003; Hawkins, 1977; Potter, 1986) (see Table 8.1).

Furthermore, it appears that people make judgments on these various criteria in an independent manner; that is, if a message is perceived as highly realistic on one criterion, the person may or may not perceive the message as being realistic on the other criteria. For example, *Star Trek* is likely to be regarded as fantasy when using the factuality criterion, but it could be regarded as highly realistic by many on the other criteria.



Stock/Jason Lugo

Very young children may view television as a “magic window” on the world, but they can distinguish fictional programming from news by age 5.



LUCASFILM/20TH CENTURY FOX/Album/Newscom



Album/Alamy Stock Photo

While space ships and aliens may be more fanciful than college students, in what ways are the science fiction *Star Wars* films more realistic than the telenovela-style TV drama *Jane the Virgin*?



TABLE 8.1 ■ Criteria for Determining Reality of Media Messages

Criterion	Questions
Factuality	Does the message show what actually happened? This is the idea of the magic window that asks: Is the media message an accurate, undistorted view of actual events and people from the real world?
Perceptual persuasiveness	Does the media message present characters and settings that convince us to perceive them as real?
Social utility	Does the media message portray social lessons that can be used by people in their everyday lives?
Identity	Does the way characters are portrayed in media messages lead people to believe that those characters are very much like people in their everyday lives, so that they develop attachments to those characters like the attachments they have with real people?
Emotional involvement	Does the media message engage people's feelings so they are pulled into the action and feel that the action portrayed is really happening?
Plausibility	Does the media message portray something that <i>could</i> happen?
Typicality	Does the media message portray something that <i>usually</i> happens?
Narrative consistency	Does the plot of the story make people believe that the sequence of actions is believable?

### Differences Across Individuals

As you have seen with the arguments laid out above, reality is a complex idea. There are many dimensions. There are also considerable differences across individuals in how they make their judgments of reality of media portrayals. These judgments of reality can vary widely even among people of the same age and experience. Not every child of the same age is making the same judgments about reality. For example, van der Voort (1986) reported that perceptions of reality and the degree of identification with characters vary substantially at any given age. He found that some children became absorbed in watching violent videos and judged the violence to be realistic, which led to a stronger emotional reaction, which led to a belief that the violence was terrible, which did *not* lead to aggressive behavior in real life. In contrast, other children who were also absorbed in viewing violence and believed it to be realistic had an uncritical attitude toward program violence, which led to them being more jaded and less emotionally involved, which led to more aggressive behavior in real life.

To further illustrate the idea of a range of perceptions of reality, consider the situation as described in Box 8.1 regarding the television show *Gilligan's Island*. The people who wrote to the Coast Guard, begging them to rescue Gilligan and his friends from the island, appear silly. You might be thinking that such a problem with reality is rare, and you would probably be right because this is such an extreme situation. But consider how

much variation across people there is on perceptions of reality on shows like *Undercover Boss*, *World Wrestling Federation*, *Jersey Shore*, *The Hills*, *Amish Mafia*, and *COPS*. Which of these shows do you think are more real than others? Do you think everyone else would agree with your judgments, or would there be many differences across people?

## BOX 8.1

### GILLIGAN'S ISLAND

In 1964, Sherwood Schwartz produced a show called *Gilligan's Island*. This was a farcical comedy where seven characters who had been on a pleasure cruise encountered a storm that left them shipwrecked on an island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. After about six episodes had aired, Schwartz was contacted by the Coast Guard and told that it had received several dozen telegrams from people who were complaining that the military should send a ship to rescue these seven people. Those telegrams were serious. Schwartz was dumfounded, calling this the "most extreme case of suspension of belief I ever heard of." He wondered, "Who did these viewers think was filming the castaways on that island? There was even a laugh track on the show. Who was laughing at the survivors of the wreck of the *S. S. Minnow*? It boggled the mind" (Schwartz, 1984, p. 2).



The cast of *Gilligan's Island*.

© Ronald Grant Archive / Alamy

Up to this point in the chapter, I have shown you how complex the idea of reality can be. We must consider multiple criteria that are independent from one another. We must also consider that children are less capable than adults in making certain kinds of judgments about reality but become more sophisticated in applying different criteria as they age. Furthermore, we must consider that there is a wide range of sophistication in making reality judgments across adults.

How can we simplify this complex array of ideas so that we can focus attention on why all this should matter to media literacy? What do people really need to know about the nature of the reality of media messages to be literate and protect themselves from harmful effects?

### Organizing Principle: Next-Step Reality

Much of the complexity in the research about perceptions of reality can be explained simply by what I call "**next-step reality**." When we think about what audiences really want from media messages, we can see that many of their exposure decisions are guided by a



desire for next-step reality. Also, when we look at decisions from a programmer's perspective, we can again see the emergence of next-step reality. This idea is embedded in how media messages get produced and why certain messages attract large audiences whereas other messages do not. In this section, I bring this idea to the surface and show you how it serves as a useful organizing principle for thinking about all kinds of media content.

### Audience's Perspective

Why do people expose themselves to media messages? At the most fundamental level, they expose themselves to the media to find messages that they cannot get in real life. If people were getting all the messages they needed in real life, they would have no motivation to go to the expense (money and time) to search through the media for these messages. There are two reasons why people are motivated to get certain messages but go to the media rather than get those messages in real life. One reason is that it is impossible for them to get those messages in real life. For example, for most people, it is impossible to know what the Earth looks like from outer space or what the surfaces of other planets look like. It is impossible to know what it was like to live on a farm during the American Civil War, to be a knight of the Round Table in medieval England, or to watch Jesus Christ preach. To get access to these images, sounds, and emotions, people must access messages from the media.

A second reason that motivates people to get messages from the media instead of real life is because the costs of getting those messages in the media are far lower than the costs required in real life. For example, it is easier to watch a 1-hour travelogue on France than to pay the money to travel there for a week. It is far easier to watch a presidential news conference on television than it is to go to journalism school, get a job at a major newspaper or television service, get credentialed as a White House reporter, and attend the press conference in person. And it is less costly emotionally to watch characters in a movie try to meet each other, establish relationships, break up, and learn from their mistakes than it is to go through all of that in real life to learn the same social lessons.

Audiences therefore have a strong, continuing motivation to seek out messages in the media. They search for messages that have two general characteristics. First, those messages must appear real. They must have many elements that signal to viewers that they are real; that is, they are close enough to resonate strongly with a viewer's experience of everyday life, and thus those messages are accurate representations or at least plausible and probable. If they do not appear real, then audiences will not trust that the information is useful enough to bring it back into their everyday lives. Second, those messages must present something more than everyday reality. Without this something extra, there is no reason to search out the media message because the person is already getting those experiences in his or her real life. This is what I mean by next-step reality—the message is presented as reality to resonate with the audience's experience and make it have the potential to be useful in everyday situations, but the message is also “sweetened” by an extra added ingredient that takes it one step outside of the audience's everyday existence.

Therefore, people want media messages that are not so real that they are identical to the experiences in their everyday lives. But neither do they want media messages that are so far removed from their experiences that the messages have no immediate relevance. So people want messages that are one step removed from real life; they want messages that show what is easily possible and make it seem probable and even actual.

### Programmers' Perspective

Programmers intuitively know that to attract an audience, they must take their audience's sense of reality and tweak it a bit to make it seem more interesting. Thus, the producers of media messages typically keep the elements of their messages anchored in the real world as much as possible so those depictions can resonate with the audience's experiences in real life. But producers of media messages also know they cannot simply reproduce those messages; there would be no point to this because it would be easier for people to stay with their own real-world experiences.

Producers of fiction know that the essence of their challenge is to tell stories that are “bigger” than life in some way. Producers typically start with an ordinary setting and a standard plot (boy meets girl) then sweeten the story by making it more dramatic. They make their characters a little more attractive or a little more interesting than people in real life. They make plots unfold at a faster pace than real-life events, and they put their characters in situations where their decisions are tougher and the consequences of those decisions are more serious. Skilled producers can take the audience on a journey by removing the audience from actual reality one step at a time until they have taken them willingly to an absurd place. This is the formula with farce. The story begins with what looks like an ordinary everyday situation; then, step by step, the producer takes the audience far away from that reality but does it in a way that the audience is not lost but willingly awaits each new step. Thus, producers depend on viewers' willing suspension of disbelief. To make people willing, producers must take it one step at a time.

The next-step reality is also easy to understand with persuasive messages. For example, the typical problem–solution advertising message shows ordinary people with an ordinary problem, such as bad breath, a headache, dirty laundry, hunger for a good lunch, and so on. The advertiser invites the audience to take the step of faith into a solution, that is, to buy and use the advertised product on the promise that it will solve the problem better than any other solution—more quickly, more completely, more cheaply, or more satisfying emotionally.

The next-step reality is a bit more difficult to understand with information-type messages. For example, if the purpose of news organizations is to report the events of the day, how can the next-step reality apply to journalists? The answer is that when journalists select what gets reported, they are not as interested in the typical events as they are in the anomalous events. Recall the old saying that if a dog bites a man, it is not news, but if a man bites a dog, that is news. The twist in the event makes it news. Crimes are news because they are aberrant behaviors. Violent crimes are more newsworthy than are property crimes because they are more aberrant and more rare—in the real world.

All kinds of messages—entertainment, persuasion, and information—are crafted to retain the appearance of a high degree of reality, but all are really one step removed from reality. The more skillfully this one-step remove transforms the reality, the more interesting the message will be and the more likely it will attract and hold people's attention.

Because we spend so much time with the media world in addition to the real world, and because the boundary between the two is often obscured, we can often get confused. This is especially the case after thousands of hours of automatic processing of both the mundane real-world messages and the massive flow of media-world messages. In all of that continuous flow, there is a constant intermingling of perceptions about what is real and what is fantasy.



## REALITY PROGRAMMING AS A GENRE

While television has had examples of reality programming throughout its history (with game shows, *Candid Camera*, etc.), it did not become a recognizable genre until about 2000, when three of the most popular TV shows were unscripted series using real people instead of professional performers (*Survivor*, *American Idol*, and *Big Brother*). This type of show was popular with audiences because it appealed to the public's voyeuristic interest in following real people as they struggle then succeed in competitions.

While the reality series is a relatively new genre, there are now several hundred different reality programs where ordinary people (not professional actors) find love, friendship, treasure, a job, a new family, or financial backing for inventions; where ordinary people get their houses rebuilt, their wardrobes upgraded, their vehicles tricked out, and their bodily appearance reshaped; and where ordinary people compete with others to attain the honor of being the best singer, dancer, entertainer, chef, or human punching bag.

One of the most popular of the reality series has been *Survivor*, which typically takes 16 real people and puts them in a wilderness setting where the individuals depend on each other for survival (food, shelter, fire). Even before the first episode aired, CBS received 6,000 applicants who wanted to be marooned on a small island in the South China Sea and compete for \$1 million (Bauder, 2000). When we apply the eight reality criteria (Table 8.1) to *Survivor*, we can see that the show is realistic in some ways but not in others. Furthermore, it might appear to be realistic on the surface in some ways, but when we analyze the show's characteristics, we can see that these judgments might change. For example, the players are real people, not actors hired to deliver scripted lines. However, those players were not selected from thousands of applicants because they were ordinary people; instead they were selected on the basis of their potential attractiveness to audiences and their ability to generate conflict. The situation is artificial in the sense that none of these people live their typical life in the wilderness, nor (with the exception of the all-star seasons) have they played this game before—or any game for \$1 million. Although the setting looks like a deserted wilderness, the players are not really alone. There are dozens of production people (including camera crews, sound engineers, and crews to design and build sets for the challenges and tribal councils) and the host, Jeff Probst. Where do these production people live? How do they get to the survivors' camps to record their actions? Are there helicopter and boat crews? How do all these production people eat? Are there cooks? How does their food get to the wilderness location? The show is not scripted in the sense that dialogue has been written by a member of the Writers Guild of America. However, each contestant carefully writes his or her own lines in the sense that the contestant's interactions are highly calculated to put that individual in the best position to win the game. Also, the show is carefully edited to present to the viewing public the most dramatic version of what takes place. Multiple cameras are constantly recording what happens over the 40 days of the game, and these thousands of hours of footage are edited down to about 20 hours that are shown to the public. Thus the audience is shown much less than 1% of what actually happened during those 40 days. The editors and producers of "reality" media messages never tell the audience the full story; they edit out what they think is boring then assemble the pieces they think will be the most dramatic into interesting story lines.

The popularity of *Survivor* quickly generated a slew of other entries into this genre of reality programming. What these shows have in common is that each takes a handful of

real people and puts them in a competitive situation. As the participants compete and reveal their personalities, audience members begin to identify with (or at least root for) certain players. For example, on *The Bachelor*, a young man who is looking for a wife is introduced to 25 beautiful women. Each week, he eliminates some of the women until he gets it down to one woman (the winner) and proposes marriage to her (the prize). Another example is *American Idol*, where thousands of people go to auditions all over the country and about a dozen are chosen as contestants. The contestants compete as one is let go each week until only one winner remains and is awarded a recording contract.

Within a decade, the number of reality shows on television had grown from 4 in 2000 to 320 in 2010. By 2018, that number had climbed to over 750 different reality shows; an analysis of the top 400 shows on broadcast and cable television in 2017 found that 188 of them were reality shows (Dehnart, 2018).

Much of this growth came from **knock-offs** and **spin-offs**. An example of a knock-off series is *Hardcore Pawn*, which is a television series about a pawn shop in Detroit airing on truTV. This series is a knock-off of *Pawn Stars*, which was a successful series on the History Channel about a pawn shop in Las Vegas (Passy, 2014). An example of a spin-off is the *Real Housewives* franchise (as described in Chapter 4), which began with Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Orange County* in 2006 and has since expanded to other U.S. and international locations. Other TV cable producers formulated their own shows featuring housewives (*Mob Wives*).



Andy Martin Jr./Alamy Stock Photo

The popular reality television show, *Dancing With the Stars*, places real well-known people in a competitive situation.

## COMPARE & CONTRAST

### SPIN-OFF SERIES AND KNOCK-OFF SERIES

**Compare:** The spin-off series and knock-off series are *the same* in the following ways:

- Both are television shows in a series, which is a progression of episodes using the same settings and characters (or real people) and where some plot lines are resolved within a single episode and other plot lines are played out over multiple episodes in the series.
- Both are new television series that substantially copy the formulas used by a previously successful television series.

**Contrast:** The spin-off series and knock-off series are *different* in the following ways:

- The spin-off series is produced by the same people who produced the previously successful television series on which the spin-off is based.
- The knock-off series is produced by different people who are copying the formula used by other people who produced the successful television series on which the knock-off is based.



The genre of reality TV has grown so large that it requires eight sub-genres and many sub-sub-genre categories to capture all its variety (see Table 8.2). Now that there are so many reality shows, the audience is so split that the ratings for even the most popular shows have dropped. For example, *American Idol* was the most watched TV show for eight seasons in the early 2000s then dropped to 22nd place by 2014 (Passy, 2014).

TABLE 8.2 ■ The Sub-Genres of the Reality TV Genre

Sub-Genre	Description	Shows
Documentary style	Cameras record what happens in everyday life	Real people ( <i>Big Brother</i> , <i>Jersey Shore</i> , <i>The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills</i> )
		Workers ( <i>Undercover Boss</i> , <i>Dog Whisperer</i> , <i>American Chopper</i> )
		Celebrities ( <i>The Osbournes</i> , <i>The Anna Nicole Show</i> )
		Fringe groups ( <i>Sister Wives</i> , <i>Amish Mafia</i> )
Reality-legal	People's behavior is recorded as they deal with legal problems	Court shows ( <i>The People's Court</i> , <i>Divorce Court</i> )
		Law enforcement documentaries ( <i>COPS</i> )
Reality competition/ game show	People compete for some prize as one or more contestants are eliminated each episode	Performance ( <i>American Idol</i> , <i>America's Got Talent</i> , <i>Dancing With the Stars</i> )
		Dating competitions ( <i>The Bachelor</i> , <i>For Love or Money</i> )
		Job search competitions ( <i>Top Chef</i> , <i>America's Next Top Model</i> , <i>Last Comic Standing</i> )
Self-improvement/ makeover	Viewers are amazed as a real-world person or object is drastically improved	Personal makeovers ( <i>The Biggest Loser</i> , <i>Extreme Makeover</i> )
		Home makeovers ( <i>Extreme Makeover: Home Edition</i> )
		Vehicle makeovers ( <i>Pimp My Ride</i> )
Social experiment	People are put in unusual situations and a camera records their reactions	<i>Wife Swap</i> , <i>Secret Millionaire</i>
Hidden camera	People's actions are recorded without their awareness	<i>What Would You Do?</i> , <i>Cheaters</i>
Supernatural/ paranormal	People are put in frightening situations that purportedly involve paranormal forces	<i>Scariest Places on Earth</i> , <i>Ghost Hunters</i>
Hoax	People are fooled to believe something false and their reactions are recorded	<i>Catfish</i> , <i>My Big Fat Obnoxious Boss</i> , <i>Hell Date</i> , <i>Punk'd</i>

TV programmers also like reality shows because they are less expensive to produce. According to Passy (2014), “Even on a show like ‘American Idol,’ contestants who make it to the top 12 earn just a few thousand dollars in performance fees” and unlike “writers for scripted television, reality-TV writers often work without union contracts, which means they’re paid less than union members. Consequently, a reality series can cost less than \$500,000 an episode—less than what a high-profile sitcom actor gets paid in a single week” (p. F3).

## THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA LITERACY

We all live in two worlds: the real world and the media world. Attaining higher levels of media literacy does not mean avoiding the media world. Instead it means being able to tell the two worlds apart as the two merge together under pressures from newer message formats and newer technologies that seem to make the boundary lines between the two worlds very fuzzy.

Most of us feel that the real world is too limited; that is, we cannot get all the experiences and information we want in the real world. To get those experiences and information, we journey into the media world. For example, you might feel that your life is too boring and you want to experience some exciting romance. You could read a novel, go to a movie, or watch a television program to get this kind of experience. Or you might be curious about what happened in your city today, so you watch the evening news, where reporters take you to all the places of the day's actions—crime scenes, fire locations, courthouses, sporting arenas. Although these are all real-world locations, you are not visiting them in the real world. Instead, you enter the media world to visit them.

We are continually entering the media world to get experiences and information we cannot get very well in our real lives. We enter the media world to expand our real-world experience and to help us understand the real world better. But those experiences we have in the media world are different than if we had experienced them directly in the real world. We often forget this as we bring media-world experiences back into our real world. As we constantly cross the border between the real world and the media world, the border sometimes gets blurred, and over time we tend to forget which memories are from experiences in the real world and which were originally experienced in the media world.

This blurring of the line and the interlacing of memories makes it important that we spend some mental energy considering the nature of reality and how the reality of the two worlds is different. Increasingly, the border between our real world and the media world is becoming harder to discern. More and more often, the media do not wait for us to cross over into their world; they bring their messages into our world. Because much of our exposure to media messages is not planned by us, we don't realize how much we are exposed to the media. Consider the exposure you have to media messages every day in your real world without you being aware of them. For example, there are radio messages coming out of other people's cars as you walk down the street in your real world; you pass messages on kiosks, billboards, newspapers lying on tables, and people talking about the media messages they have experienced. As the media pump messages into our world at an ever increasing rate, the borderline becomes blurred. We take almost all of this for granted.



There are many places where the border between the real world and the media world is not so clear. Think about what makes the following programs real, as the media claim: *Big Brother*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Ink Master*, *American Idol*, *Pimp My Ride*, and *Hardcore Pawn*. To what extent do these shows fit into your real world and resonate with your real experiences?

As genres change and the line between reality and fantasy programming becomes even more blurred, we must avoid falling into the trap of debating which shows are real and which are fantasy. This is why the next-step reality is so fundamental to media literacy because it shifts the question and hence the focus of our attention. The question should *not* be: How real are media messages? The next-step reality organizing principle shows us that every media message is a mix of reality and fantasy. Instead, the question should be: Which elements in this message reflect reality and which elements are removed from reality in some way? When you are guided by the organizing principle of next-step reality, you need to analyze media messages to answer these more appropriate questions. This analysis will help you develop a sensitivity to how big of a step you usually tolerate in the one-step remove messages. Some people will tolerate only a very small step and limit themselves to messages that very closely match their own experiences and knowledge. On the other end of that spectrum are people who insist on radical departures from what their everyday lives provide them.

The key to becoming media literate is not in how close we move to the reality end of the spectrum; that would only limit our range of information and emotional reactions. Instead, the key to media literacy is to be flexible and aware. Being flexible means being willing to traverse the entire spectrum of messages and being willing to enjoy the full range of messages. Being aware means realizing where you are in the spectrum as you experience each type of message and knowing the different standards of appreciation to apply to different places on the spectrum of reality. By being both flexible and aware, you can much better enjoy the enormous variety of messages in the media and, at the same time, control the effects of those messages so that you avoid the negative ones that usually come from automatic exposure and instead more intensely enjoy the positive effects that can result from any media message.

All of us must continually decide how closely media messages reflect real life and what the implications of those differences are on our beliefs about reality. Sometimes, these decisions about what is real are relatively easy; it is simple for most of us to understand that there is nothing like *Gilligan's Island* in real life. But some of the decisions are harder to make accurately—especially when they are subtly shaped over a long period of time by the accumulation of thousands of journeys into the media world. Over time, we have come to accept much of the media world as the real world. For example, who is the current president of the United States? Are you sure? Have you ever met him? If you have not met him, how do you know he really exists? If you have met him, how do you know he is who he says he is? I am not trying to make you paranoid. I am only asking you to consider the degree to which you trust the information and experiences you bring back from the media world into your real world. When encountering some of that information, you should have a high degree of skepticism, but other information should be accepted by you with a feeling of trust. Are you sure you know which is which?

This is why being media literate is so important. Media messages are not always the way they seem. For example, with reality programming, we need to be careful to discern what is the reality and what is the fantasy in those programs. Passy (2014) writes,

Producers and networks acknowledge that reality TV involves a fair amount of fakery. Show producers shape situations to beef up story lines—in the case of competition-style shows sometimes by simply prompting contestants to do something unusual to boost their chances with the judges. Producers argue that truly spontaneous and unplanned situations often take too long to unfold or lack dramatic impact—and that the public understands “reality TV” isn’t meant to mirror reality. (p. F3)

There are often many layers of meanings. Some of those layers are highly unrealistic (never happened in actuality, never will happen, and never could happen), but they are interlaced among layers of realistic elements that could transform the overall message in your perception from “fantasy” to “it might happen” to “it is likely to happen” to “I need to try this.” The more you are aware of the layers of meaning in messages, the more you can control the selection of which meanings you want. Being more analytical is the first step toward controlling how the media affect you. If you are unaware of the meanings, then the media stay in control of how you perceive the world.

When you understand this organizing principle of next-step reality, you can better appreciate media content. You can focus your analysis on how different media, different vehicles, and different artists achieve the resonance of reality and then take that one step to remove their message from that reality. This is where the artistic talent comes into play. So a good understanding of this concept can help you develop a keener aesthetic sense as you experience individual messages. Also important, this concept should motivate you to ask questions about patterns in the one-step remove. There are patterns of life in the real world, and there are patterns of stories in the media world. The two patterns are not the same. The more you recognize the story patterns and how they are different from real-world life patterns, the less trouble you will have in recognizing the border between reality and fantasy. To get started on this path, try Exercise 8.1. As you analyze television programs for their reality and fantasy elements, try to push yourself beyond the easy-to-spot elements. Dig deeper to identify the less obvious elements.

## SUMMARY

Clearly, the issue of reality entails more than making a simple decision about whether something actually happened. People are able to think in terms of degrees of reality, and when they are assessing the degree of reality, they consider more than one dimension. It is also important to understand that there is not a huge gap between children’s ability to perceive reality accurately and adults’ ability. This is a trap into which adults frequently fall. Being in this trap gives those adults a false sense of security that they do not need to think carefully about the reality of media messages because they are no longer children and therefore are protected by the adult discount. Because the degree of belief in reality



is associated with higher negative effects, adults are vulnerable, as are children (Potter, 1986; Rubin, Perse, & Taylor, 1988).

The most useful way to think about reality is with the “next-step reality” organizing principle. This focuses your attention on the degree to which media messages are both real and fantasy. This then sets up more important questions: Which elements in the message do I regard as real, and how did I arrive at that perception? Which elements in the message do I regard as fantasy? To what extent am I attracted to the fantasy and willing to try to make it my reality? Keep these questions in mind as you read through the next four chapters on different types of media content.

## Further Reading

DeVolld, T. (2016). *Reality TV: An insider's guide to TV's hottest market* (2nd ed.). Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions. (172 pages, including appendices)

The author begins with an overview of the history of reality TV and some schemes to organize all the different types of shows. However, most of the 12 chapters in this book are organized by topics that help readers understand the process of planning, producing, editing, and marketing reality TV programs.

Dill, K. E. (2009). *How fantasy becomes reality: Seeing through media influence*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. (306 pages with end-notes and index)

This is a very readable book by a media psychology scholar. In her nine chapters, Dill explores the various ways the media's use of fantasy leads to real effects among individuals. Topics include violence, beauty, race, gender, advertising, and political coverage.

Essany, M. (2008). *Reality check: The business and art of producing reality TV*. Burlington, MA: Focal Press. (260 pages with index and glossary of TV production terms)

This is an easy-to-read book with a self-help tone. The author is an industry insider who produced and starred in his own reality television series telecast on E! The book presents a lot of practical information about what goes on during the planning and production of a reality series for American television.

Ouellette, L., & Murray, S. (Eds.). (2009). *Reality TV: Remaking television culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press. (377 pages with index)

This edited volume consists of 17 chapters written by critical and cultural scholars. The chapters are organized into four groups: genre, industry, culture/power, and interactivity.

Pozner, J. L. (2010). *Reality bites back: The troubling truth about guilty pleasure TV*. New York, NY: Seal Press.

The author is a journalist, social critic, and founder of Women In Media & News (WIMN), a media justice group that amplifies women's presence and power in the public debate through media analysis, education, and advocacy. This book presents an extended criticism of so-called reality television programs.

## Keeping Up to Date

JobMonkey.com (<http://www.jobmonkey.com/realitytv/reality-tv-statistics.html>)

This general website posts information about lots of different kinds of job opportunities.

The link above presents a lot of information about productions and casting opportunities for a wide range of reality programs.

## EXERCISE 8.1

### DELINEATING THE ELUSIVE LINE BETWEEN REALITY AND FANTASY

1. *Analyze Television Programs:* For each of the genres of programs listed below, pick one particular program and analyze it.

- Situation comedy
- Drama (police drama or family drama)
- “Reality” program (such as *Survivor*, *The Bachelor*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Big Brother*, *Undercover Boss*, etc.)
- News program

For each program, take a sheet of paper and write the name of the program at the top. Then draw a vertical line down the middle of the page. Label the left column as “Reality Indicators” and list in the column all the things about the program that you think would lead someone to believe that the program content is real (that is, depicts reality). Then label the right column “Non-Real World” and list in that column all the things about the program that you think would lead someone to believe that the program was not real.

2. *Tabulate Lists:* Count all the items you have listed in the Reality Indicators column and

write that number at the bottom of that column. Then count all the items you have listed in the Non-Real World column and write that number at the bottom of that column. Do the same for all sheets, so that you have two totals at the bottom of the page for each program you have analyzed for reality. Turn totals into percentages. For example, if on one sheet you listed five things in the left column (reality items) and five things in the right column (non-reality items), then this would compute to 50% reality and 50% non-reality. If instead you had one item in the reality column and four items in the unreality column, this would compute to 20% and 80%.

3. *Check for Patterns:* If you are a perceptive television viewer, you are likely to have at least a handful of items in each column. No program is purely reality—there are all kinds of production decisions (about characters, plot, settings, customs, makeup, dialogue, camera placement, editing, etc.) that take messages out of the pure reality realm. Also, no program is purely fantasy—there are character types,

(Continued)



(Continued)

situations, language, settings, and so forth that are very much like the real world.

Look at the pairs of percentages at the bottom of each page. Are the splits in percentages favoring the first types of shows, which are the more fantasy types of shows? Or are they favoring the more reality types of shows, which are the second two genres? Or is there no difference? Now try this exercise again with the following media types:

- Movies
- Stories in magazines
- Newspaper stories
- Internet sites
- Video games

Do reality proportions vary across the medium?



Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis via Getty Images

## NEWS

*Key Idea: News is not a reflection of actual events; it is a construction by news workers who are subjected to many influences and constraints.*

Eight months after the 2016 presidential elections, tabloids still advertise headlines about Hillary Clinton. The news media played an important role in shaping this story.



Dynamic Nature of News	Consumer Standards for Evaluating the Quality of News
Rise and Fall of “Big News”	Objectivity
Shift to Online Sources of News	Accuracy
Different Perspectives on News	<i>Completeness</i>
Political Philosophy Perspective	<i>Context</i>
Traditional Journalistic Perspective	Neutrality
News-Working Perspective	<i>Lack of Bias</i>
Economic Perspective	<i>Balance</i>
Consumer Personal Perspective	How Can We Become More Media
<i>Hyper-localism</i>	Literate With News?
<i>Selective Exposure</i>	Exposure Matters
	Quality Matters
	Summary
	Further Reading
	Keeping Up to Date
	Exercises

Kristen was shopping at the mall when a person came up to her holding a clipboard and said, “I’m taking a survey. Could you answer a few questions for me?”

“Okay, what are they about?”

“This is a survey about news. My first question is: What newspapers do you read?”

“I don’t read any newspapers,” said Kristen.

The interviewer made a mark on her form then asked, “What news magazines do you read?”

“None.”

“Do you listen to newscasts on the radio?”

“No.”

“How about the evening news on television?”

“No.”

The interviewer glanced over her form then looked up at Kristen. “So you avoid all news?”

“No. I love news and watch about 2 hours of it every night on TV. I always watch the Daily Show With Jon Stewart. Then I watch the Late Show With David Letterman.”

“But those aren’t news shows. They’re comedy shows.”

“They present lots of news. I always learn a lot more about what is going on in the world by watching those shows than when I used to watch the evening news programs. And they’re fun to watch.”

“Those shows make stuff up to be funny!”

“Yes, they do. But I can always tell when they are making something up. With the so-called real news shows, I am never sure what they are making up.”

Concern about recent changes in the news industry has been growing among the public. In his classic book *The Sociology of News*, Schudson (2003) argued that the audience for news has been fragmenting and that journalists have been trivializing the news in order to satisfy what the news industry perceives as what the public now wants. Schudson brought his criticism to a climax by asking, “Can journalism continue to be publicly important?” McCaffrey (2010) wrote, “The news industry is in the midst of a period of profound transition. The advent of the Internet Age has rendered obsolete long-standing models of how to gather and communicate the news.” Given the “break-neck pace at which change has occurred over the past two decades, it’s likely that we are in for an era of perpetual transformation, one with few certainties and no fixed outcome” (p. 3). Critics ranging from current U.S. President Donald Trump to members of the public have labeled media news reports they do not like or agree with as “fake news” (for more on this, see Issue 3).

These recent alarms and criticisms, however, are nothing new. Critics have been complaining about the nature of news for centuries. For example, when Thomas Jefferson was president of the United States, he delivered one of the most strident criticisms of the press in 1807 when he said, “The man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them.” Jefferson took the position that “he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors” (quoted in Jensen, 1997, p. 11). Thus, Jefferson was arguing that nothing printed in a newspaper could be believed. His harsh criticism of news after he became president is in direct contrast to his more often cited support of the press in 1787 before he was president, when he said, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter” (quoted in Jensen, 1997, p. 11). This pair of quotes from Jefferson illustrates that Americans have had a love-hate relationship with news for as long as there have been Americans. We seem to revere the institution of the press as essential to creating an informed citizenry, but then we use this idealism to hold the press to standards so high that they are impossible to achieve.

In this chapter, I will first provide you with some history about the development of the press so that you can see that it has gone through several major changes since the founding of this country. Then we will analyze the standards that people use to evaluate the quality of news. Finally, the chapter builds to some recommendations for dealing with the news in a more media literate manner. This topic is then explored in more detail in Issue 3 on fake news.

## DYNAMIC NATURE OF NEWS

Changes in the conception of news are not new; journalists, social critics, and the public have all been experiencing transformations in the way they think about news for centuries. So in order to understand the meaning of the current transformations, we need to draw some context from history.

The desire for news goes back to preliterate culture; humans have always expressed an interest in the events surrounding them (Harrison, 2006). News was personal and local; that is, people were most concerned about events that impacted their daily lives (e.g., threats from invaders, impact of weather on their crops, changes in local regulations) as





Library of Congress

Newspapers have played an important role in American life from the very beginning. The first newspaper to print the Declaration of Independence was the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* on July 6, 1776.

well as the lives of their families and friends. News was transmitted almost exclusively through interpersonal conversations, so it was composed largely of gossip and rumors.

Newspapers did not begin until the 16th century, when a group of men in Italy collected information and sold it to their clients in news pamphlets. By the 17th century, these news pamphlets evolved into daily newspapers first in Germany then throughout Europe. These early newspapers presented a simple listing of facts, which made them hard to read because the facts were not presented as a story with any context or flow. The audience for these early newspapers were elites—that is, people who could read and who could afford to pay for information. “Merchants, in particular, had a keen awareness of the value of information, and the dangers of acting on false rumour” (Pettegree, 2014, p. 3). Therefore, these early journalists were most concerned with accuracy of their information, so they worked to corroborate their facts to give them greater credibility.

The early settlers in America clustered into colonies, each with its own local problems and challenges. People in each colony wanted to be kept up to date about shipping schedules, changes in regulation from England, and their own local politics. Each colony had several newspapers, each with its own political point of view.

### Rise and Fall of “Big News”

Following the American Civil War and the rise of the industrial revolution in the mid-19th century, the population was undergoing fundamental change as people moved from farms to cities. After the American Civil War, the population was developing a greater sense of nationhood and wanted information about political leaders and America’s place in the world. And due to compulsory education, literacy rates had greatly increased. Some entrepreneurs (e.g., William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer) saw this as a chance to develop newspapers with very large circulations in the growing population centers. But these entrepreneurs realized that in order to appeal to a large readership, they needed to move away from obvious political partisanship in their stories and make them appear as being “objective” so as not to offend any group of readers.

The growth of huge-circulation newspapers ushered in an era of “big news.” Editors of these newspapers regarded the population as hungry for news but needed to be told what was most important. When radio became a mass medium in the 1920s, networks created national news broadcasts using this idea of big news where expert journalists decided what events should be covered. When radio became a mass medium in the 1950s, it followed the big news model.

This idea of big news reached a peak in the 1980s, then circulation began declining for newspapers, and audiences began eroding for radio and television news. This erosion

was slow at first but then increased with the rise of the Internet and the news alternatives it offered in the form of news blogs and bulletin boards.

These declines were dramatic for newspapers. The number of daily newspapers decreased from 1,750 in 1970 to 1,350 in 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2014). The circulation for daily newspapers in the United States was 63.3 million in 1984 and declined to 30.9 million by 2017. Some of this loss of circulation was offset by these newspapers attracting visitors to their online sites. In 2006, there were 8.2 million unique visitors each month to a daily newspaper website, and this had increased to 11.5 million by 2017. However, during this time, the number of journalists shrank. Employment at daily newspapers peaked at 74,410 employees in newsrooms in 2006, down to only 39,210 by 2017 (Barthel, 2018).

As for TV news, 50% of Americans said in 2017 that they get news from television, while 43% said they get news from online sources (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). Unlike newspapers, TV news exposure has not been showing a decline recently. The combined viewership of network-produced evening news (ABC, CBS, and NBC) was 22.8 million in 2008, and it increased slightly to 23.8 million by 2016 (Matsa, 2017a). However, exposure to local TV newscasts has been falling. Viewership of newscasts decreased from 12.3 million in 2007 to 10.8 million in 2016 for local morning news, from 25.7 million to 20.7 million for early evening news, and from 29.2 to 20.3 million for late-night news (Matsa, 2017b).

### Shift to Online Sources of News

The dramatic erosion of audiences for “big news” should not be interpreted as Americans losing interest in being informed; instead, there has been a shift toward exposure to online news sources, which indicates that Americans are still interested in keeping up with the events of the day. This trend of news exposure away from traditional media to online media was initially driven by younger people. The Kaiser Family Foundation (2010) conducted a survey of young Americans ages 8 to 18 and found that from 2005 to 2010, time spent reading magazines and newspapers dropped (from 14 to 9 minutes for magazines and from 6 to 3 minutes for newspapers). The proportion of young people who read a newspaper in a typical day dropped from 42% in 1999 to 23% in 2009 (Pew Research Center, 2012). A few years later, the Pew Research Center (2014) reported that 48% of 18- to 29-year-olds watch online news videos, while only 27% of 50- to 64-year-olds and 11% of those 65 and older do the same. By 2017, 43% of all adults said they got their news from online sources and 67% of people 65 and older were getting their news on a mobile device; furthermore, 67% of Americans said they get at least some of their news on social media sites such as Twitter, YouTube, and Snapchat (Bialik & Matsa, 2017).

This shift from traditional news sources to online sources illustrates changes in the need for news. First, it indicates that Americans want more efficient access to news. They do not want to wait for a newspaper to be delivered or for a broadcast news site to report the news of the day; instead, they want continuous access at any time and anywhere. Online news sites offer this convenience, especially when people access those online sites with their mobile devices. By 2014, 36% of all adults were watching online news videos, 82% of Americans said they got news on a desktop or laptop, and 54% said they got news on a mobile device (Pew Research Center, 2014). By 2017, 85% of U.S. adults said they were getting their news on a mobile device (Bialik & Matsa, 2017).





Younger Americans increasingly get their news from web-based outlets.

Second, the shift from traditional sources to online sources also illustrates that people want a different kind of news. By moving away from traditional news sources that are staffed by professional journalists who use their expertise to select what they regard as the most important events of each day and use their professionalism to search out credible information to tell their stories in a balanced manner, people are indicating that they prefer news stories that are much more local, in the sense that those stories are about what their friends are doing or the things that users—not journalists—think are the most important (Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim,

2014; Moon & Hadley, 2014; Revers, 2014; Xu & Feng, 2014). Evidence for this is seen in the rise of social networking sites being used to access news. Over the past decade, surveys show that 30% of the general population says it gets its news from Facebook, 10% gets its news from YouTube, and 8% gets its news from Twitter. Furthermore, 26% of the population gets its news from two social networking sites, and 9% get news from at least three (Holcomb, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2013). Donsbach (2010) writes, “Younger people are increasingly using blogs, chatrooms or community networks such as Facebook and MySpace to receive what they think is ‘news’” (p. 43). Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg bragged that Facebook may be the biggest source of news in the entire world; in 2007, he said, “We’re actually producing more news in a single day for our 19 million users than any other media outlet in its entire existence” (Pariser, 2011).

It appears that the shift in what is news has been away from what traditional news outlets have determined as important events and much more toward what individuals seek out as useful information. When Purcell and Rainie (2014) asked people if they feel that digital technologies have made them feel better informed than 5 years ago, they found that 81% of respondents said they were better informed about products and services to buy, 75% about national news, 72% about popular culture, 68% about hobbies and personal interests, 67% about their friends, 65% about their health and fitness, and 60% about their family. Notice how important “news” about products, friends, family, and personal health is.

As you can now see, the idea of what is news has always been in a state of dynamic change. Until the rise of news pamphlets and newspapers in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, people’s idea of news was limited to the current events taking place in their immediate vicinity in their everyday lives. Then the idea of news shifted to pamphlets presenting daily listings of facts. Then there was a shift to newspapers presenting stories from a particular political point of view to audiences that wanted up-to-date information to support their political orientations. Then there was a shift to newspapers telling readers that they were presenting objective facts rather than editorializing particular political positions. Then there was a shift toward making news more entertaining rather than purely factual. Then there was a shift to offering a wide variety of platforms—many interactive—to offer every kind of niche audience a different kind of up-to-date information.

## DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON NEWS

There are many perspectives on what constitutes this thing we refer to as “news” (Table 9.1). Some of these perspectives are complementary and work together, while others are in conflict with one another. Let’s examine five of these perspectives in some detail.

### Political Philosophy Perspective

The political philosophy perspective specifies what news *should be*. Thus this is a normative perspective rather than a descriptive perspective. People who take this perspective on the news argue that news should focus on the most important events and people in a society in order to keep people up to date about what is most significant. News stories should be constructed from accurate facts rather than journalists’ opinions so that people can become educated about what is really happening and make up their own minds about what positions to take on issues and which candidates to vote for in elections of their leaders. This position is espoused by philosophers and social critics who view the purpose of the press to educate the public every day about their world and thus create and maintain an informed public that would make the best decisions possible in electing their leaders and supporting issues in a democratic society.

This perspective builds from the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which protects the news media from governmental interference so that they can be free to report

TABLE 9.1 ■ Five Perspectives on News

Perspective	Description
Political philosophy perspective	News is the daily reporting of the key, accurate facts about most significant events of the day in order to inform the public so that individuals have enough information to make rational, informed choices.
Traditional journalism perspective	News is that which is reported by journalists who are professional because of their knowledge, their membership in professional journalism organizations, and their autonomy from outside influences.
News-working perspective	News is the flow of stories produced by newswriters who learn how to be successful (get their stories published and read) through a continuing process of socialization within news organizations.
Economic perspective	News is that which is presented by news businesses and as such is shaped by decisions regarding the allocation of scarce resources in a way to increase profits by maximizing revenue and minimizing expenses.
Consumer personal perspective	News is that which people seek out and expose themselves to in order to keep up to date about the events and issues they regard as being most important to them.



on public issues “so that crucial features of liberal society can be maintained, for example the protection of rights such as free speech, or the monitoring of abuses of power” (Ward, 2014, p. 3). People holding this perspective on the news believe that the press should not be an instrument used by powerful elites (such as the government or powerful businesses) to achieve their own goals. The press should be independent from political or economic pressures so that it can present the public with an objective representation of major events every day. Kaplan (2010) argues that the quest for objectivity is “American journalism’s proudest, if most difficult to sustain, achievement. Considered a crucial tool for democracy, objectivity supposedly secures a space for neutral, factual information and public deliberation outside the corruption, rancor, and partisan spin that normally characterizes public discourse” (p. 25).

### Traditional Journalistic Perspective

The traditional journalistic perspective is also a normative perspective because it encapsulates what journalists believe to be the purpose and nature of news and presents this encapsulation as a template for what news should be. Journalists essentially believe that their purpose is to inform the public, rather than persuade the public, which they refer to as editorializing and should be avoided. This perspective typically focuses on seven criteria to specify the characteristics an event must have in order to be considered newsworthy. These seven criteria are timeliness, significance, proximity, prominence, conflict, human interest, and deviance.

Timeliness is the most obvious criterion for newsworthiness. An event has to be current in order to be considered news. Significance refers to the magnitude of the consequences of an event. Thus a shooting resulting in the death of five people is more newsworthy than a shooting that results in only one death. Proximity refers to how close the event is to the news audience. Thus a shooting that takes place in a news outlet’s home town is more newsworthy in that town compared to a shooting that takes place a thousand miles away. Prominence refers to how well known people and institutions are in the event being considered as newsworthy. Thus if the mayor of a town is arrested for drunk driving, that is more newsworthy than if one of the town’s file clerks is arrested for drunk driving. Conflict refers to the degree to which the parties in an event disagree. Human interest refers to how strongly the event would appeal to human emotions.

Deviance refers to the degree to which an event is out of the ordinary. Thus if a dog bites a man, that is not newsworthy; but if a man bites a dog, that is newsworthy. The irony is that we depend on the news to tell us what the norm is. To be well informed, we need to know how things typically work, what is likely to happen tomorrow, and what the relative risks of harm are. But the news media focus our attention on the deviant. Because we see so many portrayals of the deviant, we come to believe that the deviant is the norm.

### News-Working Perspective

Unlike the previous two perspectives, the news-working perspective is not a normative one; instead, it has been developed by scholars who study what journalists, editors, and other news workers actually do in the everyday performance of gathering news and

presenting it. For example, Altheide (1976) found that while news workers are aware of normative news perspectives that tell them what they should do, they frequently cannot achieve the prescribed standards because of **unavoidable constraints**, such as deadlines, limited access to sources, and limited financial resources. Journalists learn how to work around these constraints to do the best they can but it always falls short of the ideal. Thus journalists are socialized into their work environment through trial and error as they learn what they must do in order to survive. Over time, they develop what has been called the “**news perspective**,” which is not something that is consciously imposed by the owners of the media, but instead grows naturally out of their everyday practices. The news perspective is so pervasive and common among journalists that it is taken for granted. It is also generally shared by journalists in all kinds of vehicles and all media; as a result, there is a widespread commonality to all news in traditional news organizations. To illustrate this point, let’s consider the topic of health and how it is covered in the news. First, let’s examine what is covered. In a content analysis of 14,849 local television news stories from across the United States, Haberkorn (2009) kept track of how often the major causes of death (heart disease, lung cancer, and diabetes) were covered. She found that of all news stories, only 5.9% deal with a health issue of any kind. And among that small number of health stories, only 5.8% focused on the top three causes of death. She concluded that there is a poverty of information on local television news programs concerning serious health risks that affect most people. Another content analysis of news (local and national newspapers, television, and magazines) found that news coverage underrepresented the contribution of lung cancer; furthermore, the news media presented almost no information concerning the prevention and detection of cancers (Slater, Long, & Bettinghaus, 2008). However, while the news media underreported serious illnesses common throughout the population, they increased their coverage of elective plastic surgeries (Cho, 2007).

A key part of the news perspective are **story formulas**. These are the procedures that journalists learn as shortcuts to help them quickly select and write stories. As far as gathering information on a story, journalists follow the formula of asking six questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? Journalists confronted with a new story begin by asking these questions, then structure their story to answer each of these questions.

One popular news-writing formula is the inverted pyramid. This formula tells the journalist to put the most important information at the beginning of the story, then add the next most important set of information. Journalists move down their list of information, ranked according to importance, until all the information is in the story. This formula was developed in the early days of the telegraph, when journalists in the field would send their stories to their newspapers over telegraph lines. They needed to send the most important information first in case the telegraph line went dead before they were done transmitting the entire story. We are way past the days of dependence on telegraph lines, but the formula still has value because editors will cut stories if they run too long. For example, a newspaper editor might want to use a reporter’s 20-inch story but only has room for 16 inches, so the editor will typically cut off the last 4 inches.

Another popular formula is to use a narrative to tell a story in an entertainment format. Journalists who use this formula will begin the story with a heated conflict, a gruesome description, or an unusual quote—all designed to grab the reader’s attention in



an emotional manner. The journalist then presents each bit of information in a narrative much like a storyteller would.

Perhaps the most popular formula for telling stories in the news is what I call **simplified extended conflict** (SEC). When covering a story, journalists look for some angle of conflict that appears very simple. They believe that a story that has no conflict will not *grab* the audience's attention, but if the conflict is complex, the story will not *hold* the audience's attention. Furthermore, if the story can be played out over several days—or longer—so much the better. Political elections offer lots of good examples of the SEC. Campaigns always involve conflict between the candidates, and this can usually be reduced to two people. Also, the campaign, which goes on for weeks or months, can be portrayed as a race, with one candidate ahead and the other candidate running hard to catch up. If the conflict is focused on the finer points of complex issues, the story will not appeal to as large an audience. Therefore, journalists look for a simple form of conflict, and that is best seen in the “horse race” metaphor. Political coverage is much more about who is winning and whether the challenger can come from behind and close the gap than it is about issues. Other examples of SEC are the United States against Iraq, various crusaders against Congress, the little guy against city hall, and the forces of pro-life against the forces of pro-choice. The press can present the conflict in these situations in a very simple manner and keep the conflict going for a long time. It does this by polarizing the people or issues in the conflict, inviting the audience to identify with one side, then playing out the fight with lots of drama.

When the press has a big story that will consume news space for several weeks or months, it has an opportunity to more fully develop the nuances of the parties in the conflict. With political issues, the press could choose to tell the story of how competing interests have some common ground and how compromise is crafted. With criminal trials, the press could choose to tell the story of how humans can go astray and what justice means in each situation. Instead, the press rarely digs deep into a story—illuminating its complexity and educating the public about the underlying nature of the problem. The press typically focuses on the surface information—polishing it to a more glitzy finish to make it more attractive to passive viewers.

While these guidelines and story formulas instruct journalists, they are not definitive prescriptions; that is, journalists are free to deviate from them, and many times in the everyday world, journalists must think beyond the guidelines. This is especially the case in determining what gets covered. For example, let's say that a local official was arrested for a minor misdemeanor in your town 1 hour ago. This event is high on timeliness and proximity but low on significance. In contrast, let's say that yesterday an earthquake in a small country halfway around the world killed thousands of people. Which story is more newsworthy? This multi-characteristic definition forces us to compare apples and oranges; that is, when determining what is news, is the characteristic of proximity more important than the characteristic of significance? And what does significance really mean—significant to governments, significant to the people involved in the event, or significant to you?

This perspective has been criticized for distorting events. Altheide (1976) argues that “the organizational, practical, and other mundane features of news work promote a way of looking at events which fundamentally distorts them. . . . In order to make events news, news reporting decontextualizes and thereby changes them” (pp. 24–25).

## Economic Perspective

The economic perspective on news focuses on how news organizations operate as businesses in the way they allocate their resources in order to achieve their primary business goal, which is to increase profits by maximizing revenue and minimizing expenses. From the early days of newspapers up until today, the organizations that gather and report news are businesses. Some are very small and some are huge conglomerates, but the one thing they all have in common is that they must generate revenue to pay for all their materials and employees. The two most salient characteristics of the economic perspective are commercialism and marketing.

Arguably, the strongest influence on the construction of news is its commercial nature (Altheide, 1976). News organizations are in the business of constructing large audiences so they can rent those audiences to advertisers. The larger the audience, the higher the rent and the more revenue the news organization generates. Therefore, the ultimate goal of news is a commercial one, and journalists are driven to construct stories that will attract large audiences. Therefore, news organizations must be careful not to run hard-hitting stories that would offend audiences. Also, news organizations must be careful not to offend their advertisers (Lee & Solomon, 1990). Furthermore, news organizations seek to find what kinds of stories audiences want most, then journalists are directed by marketing managers to present those kinds of stories in order to satisfy the existing needs in the market—just like manufacturing companies do when determining which products to produce.

Commercialization is not new. The commercialization of newspapers in the United States dates back to about the 1830s, when newspapers shifted away from financial dependence on political parties to dependence on circulation and advertising revenues (Hampton, Livio, & Sessions Goulet, 2010). Pettegree (2014) argued that news first became a commercial commodity, not with the invention of the newspaper, but much earlier in the 15th century with the invention of the printing press, which resulted in printers growing the public appetite for news and information.

The economic perspective has been criticized for several reasons. One reason is that when news decisions are made by marketers instead of journalists, the news coverage is confounded with advertising. For example, Kaniss (1996) criticized news shows in the Philadelphia area by pointing out that during the November 1996 sweeps month, the local CBS affiliate on its evening news show ran nine stories on the *Titanic*, a ship that sank 84 years prior to those “news” stories but was the subject of a CBS mini-series. The Philadelphia ABC affiliate was cited as frequently running “news” stories about Mickey Mouse because the ABC network is owned by Disney. Local affiliates in many TV markets are also found to frequently run news stories about stars on their network series, and they often run soft news stories on topics of made-for-TV movies appearing that night on the network.

Another criticism of the economic perspective is that it tends to change the content of news in a way that is somehow harmful to the public. For example, journalists operating under the **marketing perspective** are more likely to present stories that grab the attention of large audiences by highlighting the unusual so as to shock people. This marketing perspective has led news workers to believe that the public wants more soft news items than stories about the government, the economy, and political matters. In a content analysis of



13,000 items in 12 daily newspapers, it was found that newspapers with a strong market orientation publish fewer items about government and public affairs and more items about lifestyle and sports than do newspapers with a weak market orientation.

Today, the newsrooms of hundreds of U.S. newspapers, magazines, and television stations have embraced, to greater or lesser extents, this approach to making news. Typically a market-driven organization selects target markets for its product, identifies the wants and needs of potential customers in its target markets, and seeks to satisfy those wants and needs as efficiently as possible. (Beam, 2003, p. 368)

And one of the widespread needs in any population is the need for information that confirms one's beliefs rather than challenges them (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). Therefore the more successful news organizations use the marketing perspective to identify their audience's beliefs then provide them with information that supports those beliefs.

Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) argue that a foundational issue about the news is “whether journalists supply the news that citizens need and whether citizens want such information or prefer information on sports, crime, and entertainment—subjects that are interesting but don't contribute to the health of a democratic society” (p. 6). Perhaps there is a gap between the stories that professional journalists think are the most newsworthy (i.e., politics, economics, and international matters) and those that attract audiences most strongly. Gans (2003) observes that journalists expect as an integral part of their professional identities to provide stories that are most newsworthy rather than most attractive. Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) conducted a major 2-year study in which they interviewed dozens of news editors and analyzed the content of 40,000 news stories as well as audience attractions to 20 news sites across seven countries. They found a large and growing gap between the supply of what they called public affairs stories (stories thought by journalists to be the most important and newsworthy) and public demand for non-public affairs (sports and entertainment). They said,

There was a gap despite the presence of substantive differences in the media systems among the countries in which the sites are located and in the sites' ideological orientations. Moreover, the lack of major geographic variation persists at the regional level. (p. 17)

### Consumer Personal Perspective

When we look at the current exposure patterns to news content, we must conclude that many people are seeking a kind of information that does not conform to the old traditional journalistic perspective on news. One pattern we see is that people are seeking out information strategically that benefits them. That is, they are not sitting back waiting for “authorities” to tell them what the most important events and issues are; instead, they already have a good idea of their interests and they seek out information that satisfies their personal needs for information they can use. This shows up in two trends: hyper-localism and selective exposure.

### Hyper-localism

As the audience for news fragments, news vehicles are getting more and more specialized, which is known as **hyper-localism**. The news watchdog group the Project for Excellence in Journalism says that the mass media are having a very hard time holding onto their audiences for news and the overall audience is shrinking for newspapers, TV news, and even Internet news. Also, the smaller and smaller number of people who care about exposing themselves to news messages have more and more options, beyond newspapers and network news programs (Rainey, 2007). Cable news is pulling away a lot of viewers who like personality-driven news shows (such as Bill O'Reilly), comedy news shows (such as the *Daily Show* or the *Colbert Report*), sports-focused news shows (such as *SportsCenter*), or celebrity-focused news (such as *E!*). These news seekers are less interested in global or national issues than they are in more local or hobby-type things that interest them personally. News organizations realize this, so they are developing more and more specialized vehicles to appeal to these many niche audiences.



iStock/Bywalker

Today, people tend to seek out news that satisfies their own particular personal needs, in contrast to decades ago, when people let news organizations tell them what was important and should be considered news.

### Selective Exposure

The idea that people selectively expose themselves to news content has been around for a long time, but it is even more important today with the fragmentation of audiences and the proliferation of choices. Selective exposure is a psychological concept that says people seek out information that conforms to their existing belief systems and avoid information that challenges those beliefs. In the past when there were few sources of news, people could either expose themselves to mainstream news—where they would likely see beliefs expressed counter to their own—or they could avoid news altogether. Now with so many types of news constantly available to a full range of niche audiences, people can easily find a source of news that constantly confirms their own personal belief system. This leads to the possibility of creating many different small groups of people, each strongly believing they are correct and everyone else is wrong about how the world works.

The consumer personal perspective appears to be gaining importance with the rise of Internet platforms of news, although this perspective is not new—it has always been around. The locus of this perspective is the individual who determines for himself or herself what is news rather than relying on an outside authority such as a journalist, news company, or philosopher. This perspective is a pragmatic one, where an individual's standard for what is news is purely personal and focuses on what is most important or interesting to the individual. Thus people with a particular hobby will define news as those events currently impacting their hobby—meetings of hobbyists, new regulations on their hobby, new inventions that help them with their hobby, and so on. People who are family oriented are most interested in what is happening to people with whom they are related—who is sick, who is traveling and where, who is dating or getting engaged, married, or divorced, and so on. Thus sources such as Facebook provide much more



“newsworthy” information than *USA Today*, *Time Magazine*, and *CBS Evening News* put together. For many people, when the president of the United States delivers a State of the Union address and lays out economic plans, this is not newsworthy; instead, when their closest friends lay out their plans for how they plan to spend their time and money on vacations and shopping trips, this is highly newsworthy. Other journalistic criteria such as proximity or prominence are relatively unimportant. When a sibling or close friend announces her engagement, this is highly newsworthy regardless of whether she lives next door or far away. What your brother is doing for the holidays is newsworthy to you regardless of whether he is a college student or a congressman.

## CONSUMER STANDARDS FOR EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF NEWS

As you have seen thus far in this chapter, there is a lot of criticism of the news. Criticism is stimulated when people are upset that something, like news, does not meet their standards. So in order to understand the nature of this criticism, we need to analyze what the standards are for making evaluations about news stories. In this section, we will look at the three most often mentioned standards in some detail—objectivity, accuracy, and neutrality.

### Objectivity

The most often mentioned criterion of news quality is objectivity. There is a strong ethic of objectivity in journalism (Parenti, 1986), and Kaplan (2010) adds, “For over a century, the US press has embraced the ethic of objectivity as defining its core public mission” (p. 25).

The idea of objectivity, however, is a very general philosophical concept that means a separateness from the object being observed so that the object is perceived accurately and that the perception is not distorted by human limitations. This, of course, is an impossible standard for humans—even journalists—to achieve. When humans observe objects, their perceptions are always shaped by their expectations, their abilities, and their histories. Furthermore, journalists are limited by time constraints imposed by deadlines, by the size of the story they can write, by their network of sources, and by their ability to interview people and judge whether those people are telling the truth.

The use of objectivity as a standard for journalists is unrealistic. Journalists can never be purely objective. Even when they try to avoid being influenced by their biases, they cannot know all of their biases. And these unconscious biases serve to shape how they make their many daily decisions about what things to cover, what kinds of information to gather, how much information to gather, and how to assemble their research into a story.

### Accuracy

Accuracy seems to be a good criterion for judging the quality of news. It is typically obvious when a story reports facts that are wrong. If a story reports one fact and that fact is easy to check, then accuracy becomes a very useful criterion. But almost no news stories present only one fact, and this raises the issue of completeness. What if a story presents

20 facts and 19 are accurate? Does this make the entire story faulty? This is a difficult question to answer in general because if the one inaccurate fact is trivial, we could conclude that the entire story is accurate. But if the one inaccurate fact is central to the story, then it is likely that we would conclude that it does not matter that 95% of the facts were accurate, the story itself is inaccurate. You can see that the judgment about accuracy can soon become complicated.

### Completeness

Such an evaluation gets even more complicated when we start to think about facts that are not reported in a story; that is, what about a news story that reports lots of facts accurately but all of those facts are peripheral to the story, while the facts that are central to the story are left out? Presenting only a partial story is a type of distortion that is not usually regarded as bias because there does not seem to be an intention by the journalist to mislead the audience. Instead, the journalist has run out of time or does not have enough sources or ability to tell the entire story. Even though the journalist is not trying to mislead the audience, people exposed to a partial story are still shown a distorted picture of the occurrence, and therefore the story cannot be regarded as being objective.

One form of a partial story is when a major story stops getting covered, even though important events continue to occur. An example of this is the \$21 billion settlement by the tobacco industry that was covered during negotiations. But then the press stopped covering the story as the tobacco companies began paying billions of dollars to state governments between 2000 and 2002. Why would it be important to cover how the money was used? The settlement specified that states should spend the money for health care and to educate people, especially children, about the health risks of smoking. But only 5% of this total payout went toward anti-smoking efforts as it was intended. Instead, the money was funneled to all sorts of pork barrel projects across the 50 states; in North Carolina, much of the money went to subsidize tobacco farmers. These subsidies did not go to help tobacco farmers transition to other crops; instead, much of the money went to modernize their tobacco farms (Mnookin, 2002). Also, the press did a poor job of educating the public about where the money for the payout was coming from. Most people know that it is from the major tobacco companies, but most people do not know where the tobacco companies get much of the revenue that they use to make their payments to states in the tobacco settlement. Each of the major tobacco companies now controls hundreds of brands of all kinds of food products in supermarkets. So the payout was likely financed by a rise in prices of crackers, cereals, peanut butter, dog food, soups, and so on.

Another type of partial story is when a journalist tells a story from a single point of view. American journalists typically tell their stories from the point of view that America is always justified in its military actions, and those we aggress against are not justified. For example, Fishman and Marvin (2003) analyzed 21 years of photographs appearing on the front pages of the *New York Times*. They focused on violence and found that non-U.S. agents were represented as more explicitly violent than U.S. agents and that the latter are associated with disguised modes of violence more often than the former. The recurring image of non-U.S. violence is that of order brutally ruptured or enforced. By contrast, images of U.S. violence are less alarming and suggest order without cruelty. Thus, violence is associated more with out-group status than with in-group status.



## Context

Context is what helps audiences understand the meaning of the event in the news stories. Without context, the story has ambiguous meaning. For example, a story could report that Mr. Jones was arrested for murder this morning. That fact can convey very different meanings if we vary the context. Let's say that the journalist put in some historical context that Mr. Jones had murdered several people a decade ago, was caught and convicted, served time in prison, but was recently let go because of a ruling of an inexperienced and liberal judge. In contrast, let's say that Mr. Jones, one of the candidates running for mayor, was arrested despite the fact that police had in custody another man who possessed the probable murder weapon and who had confessed. The fact of the arrest takes on a very different meaning within different contexts.

This raises an important question: Can a news story be accurate if the journalist provides no context? Most scholars would answer, no. For example, Bagdikian (1992) argues that the most significant form of bias in journalism appears when a story is reported with a lack of context. The fear is that context is only the journalist's opinion, and opinion must be avoided in "objective reporting." Bagdikian continues, "But there is a difference between partisanship and placing facts in a reasonably informed context of history and social circumstance. American journalism has not made a workable distinction between them" (p. 214). He says that "there are powerful commercial pressures to remove social significance from standard American news. Informed social-economic context has unavoidable political implications which may disturb some in the audience whose world view differs" (p. 214). So the media report undisputed facts about things but ignore the meaning behind the facts and, in so doing, severely limit our ability to see that underlying meaning.

Although contextual material is very important, many stories present very little context (Parenti, 1986). For example, the many stories about crimes that we see reported every day are each limited to the facts of that one crime. Rarely is there any context about crime rates or how the particular crime reported in the story matches some kind of a pattern—historical, social, economic, and so forth. Crime stories are like popcorn for the mind. Each story is small, simple, and relatively the same. These stories give our mind the sense that it is consuming

information, but they have little nutritional value. After years of munching on this information, we have come to believe that most crime is violent street crime and that it is increasing all around us. But the real-world figures indicate that most crime is white collar (embezzlement, fraud, forgery, identity theft, etc.) and property crimes (larceny, shoplifting, etc.) rather than violent crime (murder, rape, armed robbery, etc.). Yet it is the more rare violent crime that gets reported because it is more deviant and thus more likely to capture the attention of the news audience.

Asking journalists to build more context into their stories presents two problems. First, journalists vary widely in talent, and it takes a

very talented and experienced journalist to be able to dig out a great deal of relevant contextual information on deadline. Second, when journalists have the responsibility of

constructing the context, they may be manifesting a lot of power to define the meaning of the event for the readers. Journalists can substantially change the meaning if they leave out (whether intentionally or through an oversight) an important contextual element.

Let's examine an example of a story reporting facts that are accurate but that leads readers to a wrong conclusion because the reporter does not provide an adequate context for those facts. In 2004, *Los Angeles Times* reporter Larry Stewart wrote a story from a report by a group calling itself the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport. In his newspaper story, Stewart (2004) reported that the report said that it found six of the schools in the 2004 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Sweet 16 basketball tournament had graduation rates no higher than 50%. This leaves the reader with the impression that universities (at least six) were exploiting their athletes. But what the reporter did not put in the story is that, nationwide, only about 50% of students who enter a 4-year program as a freshman end up graduating with a bachelor's degree. Therefore, the problem is not with basketball teams having unusually low graduation rates, which is what the story implied. The real issue is the relatively large dropout rate of all college students. Also, the reporter said that the report complained that only 3 of the 16 teams had an African American head coach. Why is this number bad? What should the number be? If the number should be proportional to the number of African Americans in the United States, then we should expect 12% of coaches to be African American, and that would make it two coaches. Or instead, should the number of African American coaches be proportional to the number of African American players on NCAA basketball teams? This would be a much larger percentage, but then this raises the issue that perhaps African Americans are overrepresented on these basketball teams and that the problem is that there needs to be better representation from non-African Americans on NCAA basketball teams—why are there not many more Hispanic or Asian American players? The determination of adequate representation is a complex issue. If news organizations see themselves as having the function of informing their audiences so those people can make good decisions, then journalists must provide more detailed contexts. If, instead, a journalist writes a superficial story that features only a controversy, then this serves to stir up negative emotions instead of educating audiences.

## COMPARE & CONTRAST

### NEWS OBJECTIVITY AND NEWS QUALITY

**Compare:** News objectivity and news quality are *the same* in the following ways:

- Both are criteria people apply to make assessments of the news.
- Both are abstract standards that are difficult to articulate.

**Contrast:** News objectivity and news quality are *different* in the following ways:

- News objectivity is an impossible criterion to achieve because it requires journalists to perceive news events without bias or limitations (such as time deadlines, access to sources, etc.).
- News quality refers to criteria such as truthfulness, neutrality, and accuracy, which are possible but still difficult criteria for journalists to meet.



iStock/Getty

A lack of context is the most significant form of bias in journalism.





Bloomberg/Getty Images

Who would you consider to be a more qualified journalist: Katie Couric (pictured), or John Oliver of HBO?

### Lack of Bias

Bias—like fabrication—is a willful distortion on the part of a journalist, but it is difficult for audiences to recognize when this is occurring. This highlights the distinction between actual bias (where a journalist willfully distorts a news story) and perceived bias (when audiences think that the story is slanted). Examples of actual bias in traditional news organizations are rare but this does not mean that the stories themselves are free of bias. Jensen (1997) points out that there is little evidence of a conscious conspiracy among journalists to censor the news.

News is too diverse, fast-breaking, and unpredictable to be controlled by some sinister conservative eastern establishment media cabal. However, there is a congruence of attitudes and interests on the part of the owners and managers of mass media organizations. That non-conspiracy conspiracy, when combined with a variety of other factors, leads to the systematic failure of the news media to inform the public. While it is not an overt form of censorship, such as the kind we observe in some other societies, it is nonetheless real and often equally as dangerous to the public's well-being. (pp. 14–15)

In his book *Censored: The News That Didn't Make the News—And Why*, Jensen (1995) describes many seemingly important stories that did not receive much, if any, coverage by the news media. For example, in 1985, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found that more than 240,000 people were in danger in 258 work sites around the United States. The purpose of NIOSH is to monitor safety in the workplace and to inform workers when they are in serious danger of contracting life-threatening diseases from exposure to chemicals and other hazardous materials in the workplace. By 1995, NIOSH had informed less than 30% of the people who it had found to be in daily danger a decade earlier. Thus, NIOSH knew that 170,000 people were working in highly risky environments every day and let 10 years go by without telling them. The news media ignored this governmental negligence for more than a decade.

Those who follow the media closely often complain about a liberal or a conservative news bias, or they say that there is too much negativism. In an analysis of Gallup public opinion data, it was found that more than half of Americans felt that the media were

In summary, you can see that accuracy is a complex concept with many layers of meaning. This makes it complicated to use as a standard for judging the quality of a news story.

### Neutrality

As a criterion for the quality of news, neutrality means that the story is free from journalistic bias or editorializing. This means that the journalist does not slant the story to convince the audience to think a certain way; that is, the journalist focuses on informing and not on persuading. Neutrality is observed in lack of bias and balance.

influenced by advertisers, business corporations, Democrats, the federal government, liberals, the military, and Republicans (Becker, Kosicki, & Jones, 1992). The newspaper industry itself has found the same thing in its own surveys. For example, a survey by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found that most people believe the media have political leanings (Jeffres, 1994).

Perception of news bias has been explained by in-group/out-group differences. Citizens' political leanings influence how much variation they perceive; politically dissimilar media are seen as having a more uniform partisan bias and politically similar media are seen as having more diverse partisan biases (Stroud, Muddiman, & Lee, 2014).

What is interesting is that conservatives feel that the media have a generally liberal leaning, whereas liberals feel that the media are conservative. Conservatives complain that most news reporters are liberal in their own views, and these liberal journalists show their bias when they present their stories. In contrast, liberals feel that conservative commentators have too much power and have redefined the American agenda to stigmatize liberals.

In the early days of the United States, most newspapers were founded by people who had a clear political viewpoint that they wanted to promote. Towns had multiple newspapers, each one appealing to a different niche of political thinking. Newspapers were biased politically, and the bias was clearly labeled. But by the late 1800s, newspapers had shifted from a political focus to a business focus, with the goal of building the largest circulation. To do this, newspapers lost their political edge so as to avoid offending any potential readers. This business focus still underlies the mass media. Decisions are made to build audiences, not to espouse a political point of view. Sometimes, arguing for a particular political point of view can be used as a tool to build an audience, but these instances are usually found within those media with a niche orientation. Instead, the large national news organizations such as the television networks and the large newspapers try to present both sides of any political issue so as to appear objective and balanced because they want to appeal to all kinds of people across the political spectrum. This conclusion has been supported by D'Alessio and Allen (2000), who conducted a meta-analysis of 59 quantitative studies of news bias in presidential campaigns since 1948. They found no evidence of bias with newspapers or magazines and only an "insubstantial" bias in network television news.

Bernard Goldberg, an Emmy award-winning reporter who worked for CBS news for 30 years, published a book entitled *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* in 2003. Goldberg argued that the news is slanted with a liberal bias rather than providing objective, disinterested reporting. Written in a personal style, Goldberg tells insider stories about how the news is gathered and reported that show how almost everyone working in television news fosters a liberal bias in their reporting.

It is important to be sensitive to whether particular news vehicles present either a liberal or conservative bias. But it is far more important to be sensitive to the broader bias underlying all news vehicles—that is, the bias of commercialism, entertainment, and superficiality. If all we do is debate the liberal-conservative issue when it comes to news bias, we are in danger of missing the larger picture that the news media are providing us with a worldview that determines not only what we think about (as in agenda setting) but also what we think, how we think, and who we are.



Lack of bias means truthfulness. Pettegree (2014) points out that the earliest concern about quality of news concerned truthfulness: “Merchants, in particular, had a keen awareness of the value of information, and the dangers of acting on false rumour” (p. 3). This led to the importance of corroboration of facts across several sources so that lies and falsehoods could be weeded out.

Truthfulness also requires that journalists not make up facts to fill in the gaps of their stories or to “sweeten” their stories to make them more attractive or compelling to audiences. Jamieson and Waldman (2003) point out that sometimes journalists are tempted to tell a good story and ignore facts that get in the way of telling that story.

Fortunately, there are not many examples of fabrication, but the few major instances that have been revealed have really damaged journalism’s credibility. In an article published in the *American Journalism Review*, Lori Robertson (2001) highlighted almost two dozen high-profile acts of ethical violations that resulted in the firing of journalists. The problem seems to be in all kinds of print vehicles, including well-known magazines (*Time*, *New Republic*, *Business Week*), large newspapers (*Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*), and small newspapers (*Myrtle Beach Sun News* in South Carolina, *Bloomsburg Press Enterprise* in Pennsylvania, and *Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer* in Kentucky), and cuts across all kinds of reporters, including sports, business, general news, columnists, and arts critics.

Perhaps the most publicized ethical problems were perpetrated by Jayson Blair, a 27-year-old reporter on the fast track at the *New York Times*. In order to enhance his career, he tried to write stories that would be so interesting that they would be selected for publication in the most prominent places in the newspaper. However, in order to write such stories, he liberally embellished the facts, even going so far as to make up whole stories. When *Times* editors finally began checking his stories, they found many fabrications and quickly fired Blair. But the damage to the credibility of the *Times* was done, and the editors felt compelled to publish a 14,000-word apologia on its front page (Wolf, 2003).

Sometimes newsmakers will fabricate facts and present them to journalists who must then decide whether to publish the fabricated facts or to expose them as being false. This is especially the case in political campaigns where the public relations staffs of candidates often manufacture “facts” to strengthen the position of their candidate. The 2012 presidential campaign was a good one for fact checkers like PolitiFact and FactCheck.org, which uncovered many instances of bending the truth as well as outright lies and brought these to the attention of the public. However, this exposure seemed to have had little effect on either voters or the campaigns. For example, the Romney campaign claimed that Barack Obama was ditching welfare work requirements. This was found to be false and reported as false by the fact checkers. However, when this campaign lie was exposed, it did not harm Romney’s campaign. Either the electorate did not hear that it was a lie or did not care, because polling numbers were found to increase support for Romney as a result of the claim. When Romney pollster Neil Newhouse was confronted with the lie, he replied, “We’re not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact checkers” (Poniewozik, 2012).

### Balance

The criterion of balance means that journalists present all sides of an issue in an equal manner. Again, this is a simple concept that becomes complicated as we analyze it. If an issue is simple, it has only two sides, each of which has an equal number of potential

arguments to support it. If we believe that issues meet these conditions, then we can design a relatively simple test for balance. For example, Fico and Soffin (1995) looked at balance in newspaper coverage of controversial issues such as abortion, condoms in schools, and various governmental bills. Balance was assessed by examining whether both sides of an issue were illuminated in terms of sources interviewed for both sides and whether assertions for both sides were in the headline, first paragraph, and graphics. They found that 48% of stories analyzed were one-sided; that is, a second side was not covered at all. They counted the number of story elements that illuminated the different sides of each issue and found that, on average, one side received three more elements compared to the other side—therefore, the average story was imbalanced. Only 7% of stories were completely balanced. The authors concluded that professional capability or ethical self-consciousness are lacking in many journalists.

Most issues, however, have more than two sides. For example, let’s take abortion, which is almost always presented as having two and only two sides. But when we start asking questions about when life begins—conception, zygote, when a child is able to function on his or her own if induced, birth—then we can see there are multiple positions that can be taken on this issue and the criterion of balance would require that all positions be acknowledged in a news story.

Another problem with achieving balance arises when we realize that not all positions on an issue have an equal amount of potentially supporting information. For example, let’s say journalists must cover a story where a person argues that the Earth is flat. Must those journalists work extra hard to find enough facts to support the flat Earth claim in order to write a good news story? Do those journalists have an obligation to make both sides of the “controversy” appeal equally credible? Clearly, in this example, if journalists give credence to the flat Earth claim equal to the spherical Earth claim, they will be misleading their audiences. The problem then shifts to determining which issues are equally balanced controversies and which are not and who should be trusted to determine which is which.

In summary, while it is important that we continually make good evaluations of news stories, all of the criteria we could use to engage in such evaluations require us to think through the complexity that each presents.

## HOW CAN WE BECOME MORE MEDIA LITERATE WITH NEWS?

The information we acquire every day from what we consider news providers molds our view of the world. The gradual accumulation of information about what we think is important shapes our beliefs about how things work and about how things *should* work. These beliefs become the standards we use when evaluating people, events, and places. Thus over the long run, our exposure patterns to news are about more than acquiring information about current occurrences; it is more fundamentally an unavoidable process of constructing knowledge structures, beliefs, and attitudes. Therefore the more we think about our exposure patterns and the implications of those patterns, the more we can gain control over the process and make it work in our favor. Becoming more media literate involves the periodic assessment of exposure and quality.



## Exposure Matters

The traditional news media cover the same events and present their stories in a very similar way. Thus if you wanted to be informed about national or international events every day, it doesn't matter whether you watch the ABC, CBS, or NBC evening news or read a daily newspaper—you would be exposed to the same stories. This pattern led scholars to observe that the traditional media set the agenda each day by deciding what to cover and what to ignore. Agenda-setting theory explains that the media are selective in what they present as news and what they emphasize as being the most important news. This selection and emphasis set the agenda; that is, the public accepts what the media highlight as most important (see McCombs & Reynolds, 2009; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). While the theory was created to explain how the news shapes public opinion for political campaigns and issues, it has moved into a broader realm beyond politics over the years. McCombs and Reynolds (2009) also say that beyond the “specifics of politics and election campaigns, the larger political culture is defined by a basic civic agenda of beliefs about politics and elections. Exploration of yet other cultural agendas is moving agenda-setting theory far beyond its traditional realm of public affairs” (p. 13).

In the past, we could control whether we exposed ourselves to traditional news media or not, but if we did, then the control shifted to the traditional news media which told us what was important. With the rise of nontraditional news media, we now have many alternative sources of news. Thus, the control of what we are exposed to shifts to us. Our exposure decisions are likely to be shaped by what we consider to be news. To think of this choice, consider the dimension of global to personal. At one pole of this dimension is global, which consists of patterns of events worldwide; this exposure takes you to countries, cultures, and historical periods of which you have little or no direct contact. The next “neighborhood” along this dimension is national, which consists of events taking place in your home country where you are likely to know the language, culture, and history and want to be kept up to date with current happenings. The next neighborhood is your region, which is likely the geographical area that you frequently visit on a regular basis. At the other end of this dimension is the personal pole. The news here is not limited by geography but by your sense of personal contacts; that is, you desire to know what is happening to people with whom you have a personal relationship. Where you focus your news exposure experiences along this dimension is determined in large part by your perspective on the news. If your perspective is outward directed, then you are likely to be highly curious about things that are foreign to you. In contrast, if your perspective is inward directed, then you are likely driven to search for exposures that involve personal contact with individuals. Media literacy is not associated with either pole of this dimension; instead, media literacy is reflected in the scope of your perspective. That is, the more neighborhoods that generate curiosity in you, the more broad will be your exposure. Thus media literacy warns against a narrow focus. If we limit ourselves to a narrow perspective that focuses only on our personal social networks, then we become blind to how governments work, the shape of the economy, and what is happening in other parts of the world.

Let's see where you are in your exposure patterns (see Exercise 9.1). First, rate how your news exposure is divided among the four neighborhoods. Then move on to the

questions about your curiosity and knowledge to see how those differences are related to your exposure patterns.

The culture is becoming fragmented into smaller and smaller interest groups, and the people within each group seem to have a different need for news. Thus over time, the common experience is evaporating; that is, there is a diminishing knowledge base that we all share. Instead we each have a different set of facts about the world, which leads to a multiplicity of beliefs and attitudes. Thus when the public must make a choice about electing political leaders or supporting issues, there are many groups, each with a different approach, shouting at each other that they are right and all others are wrong. Thus the political discourse gets more diverse, more loud, more polarized, and less tolerant or understanding of other points of view.

It is more difficult to see commonalities. However, one likely commonality is the movement toward a culture of fear. This is because news outlets, regardless of niche audience, use the tool of triggering emotions to attract audiences and hold their attention. Fear is an easy emotion to trigger. News outlets focus on deviance and this triggers a fear in audiences that their well-being and lifestyle may be threatened by criminal activity, higher taxes and fewer services, a faltering economy leading to layoffs, selfish or incompetent leaders making bad decisions, and even bad weather. Rarely does any one of these individual messages paralyze us with fear, but over time the gradual reminder of risks and threats builds in each of us an uneasy fear that things are getting worse somehow.

## Quality Matters

If we don't periodically evaluate the quality of our news sources, we run the risk of believing we are well informed when in reality we are not. Check out Table 9.2. Notice that most of the items in the table are concerned with accuracy and credibility. But quality also refers to scope. Because of selective exposure, we are likely to gravitate to stories that confirm our existing beliefs. It is comforting to continually be reminded that other people think the same way we do. And it is easier to avoid the dissonance that typically arises when we are presented with evidence that our beliefs are weak or wrong.

Interactivity with news has created a paradox. On the one hand, interactivity makes features available that draw people into news and make it more useful to them; these features include searchable archives, hyperlinks, discussion forums, and easy downloading of information. These things bring people closer to the news (Brown, 2001). On the other hand, the interactive features require considerable cognitive and emotional cost by demanding more patience, expertise, and cognitive resources that increase the likelihood of confusion and frustration (Bucy, 2004). Because we often get involved in interactive experiences with news, we think of the information we experience in these interactions as highly accurate, but this is not always the case.

Now, let's see how well you can apply the insights you learned in this chapter. Begin with Exercise 9.2 and think about the skills and knowledge structures that help you process meaning of news stories. Then move on to Exercise 9.3, which asks you to use those skills and knowledge structures to analyze and evaluate a news story. Then if you are ready for a more advanced experience of analyzing the news, do Exercises 9.4 and 9.5 to see how well you can see beyond the elements of a news story and picture the practices used by the journalists to work around constraints.



**TABLE 9.2 ■ Types of Skills and Knowledge Needed to Deal With News and Information Messages in a Media-Literate Manner<sup>1</sup>**

	Skills	Knowledge
<b>Cognitive</b>	<p>Ability to analyze a news story to identify key points of information</p> <p>Ability to compare and contrast key points of information in the news story with facts in your knowledge structure</p> <p>Ability to evaluate the veracity of information in the story</p> <p>Ability to evaluate if the story presents a balanced presentation of the news event/issue</p>	<p>Knowledge of topic from many sources (media and real world)</p>
<b>Emotional</b>	<p>Ability to analyze the feelings of people in the news story</p> <p>Ability to put oneself into the position of different people in the story</p> <p>Ability to extend empathy to other people contiguous to the news story</p>	<p>Recall from personal experience how it would feel to be in the situation in the story</p>
<b>Aesthetic</b>	<p>Ability to analyze the craft and artistic elements in the story</p> <p>Ability to compare and contrast the artistry used to tell this story with that used to tell other stories</p>	<p>Knowledge of writing, graphics, photography, and so on</p> <p>Knowledge of good and bad stories and the elements that contributed to those qualities</p>
<b>Moral</b>	<p>Ability to analyze the moral elements in a story</p> <p>Ability to compare and contrast this story with other stories</p> <p>Ability to evaluate the ethical responsibilities of the journalists on this story</p>	<p>Knowledge of criticism of news and knowledge of the meaning of bias, objectivity, balance, and fairness</p> <p>Knowledge of other stories on this topic and how those journalists achieved balance and fairness</p> <p>Highly developed moral code for journalism</p>

## SUMMARY

The idea of what is news has undergone many changes over time and has influenced different perspectives, particularly the political philosophy, traditional journalism, news-working, economic, and personal perspectives. These changes also lead us to question what a journalist is and how we should judge the quality of news. These questions are especially important now that we are in the new media environment in which nontraditional news outlets are so prevalent, so niche oriented, and open to so much interactive participation among audiences, journalists, and newsmakers.

## Further Reading

Henry, N. (2007). *American carnival: Journalism under siege in an age of new media*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. (326 pages with index)

This book is written by a journalist who is concerned about how traditional journalism can survive in the new media environment.

Jensen, C. (1995). *Censored: The news that didn't make the news—and why*. New York, NY: Four Walls Eight Windows. (332 pages with index)

Begun by the author in 1976, Project Censored invites journalists, scholars, librarians, and the general public to nominate stories that they feel were not reported adequately during that year. From the hundreds of submissions, the list is reduced to 25 based on “the amount of coverage the story received, the national or international importance of the issue, the reliability of the source, and the potential impact the story may have” (p. 15). A blue-ribbon panel of judges then selects the top 10 censored stories for the year.

Mindich, T. Z. (2005). *Tuned out: Why Americans under 40 don't follow the news*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. (172 pages with index)

The author clearly documents that the last two generations of Americans have exhibited drastic declines in attention to news in the traditional media. Furthermore, only 11% of young people even attend to the news on the Internet. He develops some explanations for why news has become so irrelevant to the younger generations, then speculates about how this will impact the political system and society in general.

Paul, R. P., & Elder, L. (2006). *How to detect media bias & propaganda* (3rd ed.). Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking. (46 pages with glossary)

This short book focuses on critical thinking and the news. It presents a lot of practical advice on how to think about news stories critically and thereby protect oneself from bias, especially from novelty and sensationalism.

Roth, A. L., & Huff, M. (Eds.) (2017) *Censored 2018: The top censored stories and media analysis of 2016–2017*. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.

This book presents 25 important news stories that were not covered at all or very little. It also includes seven other chapters that were written by social critics, such as Ralph Nader, that try to explain why the press favors certain types of stories while ignoring others that are potentially far more important to cover.

Schudson, M. (2003). *The sociology of news*. New York, NY: Norton. (261 pages, including end notes and index)

Schudson sharpens and clarifies many points in the argument that journalists “not only report reality but create it” (p. 2). He digs deep into the issue and offers explanations about how the news construction occurs and the effect those constructions have on the public. After providing a brief history of journalism, he identifies two criticisms as being especially salient today. The first is that news coverage of politics is critical and this promotes cynicism in the public. Second, news itself has gone soft; that is, it is a mix of information with entertainment rather than a legitimate effort to explain complex situations.



## Keeping Up to Date

*Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (<https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hbem20>)

*Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* (<http://journals.sagepub.com/home/jmq>)

These are scholarly journals that publish research that examines how news is presented in the content of the mass media, particularly newspapers and television

### News Blogs

There are thousands of news blogs. Many are owned by major news organizations such as CNN (<http://news.blogs.cnn.com>) and the *New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/blogs/directory.html>). Another popular news blog is the *Huffington Post* (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com>), which was

started by Arianna Huffington independent of any news organization but was bought by AOL in 2011.

### WikiLeaks (<https://wikileaks.org>)

Founded in 2007, WikiLeaks is a not-for-profit media organization that provides a secure and anonymous way for sources to leak information to the public. It relies on a network of volunteers from around the world. Leakers are typically whistle-blowers who work in private businesses and government agencies where they feel their organization is doing something harmful to the public so they steal the private information of that organization and make it available for the public to view.

## EXERCISE 9.1

### ASSESSING YOUR NEWS EXPOSURE

1. Think about the four neighborhoods along the global-personal dimension. What percentage of your time each day is spent searching out news on each of these neighborhoods?  
 \_\_\_\_\_% searching for news on international events  
 \_\_\_\_\_% searching for news on national events  
 \_\_\_\_\_% searching for news on regional events  
 \_\_\_\_\_% searching for news on personal events  
 These percentages should sum to 100%.

2. Rate your curiosity about each of these four neighborhoods. That is, how interested are you typically every day to find out more detail about what is happening in each of these four neighborhoods? A rating of 10 means you are driven to find out everything; a rating of 0 means you have absolutely no interest in anything in that neighborhood.

Degree of curiosity about news on international events: \_\_\_\_\_

Degree of curiosity about news on national events: \_\_\_\_\_

Degree of curiosity about news on regional events: \_\_\_\_\_

Degree of curiosity about news on personal events: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Rate your existing knowledge base about each of these four neighborhoods. That is, how much information do you feel you have attained about the people and history of events in each of these four neighborhoods? A rating of 10 means you feel you are expert in your knowledge; a rating of 0 means you

know absolutely nothing about the people and events in that neighborhood.

Existing knowledge about news on international events: \_\_\_\_\_

Existing knowledge about news on national events: \_\_\_\_\_

Existing knowledge about news on regional events: \_\_\_\_\_

Existing knowledge about news on personal events: \_\_\_\_\_

## EXERCISE 9.2

### PREPARING TO ANALYZE A NEWS STORY

1. Take a blank sheet of paper and draw the structure of Table 9.2 on it. That is, create two columns: label one column "Skills" and the other column "Knowledge." Now create four rows and label them as "Cognitive," "Emotional," "Aesthetic," and "Moral." Your table should have eight blocks.
2. Think about an important issue that is triggering current events. For now, don't worry about seeking out any news stories on this issue or the events currently taking place. Instead, this is about the issue itself and what kinds of skills and knowledge you would need to get the most out of news coverage.
3. Write down the skills and knowledge you would need to achieve a basic minimal understanding of a story on this topic. Think in terms of your everyday viewing of news, where you just want to monitor the surface facts to keep up with the day's major events.
4. Think about the skills and knowledge you would need to achieve a much more complete understanding about the meaning of the event in the news story. Think in terms of what it would take for you to be an expert on the event.
5. Look at what you have written in response to question 4. Does it differ much from what you have written in response to question 3? How much detail do you have in each of the eight blocks? With which blocks did you struggle the most? Why do you think you struggled there?
6. Compare the results of your tables with those of a friend. Did your friend have more details in certain blocks compared to yours? If so, did that additional detail extend your thinking? The more people's work you compare, the more you can see a range of differences.



## EXERCISE 9.3

### ANALYZING AND EVALUATING A NEWS STORY

After you have completed Exercise 9.2, find a news story on the topic you analyzed. It would be good to record the story so that you can look at it more than once.

1. How accurate are the individual facts in the story?
2. How complete is the set of facts?  
Are there obvious facts missing (who, what, when, where, why, and how)?
3. Are the facts presented in a meaningful context?  
Is there a historical context?  
Are events in this story compared/contrasted to other similar events?
4. Is the presentation of facts descriptive or persuasive?  
Does the journalist's voice come through in the story or does it appear that the facts speak for themselves?

Do you feel like you are being led to a particular conclusion rather than left alone to make up your own mind?

Do you feel that the journalist has an agenda?

5. Sources of information:  
Do you feel that the journalist used enough sources of information?  
Do you feel that the journalist used the best sources of information possible?
6. Do all the facts in the story confirm what you already knew or were you surprised by something?  
Does this story challenge you to think about things in a different way?  
Or does the story reinforce your existing beliefs and attitudes?

## EXERCISE 9.4

### INFERRING NEWS WORKERS' DECISIONS

Gather together three or four newspapers for the same day—the more the better.

1. Look at the composition of the first page across those newspapers, and think about the differences and similarities of the news perspectives.
  - a. What are the major stories in terms of placement and size?
  - b. What pictures and graphics are used? Are they used to present substance, or are they used merely to make the page more appealing to the eye?

- c. How much of the front pages is composed of non-news matter?
2. Read the major news stories.
  - a. What criteria must have been used to select them?
  - b. What types of elements are emphasized in the stories? What are the facts that make this story news? What facts provide background context?
  - c. Is the story balanced, or are obvious viewpoints ignored?
3. Look at the sections of the newspapers.
  - a. Which sections are there (such as sports, women, business, etc.)?
  - b. Look at how the space is allocated. How much space is given to ads? How much to hard news? How much to soft, entertainment-type news?
4. What happened within the last 24 hours that did not get covered?
5. In summary, which of these newspapers do you think is the best and why?
6. Later today, listen to some news on the radio and watch some on television. How is the news different in these media compared to newspapers?

## EXERCISE 9.5

### EXERCISING YOUR SKILLS

Think of some current event of interest to you. Now pretend you are an editor of an online newspaper. What elements would you want to have in the story?

1. What sources would you want to access?  
For people as sources, how will you go about getting access?  
For non-people (such as the records of government agencies and businesses), are these sources considered private? If so, how can you get access to them?
2. What facts and figures would you want to gather?  
List the questions you would ask.  
Does the order of the questions matter?
3. What historical contextual factors would you want?  
How far back should your coverage go?  
During that time period, what are the key events that your readers should know in order to appreciate the event that is currently happening that makes this news?
4. Would you want to include visuals (such as graphics, photographs, or video) in your story?  
If not, why?  
If so, which visuals do you consider important?  
If these visuals already exist, how will you get permission to use them?  
If these visuals do not already exist, how will you go about producing them?