

## CHAPTER 3

### **Definitions and Distinctions**

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# 3

## Definitions and Distinctions

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This chapter introduces the key terms and definitions used in this cognitive theory of media literacy. First, some terms foundational to the theory are defined. Then, seven pairs of constructs are defined through contrasts. Finally, the main construct of media literacy is defined through a synthesis of elements identified in the previous chapter.

### I. Definitions of Primary Terms

This theory of media literacy requires an acceptance of definitions for many fundamental terms. In everyday language, these terms are treated as primitive concepts, because people assume there is a shared meaning for them. However, in this theory, I do not treat these terms as primitive and prefer to offer particular definitions that may be different than the meaning held for them by some readers. A few of these terms are briefly defined in this section; then, those definitions are further elaborated in the next section dealing with key distinctions.

#### A. The Media

The media are the technological means of disseminating messages. They are usually categorized as being print (newspapers, books, magazines) or

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electronic (radio, CDs, film, television, computer). The media create vehicles as the means of delivering messages. For example, newspaper is a medium; *The New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* are vehicles. Television is a medium; *Friends*, *The Evening News*, and *The Sopranos* are vehicles.

There are two kinds of media: Mass and nonmass. This distinction has very little to do with the size of the audience, although that is how most people approach defining *mass*. Nor does it have much to do with the experience the audience has when receiving the messages, although this was the main criterion for defining a mass audience for a long time (for more detail on this, see Potter 2001, Chapter 12). Instead, *mass* has to do with the motives of the sender. In a mass medium, the sender's main intention is to condition audiences into a ritualistic mode of exposure; that is, senders are much less interested in coaxing people into one exposure than they are in trying to get people into a position where they will regularly be exposed to their messages. Senders attempt this conditioning by making the exposures efficient to the audience. Efficiency is achieved when the messages require as little cost to the audience as possible while delivering maximum payoffs. The greater the message efficiency, the greater the audience size. As the mass media increase the size of their audience, their revenues also grow.

### B. Information

The key component terms of information are *message*, *factual information*, and *social information*. Messages are those instruments that deliver information to us. Information is the content of those messages. Messages can be delivered in many different media: television, radio, CDs, video games, books, newspapers, magazines, Web sites, conversations, lectures, concerts, signs along the streets, labels on the products we buy, and so on. They can be large (an entire Hollywood movie) or small (one utterance by one character in a movie).

Messages are composed of two kinds of information: factual and social. A fact is something raw, unprocessed, and context-free. For example, when you watch the news and hear messages about terrorism, those messages are composed of facts, such as the World Trade Center in New York City was destroyed on September 11, 2001. On that day, the United States declared war on terrorism. The person suspected of planning the attack on the World Trade Center was Osama bin Laden. These statements are facts. Facts are discrete bits of information, such as names (of people, places, characters, etc.), definitions of terms, formula, lists, and the like.

Social information is composed of accepted beliefs that cannot be verified by authorities in the same way factual information can be. This is not

to say that social information is less valuable or less real to people. Social information is composed of techniques that people learn from observing social interactions. Examples of social information are rules about how to dress, talk, and act to be considered attractive, smart, athletic, hip, and so on.

The media present three general types of messages: news, entertainment, and ads. At base, the media's primary purpose for producing and distributing all messages is to construct audiences to generate revenue. The three types of messages differ in their secondary purposes to the media. With news messages, the intention of the media is to evoke in audience members a sense that they are being informed. With entertainment messages, the intention of the media is to evoke in audience members a sense that they are having pleasant emotional experiences, particularly of laughter, character attraction, or vicarious fear. With advertising messages, the intention of the media is to stimulate in companies paying for the advertising a sense that those ad messages are changing target audiences in terms of their cognitions, attitudes, or behaviors.

Over time, the media have blended two or more of their secondary intentions to achieve their primary purpose more effectively. This has had the result of making it more difficult for audience members to understand the nature of messages. For example, there are messages referred to as docudramas, which are based on actual happenings in real life (from the news) but which have been fictionalized to increase their entertainment value. Thus, audiences are given a sense that they are accruing more value from a single message, that is, receiving information about the real world plus being entertained. Also, there are messages referred to as info-mercials, which use a news show or informational talk show-type format but are paid advertising messages. Thus, audiences are given the sense that they are accruing valuable, objective information on a problem, which they are given an easy and compelling means to solve.

There are also genres of messages. For example, within the set of television entertainment messages there are comedies, dramas, sports, news/information, cartoons, music, and so on. Each has its subgenres. For example, within dramas, there are crime dramas, action/adventure, family drama, continuing drama, and so on.

## II. Key Distinctions

Seven distinctions are important to understanding this theory. First, there is a difference between partially specified and fully specified problems. Second,

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there is a difference between meaning matching and meaning construction. Third, exposure is different than attention. Fourth, there is the difference between automaticity and mindfulness. Fifth, there is the difference between information and knowledge. Sixth, there is a difference between schemas and knowledge structures. Seventh, there is the difference between competencies and skills.

### A. Fully Specified and Partially Specified Problems

When we interact with media messages, we are confronted with fully specified as well as partially specified problems. It is important that we know which is which so that we can properly select the best approach to solve the type of problem that confronts us.

A fully specified problem is one where all the information that is needed to solve the problem is available to the person, either in the problem itself or in the person's existing schema on the topic. When people use this full set of information, they can all arrive at the same answer, confident that they have solved the problem in the one correct way. For example, consider the following problem:

$$6 + 18 = \underline{\quad}$$

People who understand that 6 and 18 represent numbers with particular values and that the symbol + means addition can arrive at a solution of 24 with ease and have confidence that their solution is the correct one. This is what is called a fully specified problem, because the person has enough information to solve the problem.

Not all problems are fully specified. Some are partially specified. For example, consider this problem:

$$Y + Z = 24$$

This problem has two unknowns—Y and Z—so there is not enough information to arrive at one solution with confidence. You could answer 6 and 18, while I might answer 10 and 14, and we would both be right. There are also many other correct answers to this problem, because it was only partially specified. To most of us, each of these answers intuitively seems faulty. Because many answers are possible, can any one of them be regarded as “the solution?” We prefer a more fully specified problem, such as  $5 + Z = 24$ ; with this problem, we have enough information to know that Z is 19: There is one and only one correct answer.

We can solve fully specified problems with relative ease because we have memorized all the links we need, and the process of making sense is automatic. For example, learning to read in the first grade means learning to recognize symbols for letters, words, and sentences. The better we learn these symbols, the more automatically we can recognize and make sense of them. Learning to read in the elementary school years is largely a task of learning to recognize more and more of these symbols and associating them with their authority-determined definitions. When we see the sentence, “Jane throws the ball to Dick,” we need to recognize that *Jane* is a word that is a symbol for a particular girl in the story and that the other words are symbols for particular ideas. We also need to recognize that the sentence is constructed in a way that Jane is the subject who is doing something (throwing a ball) and that Dick is receiving the action. When we are in the first grade, it is a struggle to learn how to do all this, but once we do, we can do it again and again, each time with less effort. Also, everyone learns the same symbols and definitions. This is a convergent task, where all of us must learn the same rules for recognizing symbols and their definitions.

The task of meaning construction is more difficult than the task of meaning matching. The primary reason for this difference is that the task of meaning construction is always a partially specified problem; that is, the challenge always includes one or more of the following characteristics. First, we are not sure what the meaning should be. Second, the beginning point is unclear. Third, there is an incomplete process that links a clear beginning point with a clear goal as a solution to the problem; that is, steps are missing that we need to arrive at one solution.

Now let's bring this idea of fully and partially specified problems into the realm of media literacy. Reading a page in a book is a combination of both fully specified and partially specified problems. The fully specified problems are where to start reading (upper left corner), how to scan eyes (left to right across each successive line in turn), and what to look for (black lines are letters arranged in groups or words that are separated by spaces; words are arranged in sentences, sentences in paragraphs). We need to be able to recognize a word and match its meaning to the definition for the word. These are all meaning-matching tasks. By the time we complete elementary school, these tasks can be performed with relative ease. But this is not all there is to reading. We might be able to make sense of each word and even each sentence but not get much meaning from the effort of reading. To construct meaning beyond the individual words, we need to move beyond competencies and use skills. Skills help us construct our meaning about the theme of the story, how morally the characters behave, how aesthetically pleasing the story is, and how the characters' actions resonate with our own experiences.

## B. Meaning Matching and Meaning Construction

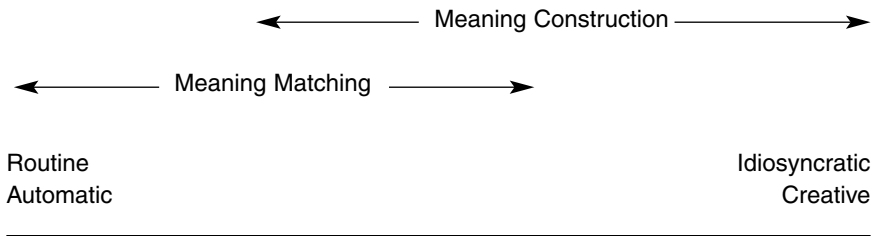
This distinction between meaning matching and meaning construction is a major one for this theory. With meaning matching, meaning is assumed to reside outside the person in an authority, such as a teacher, an expert, a dictionary, a textbook, or the like. The task for the person is to find those meanings and memorize them. Thus, parents and the educational institution are primarily responsible for housing the authoritative information and sharing it with the next generation. The media are also a major source of information, and for many people, the media have attained the status of an authoritative source, so people accept the meanings presented there.

While meaning matching is essentially a task composed of fully specified problems, meaning construction, in contrast, is composed of partially specified problems, and this makes it a much more challenging task. Meaning construction is a process wherein people transform messages they take in and create meaning for themselves. Many meanings can be constructed from any media message, and furthermore, there are many ways to go about constructing that meaning. Thus, people cannot learn a complete set of rules to accomplish this; instead, they need to be guided by their own information goals and use well-developed skills to creatively construct a path to reach their goals.

The two processes are not discrete; they are intertwined. To construct meaning, a person has to first recognize symbols and understand the sense in which they 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.

To understand how this distinction is important for media literacy, we must focus on how people regard a task of information processing. Figure 3.1 shows that both meaning matching and meaning construction are continua, and they each can be plotted on a larger continuum of how people regard the task. On the left side are tasks that are fairly routine; that is, they are familiar and can be performed with high accuracy and little effort. An example would be reading simple sentences and being able to recognize words and their designated meaning. On the right extreme are tasks that are idiosyncratic; that is, they have never been encountered before and are unusual; there are no algorithms that can be learned to solve these problems. They must be solved in a creative manner.

Notice that the meaning-matching task is not a point on the routine-idiosyncratic continuum; meaning matching is a continuum of challenges. While some of the challenges can be met in a relatively automatic manner, others require more effort. These more challenging meaning-matching tasks



**Figure 3.1** Meaning Matching and Meaning Construction

occur when symbol recognition is not yet learned well or when a symbol is ambiguous. Also, a symbol may have more than one meaning so a person has the additional task—beyond recognizing a symbol and associating its definition—of selecting among the definitions to choose the one most appropriate, given the context. Notice, too, that the meaning-construction task occupies a range on the routine-idiosyncratic continuum. Some meaning constructions require more effort and creativity than others.

Finally, notice that there is an overlap between the two processes. In many tasks of information processing, people regard the task as one of meaning matching and try to find an automatic association of a message with a definition, when they would be better off making the effort to treat the task as one of meaning construction. The challenge to be more media literate rests in this mid-continuum area. The constant flow of media messages motivates people to be more efficient than accurate and hence to look for automatic ways of processing idiosyncratic messages. Thus, they use shortcuts to do this, and these shortcuts allow them to achieve higher efficiency. But the danger is that people frequently then construct faulty meaning. To avoid this danger, they need to expend the effort to treat these tasks as meaning construction and avoid shortcuts.

The most fundamental of all barriers that hinder people from becoming more media literate is treating meaning-construction problems as if they were simple meaning-matching problems. When this happens, people think that there are correct convergent meanings that they need to learn. Because they have not learned them, they go to the media to find them. They look for news and accept the constructions offered by “experts” as the one and only meaning. They look for political pundits and accept those positions as facts. They look at how characters in fictional stories live their lives and memorize that social information so they can use it, without adaptation, in living their own lives. After years of schooling, people have learned well how to go to sources outside themselves for information and acquire that information as solutions



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to what they see as fully specified problems. People are less comfortable in regarding these as partially specified problems, which would require them to search out a range of information, carefully analyze it for usefulness, evaluate the various claims, then synthesize their own opinions or conclusions. It is much easier to accept the opinions and conclusions of others.

### C. Exposure and Attention

In everyday language, *exposure* is a term that is often used synonymously with the term *attention*, but in this theory, I draw an important distinction between the two terms. Exposure refers to being in physical proximity to a media message such that a person is in contact with that message. Attention is a conscious awareness of the message. Thus, attention is encompassed within the idea of exposure, that is, a person cannot attend to a message without being exposed to it. However, exposure is broader than attention because people could be exposed to messages without attending to them.

Exposure is not a unitary construct. In this theory, there are three modes of exposure: active searching, scanning, and screening. They differ in motive and amount of attention. Active searching is driven by a conscious desire for a particular message; attention is high as people develop their searching strategy, monitor its success, and continually make adaptations to achieve the goal. Scanning, like searching, begins with an awareness of a goal. Unlike searching, however, scanning does not require a particular question to motivate it. Instead, scanning is motivated by a general need, such as a need for entertainment or for information.

Screening is a message-monitoring state that requires the least amount of effort, hence attention. It begins with the default of automatically ignoring messages, that is, screening them out. There is no conscious goal or strategy. The screening out continues automatically with no effort until some element in a message breaks through people's default screen and captures their attention. The switch into the attention mode is usually automatic; that is, something in the message triggered the attention. Thus, message designers are in control of the screening process, because they can condition triggers into the minds of audience members then place certain elements in messages to set off the triggers.

### D. Automaticity and Mindfulness

This distinction refers to the degree of awareness in the processing of information. Automaticity refers to cognitive activity that occurs outside of consciousness; that is, it is mindlessness (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 283).

Mindlessness is a state where a person is not especially alert, thoughtful, or creative. Although the person is awake (not unconscious as if asleep or in a coma), the person is not actively thinking through decisions; instead, the person's mind is on automatic pilot where it executes habitual routines with very little mental effort. Automatic processing, according to Posner and Snyder (1975), must meet three criteria: (a) it must occur without intention, (b) it must occur without involving conscious awareness, and (c) it must not interfere with other mental activity.

For most people, driving a car is an automatic task. However, when we first learn to drive, it can be an overwhelming cognitive experience. With practice over time, however, we do not think about all the hand motions we make when we get in the car, turn it on, and get it moving. We do not think about all the visual information we process that guides us to drive safely and arrive at our destination accurately. People who drive to work each day rarely remember any of the details or hundreds of decisions they made on a particular commute. When we know a routine well, we no longer pay attention to individual components of the routine; we accomplish a wide variety of encoding tasks without much bothering our intentional, voluntary, effortful, conscious selves.

When we are in a state of automaticity, we can perform tasks with little effort or attention. Rogers, Rousseau, and Fisk (1999) explain:

After extensive and consistent practice, some task components may become automatized. As a result, because they no longer require step-by-step application, they are performed faster, are more efficient, and are generally more accurate. Automatized task components generally do not require devotion of attentional resources and, hence, may be performed in parallel with other tasks. Another characteristic of automatic processes is that, once initiated they tend to run to completion unless a conscious effort is made to inhibit them. (p. 39)

The state of automaticity is the opposite of the state of mindfulness; in the automatic state, we are operating on automatic pilot and are unaware of the details of what we are doing. This, however, does not mean that when we are in the automatic state, we have no control over the process and are instead controlled by the media; this might be the case, but it need not be. The key to control lies in how we develop our automatic routines. If we learn the routines through a conscious process (such as driving a car), then we are still in control because we are simply following our own constructed routines. However, if the routines have been built up over years of media conditioning and thereby were formulated when we were in mindless states, then we are controlled by the media routines. It is important to remember

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that when people are in an automatic state, this is not always indicative of a low level of media literacy. We need to examine the routines that guide the automaticity and analyze whether they were constructed by the individual or conditioned by the media.

### E. Information and Knowledge

In everyday language, the terms *information* and *knowledge* are used as synonyms, but in this theory, they have meanings very different from one another. Information is piecemeal and transitory, whereas knowledge is structured, organized, and of more enduring significance. Information resides in the messages, whereas knowledge resides in a person's mind. Information gives something to the person to interpret, whereas knowledge reflects that which has already been interpreted by the person.

Information is composed of facts. Facts by themselves are not knowledge, any more than a pile of bricks is a house. Knowledge requires structure to provide context and thereby exhibit meaning. Think of messages as the raw materials and skills as the tools you use to do something with the raw materials. That "something" is pulling the information out of the messages and turning that information into knowledge, that is, to reconstruct the information so that it will contribute to our knowledge structures. A characteristic of higher media literacy is the ability and habit of transforming information into knowledge structures.

### F. Schemas and Knowledge Structures

*Schema* is a term that has been important in cognitive psychology for a long time. Bartlett (1932) introduced the idea of schema in his book *Remembering*. He defined schema as an "active organization of past reactions, or of past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operating in any well-adapted organic response" (p. 201). Since that time, the term *schema* has been used by many scholars. For example, Rumelhart and Norman (1988) conceptualize a schema as a large unit of organized information used for representing concepts, situation, events, and actions in memory. The purpose of schema is to help with information encoding, retrieval from memory, inference, and evaluation (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

There has been a wide range of usage of the term *schema*, as well as terms that are synonyms. These alternative terms include *prototypes* (Cantor & Mischel, 1977, 1979), *frames* (Minsky, 1975), *stereotypes* (Lippmann, 1922), *social scripts* (Schank & Abelson, 1977), and *cognitive maps* (Rosch, 1978). A series of schemas are thought to be somewhat like scripts. *Script*

has also been defined as a schema for routine events, such as going out to dinner (Schank & Abelson, 1977). If you ask people what they do when they go to a restaurant, most people say the same things in the same order; thus, they share scripts. For example, a script is a “structure that describes an appropriate sequence of events in a particular context” or “a predetermined stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation” (Schank 1982, p. 170).

Schemas are networks or grouping concepts (Graesser, Millis, & Long, 1986). How are schemas organized? Typically, they use a series of nodes and links. “The result of the construction process is considered to be an associative structure formed by connecting nodes representing individual objects or concepts with links” (Smith, 1999, p. 252).

Schemas are constructed by remembering simple associations. In their everyday lives, people make informal associations, such as between a name and a face when they meet someone. If they remember the ideas, these are stored in memory as nodes, and if they remember that the two ideas are associated, the two nodes are linked together, such that thinking about one of the nodes brings to mind the other. This is a schema. Schemas are ideas linked together in associative networks. For example, a person sees a word on a page, asks someone what the word means, and remembers the word and the definition. Thus, there are two nodes in memory, one for the visual image of the word (or the sound of the word) and the other for the denoted meaning. The two nodes are linked together. The more a person accesses this association, the stronger the link becomes. Eventually, other related words may become linked to this association; if this happens, the links and nodes grow organically, linkage by linkage.

Schema are composed of memories of sound, smell, touch, taste, and how things feel. They also contain memories of emotions. All of these elements are linked together in networks of associations. Some of those links between elements are strong, and others are much weaker. For example, when some people think of dog, their first reaction might be one of fear as they recall being bit by a dog when they were very young. The next thing they might remember is a visual image of a dog with bared teeth because that has the strongest link from the fear. Then, there might be a link to the sound of the dog barking and the person crying. As we use a schema, we begin with the element that is most salient and work our way to other elements by following the links throughout the network.

Schemas and knowledge structures share some commonalities. Both are constructions by individuals; people are not born with these but must build them as they experience life. Both are composed of information of a cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral nature. Both are used by people to

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make sense of their world, and both are organic; that is, they are continually in a state of change as people acquire new experiences.

The differences between the two are in how people construct them and how the information is organized in them. Schemas are constructed quickly and efficiently by linking a pair of elements, such as a symbol and a definition or a face and a name. In contrast, knowledge structures are carefully constructed in a conscious and systematic manner. Their goals are accuracy and utility rather than efficiency. People spend more time tracking down useful information, not simply waiting for it to come to them in serendipitous exposures. Also, people check and cross-check the accuracy of the information. Thus, schema are composed of elements that are informally grouped together, usually by expediency. In contrast, knowledge structures are consciously built and maintained with the use of higher level skills.

We can construct a knowledge structure beginning with a schema if we thoroughly examine our schema and clear out all the inaccurate and irrelevant information, then put in the effort to search out new information to fill in the logical gaps. Schema are simple guides, whereas knowledge structures are authoritative maps that provide strong context for helping us work toward the most useful determination of meaning in an accurate manner.

Another important difference is that knowledge structures are formal mapping devices with analytical depth, whereas schema are loose amalgamations of elements that are connected by simple associations. Schemas can be regarded as two dimensional, with the elements lying on the surface. Knowledge structures are more like outlines where concepts are nested within other concepts. Location of a concept matters a great deal to knowledge structures. This is why a knowledge structure is a better mapping tool and why it is better for helping people understand context.

Knowledge structures require some thought to construct and maintain, but they offer great power in long-term efficiency. Thus, I use the term *knowledge structures* to focus attention on knowledge rather than information and also to focus attention on structure instead of organization.

## G. Competencies and Skills

There is an important distinction between competencies and skills. Competencies are the abilities 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 relatively dichotomous; that is, either people are able to do something, or they are not able. For example, people either know how to recognize a word and match its meaning to a memorized denoted meaning, or they do not.

Skills, in contrast, are tools that people develop through practice. Skill ability is not dichotomous; instead, people's skill ability can be plotted along a wide continuum. People's abilities on these techniques are highly variable; that is, some people have little ability to use a particular skill while other people have enormous ability. There is always room for more improvement through practice. Without practice, skills atrophy.

The skills most relevant to media literacy are analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstraction. These skills are rarely used in an automatic fashion; instead, they require conscious effort, even when a person has a high ability on them.

To illustrate this distinction between competency and skills, think of reading as it is taught in elementary school. Children learn to recognize symbols that are words. They learn how to vocalize those symbols and how to fit those symbols together into sentences. These are competencies. By the time people have reached secondary grades, it is assumed that they have reading competency, yet they still practice reading. However, at these more advanced grades, reading is regarded less as a competency and more as a skill. Students focus on how to get more meaning out of paragraphs and stories. For example, when teachers ask students to read aloud in elementary school, it is to check students' competencies at word recognition and pronunciation. But when teachers ask students to read aloud in high school, it is to check students' skill at reading for meaning and expression.

This cognitive theory of media literacy is much more concerned with addressing improvement of skills rather than the attainment of competencies. While the percentage of adults in this country who cannot read seems very high at 20%, and this is an important problem to address, this theory is concerned more with the other 80% who have this competency but who struggle with meaning construction. This theory relies on competencies but uses those more as a foundation for a theory that focuses on skills. The theory is much more concerned with people's skills, because skills are the tools we use to construct our knowledge structures. Skill development is what really can make a large difference in a person moving from low to high media literacy. People who have weak skills will not be able to do much with the information they encounter. They will ignore good information and fixate on inaccurate or bad information. 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; the active information providers, such as advertisers and entertainers, will become the constructors of people's knowledge structures and will take over control of how people see the world.

### III. Need for a New Paradigm

Thinking about the purpose of media literacy has changed over time. For example, Masterman (1998) has observed that there are three “historical paradigms in media education” (p. vii). The first of these regarded the mass media as a disease and argued that people, especially children, needed to be inoculated against damaging effects. The disease was the corruption of language and the constant appeals to low-level satisfactions; this was a direct threat to higher level culture with its authentic values as a higher art form. People needed to be protected against the mass media.

Then, in the 1960s, there was a shift to a belief that not all mass media were bad; that is, there was a range of content within any medium. The purpose of media education was, therefore, to educate people to make good choices, that is, to discriminate between the good and the bad film or between content that had integrity and that which was merely commercial and exploitive. This was the popular arts paradigm.

In the 1970s, there was a shift to semiotics with its focus on representation. People needed to be taught to read critically, this paradigm reasoned, so that they would not accept the false consciousness presented by the media. However, the false consciousness was not imposed by the media industries, as Marxists claimed; this paradigm favored the explanation by Gramsci that dominance of the ideology was achieved through consent of the populace. The key, then, is not to do away with the power elite but instead to educate the populace to encounter the media critically.

With this cognitive theory of media literacy, I argue that it is time for a fourth paradigm. We need another shift of perspective on why it is important to be media literate. I make this argument, because I feel we need to move beyond the tradition of critical or cultural studies where the writers make strong arguments either (a) that the media have constructed a culture that is harmful to its members or (b) that the media foster a false consciousness. While many of these writings present compelling arguments and raise serious issues for all media scholars to ponder, the arguments stop short of being fully convincing unless the reader believes that there is a standard for truth. Without such a standard, how can we accept the argument that there is a “false” consciousness or that the negative effects that those writers point out are negative for people beyond themselves?

I am not arguing that there are no negative effects. There is potential for hundreds of effects, all of which could be negative. But the valence is for the person to interpret. What I regard as a negative effect to my life may be the most valuable positive effect to you. Therefore, in this book, my purpose is to illuminate the issues and provide the beginning of knowledge structures to help

readers construct a higher degree of understanding in their own lives and leave the interpretations up to those individuals. Thus, the most fundamental guiding principle underlying my perspective is that individuals should be empowered to make their own choices and interpretations. If people end up making the same choices as they would have without developing their skills and knowledge structures, then the choices are informed ones, and that is better than choices purely programmed by the media and outside of the consumer's awareness. Also, if an individual's interpretations of meaning in the messages are the same as what the media present, then those interpretations are informed ones, and they are better than interpretations programmed by the media. The key lies not so much with the choices and interpretations but with who makes them. Media-literate people make their own choices and interpretations. They do this by first recognizing a wide range of choices; then, they use their personal, elaborated knowledge structures for context to make decisions among the options and select the option that best meets their own goals. Nonliterate people have no choice but to allow the media to make them, because they have few options and the options they do have are given to them by the media. It's rather like getting up in the morning and finding that your significant other has given you two choices of what to wear to the office: a clown suit or a mermaid outfit. It's a choice, in the literal sense of the term, but not a real choice. The media give us choices, but not nearly the range of options that we need to have to make the best choice, given our goals.

In this book, I hope to influence one more shift in thinking. I accept the premise that the locus for change is the individual and that people need to be educated to read the media better. However, I challenge the argument that the reason people need to be critical readers is to recognize the ideology of the media so they can reject it. I argue that rejection of the ideology is not the goal; the goal, instead, should be to allow people to appreciate parts of the ideology that are functional for them and create new perspectives where the ideology is not functional for them. That is, the choice should be up to the individual. Mindlessly rejecting the media ideology *in toto* is not much better than mindlessly accepting it *in toto*.

I do not believe there is a "false" ideology because to believe that, I would have to also believe that there is a "true" ideology. I accept no basis for such a claim. So the media's ideology is what it is; it is simply a construction by institutions to create practices that result in cultural products that best serve the particular needs of those institutions. There is nothing false about it in the sense that there is a superior place humankind can stand and view the truth. It is much more complex and interesting than that.

Individuals who are not media literate must accept the media's messages as they are presented and fit the round pegs of the media's messages into the



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square holes of their own lives. People who are media literate know the shape of their lives (that is, the space they want to fill), and they know how to make their own meaning from the images provided by the media (that is, whittle away certain elements and amplify others) so that their product fits their space. Of course, learning how to do this entails, in part, learning to be critical of the media. But the critical exercise is not a rhetorical exercise in recognizing the media ideology, then rejecting it. Instead, the critical exercise is actively using skills as tools on the raw material in the messages to rearrange elements in those raw materials. For example, one of the ideological elements in the media (especially in their entertainment products and commercial messages) is to present hyperattractive characters based on a highly stylized and narrow conception of attractiveness that focuses on youth and a thin athletic body type, which is impossible to achieve for many people. This has led many young women to engage in eating disorders to try to make themselves more attractive, given this narrow definition of attractiveness. Scholars in the third paradigm would train these women to recognize the media's ideology about body stereotyping and make them critical of this. The women would become angry and reject the ideology and much of the media. My perspective is to get these women to confront their acceptance of this ideology, reject it, replace it with their own goals, then search out the many alternative body types that are presented in the media; they end up in a more functional place for their lives, that is, getting past anger, becoming happy, and using the media to find material to support their own view of the world. This is empowerment to help them live a happy life, not empowerment so they can live an angry life in martyrdom.

#### IV. Synthesized Definition of Media Literacy

Now that I have defined the foundational terms and made some key distinctions. I can present my core definition of media literacy. This definition is synthesized from what I consider the major ideas in the literature, which was reviewed in the previous chapter.

##### A. The Umbrella Definition

Media literacy is the set of perspectives from which we expose ourselves to the media and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter. We build our perspectives from knowledge structures. The knowledge structures form the platforms on which we stand to view the multifaceted phenomenon of the media: their business, their content, and their effects on individuals

and institutions. The more knowledge structures we have, the more of the media phenomenon we can “see.” The more developed our knowledge structures, the more context we will have to help us understand what we see. The more people use these knowledge structures in mindful exposures, the more they will be able to use media exposures to meet their own goals and the more they will be able to avoid high risks for negative effects. Thus, they will be more media literate.

This definition of media literacy can be elaborated under the umbrella by adding two other types of definitions: process definition and product definition. Each of these further illuminates part of the construct of media literacy.

## B. The Process Definition

There are two processes to the media literacy construct. One of these is the process of building strong knowledge structures so as to become media literate. The second process is acting in a media-literate manner during exposures to media messages.

How can people construct a strong perspective on the media? The key to doing this is to build a good set of knowledge structures. To build good knowledge structures, people need raw material and tools. The raw material is information, both from the media and from the real world. The tools are skills. There is a set of skills that is generic to all media. By these skills, I do not primarily mean the production skills. The skills of production (writing, photography, acting, directing; editing, sound recording, etc.) can help people become more media literate by adding more information to their knowledge structures. But the production skills are secondary to the more primary skills of analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstracting. In fact, production skills depend on the use of these seven primary skills.

Both skills and information are important. If we have a great deal of information but weak skills, we will not be able to make much sense of the information. The information will likely be stored in schema, and it may be difficult to access a given bit of information. Skills are needed to sort through information and organize it. On the other hand, if we have strong skills but don't expose ourselves to a range of media messages or real world experiences, our knowledge structures will be limited and unbalanced.

No one is born media literate. Media literacy must be developed, and this development requires effort from each individual. The development also is a long-term process that never ends; that is, no one ever reaches a point of complete media literacy. Skills can always be more highly developed; if they are not continually improved, they will atrophy. Also, knowledge structures

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are never finished because the media and the real world are constantly changing.

The information in the knowledge structures is not limited to cognitive elements but should also contain emotional, aesthetic, and moral elements. The four types of elements work together such that the combination of any three types helps provide context for the other type.

Each of these four types of information focuses on a different domain of understanding. The cognitive domain refers to factual information: dates, names, definitions, and the like. Some people have few knowledge structures or skills, and this makes development along the cognitive dimension very difficult.

The emotional domain contains information about feelings, such as love, hate, anger, happiness, frustration, and so on. Some people have very little ability to experience an emotion during exposure to the media, whereas others are very sensitive to cues that generate all sorts of feelings in them.

The aesthetic domain contains information about how to produce messages. This information provides people with the basis for making judgments about who are great writers, photographers, actors, dancers, choreographers, singers, musicians, composers, directors, and other kinds of artists. It also helps us make judgments about other products of creative craftsmanship, such as editing, lighting, set designing, costuming, sound recording, layout, and so on. Some of us have a good ear for dialogue or musical composition. Some of us have a good eye for lighting, photographic composition, or movement. The more information we have from this domain, the finer discriminations we can make between a great actress and a very good one; between a great song that will endure and a currently popular "flash in the pan"; between a film director's best and very best work; between art and artificiality. This appreciation skill is important to some scholars (Messaris, 1994; Silverblatt, 1995; Wulff, 1997). For example, Messaris (1994) argues that viewers who are visually literate should have an awareness of artistry and visual manipulation. By this, he means they should be aware of the processes by which meaning is created through the visual media. What is expected of sophisticated viewers is some degree of self-consciousness about their role as interpreters. This includes the ability to detect artifice (in staged behavior and editing) and to spot authorial presence (style of the producer/director).

The moral domain contains information about values. Moral information provides us with the basis for making judgments about right and wrong. When we see characters make decisions in a story, we judge them on a moral dimension, that is, the characters' goodness or evilness. The more detailed and refined our moral information is, the more deeply we can perceive the values underlying messages in the media and the more sophisticated and

reasoned are our judgments about those values. Highly media literate people can perceive moral themes well.

Strong knowledge structures contain information from all four of these domains. If one type of information is missing, the knowledge structure is less elaborate than it could be. For example, people who have a knowledge structure without any emotional information are able to be highly analytical when they watch a movie and may be able to quote lots of facts about the history of the movie's genre, the director's point of view, and the underlying theme. But if they cannot evoke an emotional reaction, they are simply going through a dry, academic exercise.

The second process is acting in a media literate manner during exposures to media messages. A person who has a strong perspective on the media phenomenon has high potential to act in a media-literate manner. The set of knowledge structures by itself does not indicate media literacy; the person must actively and mindfully use the information in those knowledge structures during exposures to media messages. Thus, people who are more highly media literate spend less exposure time in automatic processing of messages. They are more consciously aware of their goals for the exposure and are consciously making decisions about filtering and meaning construction. This is not to say that highly media-literate people do not spend considerable time in automatic processing; they do. However, when they are in the state of automaticity, they are being governed by automatic routines that they have had a hand in forming rather than being governed by routines conditioned almost exclusively by the media.

The process of media literacy is so important, because it is not a categorical construct. Media literacy is not a category where either you are in the category or you are not. Media literacy is best regarded as a continuum—like a thermometer—where there are degrees. We all occupy some position on the media literacy continuum. There is no point below which we could say that someone has no literacy, and there is no point at the high end where we can say that someone is fully literate—there is always room for improvement. Media literacy is a constant process.

People are positioned along that continuum based on the strength of their overall perspective on the media. The strength of a person's perspective is based on the number and quality of knowledge structures, and the quality of knowledge structures is based on the level of a person's skills and experiences. Because people vary substantially on skills and experiences, they will vary on the number and quality of their knowledge structures. Hence, there will be great variation in media literacy across people.

People operating at lower levels of media literacy have weak and limited perspectives on the media. They have smaller, more superficial, and less

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organized knowledge structures, which provide an inadequate perspective to use in interpreting the meaning of a media message. These people are also habitually reluctant or unwilling to use their skills, which remain underdeveloped and therefore more difficult to employ successfully.

### C. The Purpose Definition

The purpose of becoming more media literate is to gain greater control over one's exposures and to construct one's own meaning from the messages in those exposures. When people do this, they are in control of determining what is important in life and setting expectations for experiences in those important areas. If they do not do this for themselves, the flood of media messages will do this for them in the default condition. The media will set the agenda and tell people what to think about. The media will define beauty, success, and happiness. The media will set impossible standards for the way we should live our lives, the appearance of our bodies, the velocity of success in careers, the value of material goods, and the intensity of relationships.

There is a big payoff to being media literate. It is important that this payoff be large, because a great deal of effort is required to build a strong perspective and to apply it continually during media exposures. The payoff is conceptualized much more in terms of accuracy rather than efficiency. Accuracy is defined here not in terms of how closely the reported facts match a standard of truth; instead, accuracy is defined in terms of how often individuals access messages that match their goals for information and entertainment as well as how often individuals are able to construct meaning to match goals for their lives.

Efficiency is a secondary purpose. Efficiency becomes important only after the more primary purpose of accuracy has been achieved. For example, let's say Harry and Bob both read a news story and both get little information from it; that little information is inaccurate. Harry is able to read the story in 5 minutes, and Bob takes 10 minutes. We can't conclude that Harry is twice as literate as Bob; instead, neither are very media literate because neither has gotten much value (accuracy) from the exposure of reading the news story. Now, let's say that Ann and Margie were active readers of the same news story (continually analyzing it and evaluating the claims), drew a good deal of information from their exposure, and incorporated it (through grouping, induction, and deduction) into their existing knowledge structures on the topic. Ann took 5 minutes to read the story, and Margie took 10 minutes. In this later scenario, we can say that Ann is a bit more media literate than Margie, but the real distinction is that both Ann and Margie are far

more media literate than are Harry and Bob. Efficiency should never be regarded as the primary criterion of the purpose is media literacy.

Once the criterion of accuracy is achieved, then efficiency becomes an important consideration. Efficiency is not something that can be achieved well in the short term; instead it should be a long-term purpose. Highly developed knowledge structures and highly developed primary skills give the person high potential for efficiency.

## V. Summary

This chapter defines the constructs used in this cognitive theory of media literacy. The foundational terms were defined as constructs with special definitions to distinguish them from their primitive term status in everyday language. Then, some of these terms, along with other key terms, were defined through seven contrasts. First, there is an important difference between fully specified and partially specified problems. Media literacy deals with both types of problems, but the more challenging of the two is the task of dealing with partially specified problems. Second, there is a difference between meaning matching and meaning construction. Meaning matching is a relatively automatic task that relies on symbol recognition and matching of a memorized definition to that symbol. Meaning construction builds on meaning matching and is, therefore, a more involved task. Meaning construction requires the use of many more skills and a conscious locus to guide it. Third, exposure is different than attention. Exposure occurs when a person is in physical proximity to a media message, whereas attention occurs only when a person is conscious and aware of the message. Fourth, automaticity was contrasted with mindfulness. Fifth, there is an important difference between information and knowledge. Sixth, there is a difference between schemas and knowledge structures. Schemas are networks of ideas linked together in a person's mind. Knowledge structures are highly organized maps of screened elements. Seventh, this theory relies on a clear difference between competencies and skills.

The chapter builds to a synthesized definition of media literacy. That definition presents media literacy as a perspective from which we expose ourselves to the media and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter. We build our perspective from knowledge structures. It is not a natural state; instead it must be developed. It is not a category; there are degrees of media literacy. It is multidimensional with development taking place cognitively, emotionally, aesthetically, and morally. The purpose of developing media literacy is to give the person greater control of exposures and the construction of meaning from the information encountered in those exposures.