CHAPTER 5

The Foundational Knowledge Structures

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Five knowledge structures underlie the media literacy perspective. These are: media content, media industries, media effects, real world information, and the self. The more accurate and elaborate knowledge structures people have in these areas, the higher their potential for being media literate. Thus, these knowledge structures provide potential, not a guarantee. The potential must be realized by the personal locus; that is, the person must use this knowledge. When a person's locus is fully engaged, the locus draws information from these knowledge structures and keeps the person aware of options as well as motivated to make good choices based on this information.

The more experience people have, the more context they have to bring to bear on processing new messages. People with the most knowledge learn most from media (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978; Rice & Wartella, 1981). When people have a great deal of knowledge on a particular topic, they have a strong, well-developed knowledge structure. They are usually motivated to acquire more information on various topics and thus seek out media that will provide them with this information. When they see a new message on the topic, they are able to integrate that new information quickly and efficiently into their existing knowledge structure.

This chapter will illuminate the nature of these five knowledge structures. Space does not permit a thorough articulation of the content of these knowledge structures, but for more detail (still not an inventory) see *Media Literacy* (Potter, 2001).

I. Media Content

People have lots of information about names of TV shows, writers, maga-
zines, names of characters, names of songs, and the like. This information
helps them access media messages, and for that reason, this type of infor-
mation is useful. But this is not the type of information that makes much of
a difference to people's level of media literacy. To build a significant knowl-
edge structure about media content, three kinds of information are essential:
content formulas, aggregate figures, and values in the content.

A. Content Formulas

There are standard formulas for messages, whether they are news stories,
ads, or fictional entertainment. Each of these three types of content has its
dominant formula. For example, many news stories follow the inverted
pyramid, which presents the most important elements (the who, what, when,
where, and why) early in the story, followed by less essential information.
Ads typically follow a problem resolution formula. Fictional entertainment
stories typically follow a formula of circumstance generation, heightened
conflict, climax, and denouement.

A content type's dominant formula can vary. Alternative formulas for
news stories include the question-answer format for interviews, the horse
race format for campaign coverage, and the anecdote format for human
interest stories. For ads, other formulas include the joke-punch line, hard
sell, and the mosaic (presenting emotion-evoking images linked with the
product).

Knowing the formulas well gives a person the ability to follow the content
much more easily. It also provides a standard on which to judge the creativ-
ity of the message makers.

B. Aggregate Figures

We can experience the content and the media as individual anecdotal
elements—each creative and unique—or we can also be concerned about
commonalities and patterns that direct our attention to the big picture.

One way to see the big picture is to construct it for ourselves through the
skill of induction. However, when we induce patterns from the media mes-
sages for ourselves, the patterns are often faulty, because people are not usu-
ally exposing themselves to the full range of messages, nor are they exposing
themselves to a sample of messages that could represent all media messages

or even all messages within a subset. Therefore, any generalization will be faulty. Also, undertaking an induction of media message patterns is challenging and requires a great deal of effort and knowledge about content analysis.

Fortunately, careful scholars regularly conduct content analyses, so we can save the effort of conducting inductions ourselves and instead learn the aggregate patterns reported by others. It would be useful to have aggregate patterns for a wide range of topics, but unfortunately, many of these have yet to be addressed by scholars, especially patterns in media other than television. However, many of the most important topic areas do have good aggregate figures. These involve the prevalence of certain behaviors in plots (violence and sex) as well as the prevalence of types of characters (gender, age, ethnic background, affluence, careers, and roles) in entertainment programs. There are also aggregate figures available about news, such as length of stories (sound bytes), types of newsmakers, types of news stories (economic, political, feature, sports, etc.), sources, formal features (use of graphics, photographs, talking heads, etc.), and credibility. Also, there are aggregate figures for advertising, such as amount, length, types of products, types of appeals, and product spokespersons.

We need to know the aggregate figures in media content to check our pattern perceptions. For example, we need to know how much violence there really is on television before we can form a useful critical opinion. We need to know whether there are many more males in important roles in the media than there are females. We need to know the patterns of eating, exercise, and other health-related behaviors.

C. Values in the Content

Underlying values are embedded in all messages in the media. We need to be sensitive to what these are. For example, even journalists who claim a high degree of objectivity are presenting a partial and selective picture of the world. Many types of events and people never get covered, and this reveals values about what is important in our culture.

As for advertising, all ads are about consumption. There is something we can buy to solve any problem quickly. Materialism is good. New products are better than old products.

As for entertainment, stories are about conflict and how that conflict is resolved. In our culture, the conflict is usually resolved through competition and often through aggressive, even violent means. Also, stories in the mass media simplify life. Characters are divided cleanly into the good characters and the bad characters; very few are gray. Most issues are presented as

having only two sides. In addition, stories focus on the exciting. They truncate time to show only the most interesting events in a story. Thus, the underlying themes of entertainment are: Life should be very exciting, it is led at a fast pace, it presents lots of conflict situations, and you need to be strong and fight hard to win.

II. Media Industries

People generally have poorly developed knowledge structures about the media industries. They may know the names of different newspapers, magazines, TV stations, and film companies, but they know little about who owns them, how they operate, how they interact in the industry, or how they market their messages. The more elaborate people's knowledge structures about the media industries are, the more they will understand why certain content is produced and why the people in the industries make the decisions they do. Four areas of knowledge are especially important: development of media industries, economics, ownership and control, and marketing messages.

A. Development of Media Industries

People need to understand where the media come from and how they evolve. This helps them appreciate the forces that motivate decisions about content and marketing. It also helps them better understand the current nature of each vehicle and what the future is likely to offer. With good projections for the future, people can prepare themselves to avoid certain media or vehicles and shift their resources of time and money to other media they feel are moving in a direction more compatible with their personal goals.

B. Economics

The primary goal of mass media organizations is to maximize shareholder wealth. They achieve this by increasing their business efficiency, that is, by making decisions that will maximize revenue and at the same time minimize costs of doing business.

Media companies increase revenue in two ways. First, they seek to produce a wide variety of vehicles, each with its own target audience, each with a special set of messages of high potential interest to that target audience, and each with its own revenue stream. The more revenue streams, the more total revenue possible. Second, media companies seek ways to maximize the availability of each vehicle to audiences. Thus, they develop means to

disseminate their message to broad audiences (not one person or a named set of people such as one's friends) in a way that it is available to all those audience members at the same time. Not everyone may access the message at the same time, but it is available for access.

Keeping costs down is a major challenge, because talent is in short supply and the media compete aggressively for the small pool of talent, thus driving costs up. One potential area for keeping costs down is to reduce the cost of potential failures. Media companies do this in three ways. First, they conduct a great deal of research to monitor what the public exposes itself to, and they try to emulate those messages. Second, they avoid messages with a negative valence to audiences, that is, messages that the public would find offensive and want to actively avoid. Third, they attempt to condition audiences into habitual exposure patterns.

When most people criticize the media, they typically focus on some form of content they dislike and totally ignore the economics that drive the production and marketing of that content. Thus, their criticism is uninformed and has virtually no chance of changing industry practices.

Media companies are businesses that are guided by the profit motive. As such, they have a strong drive to increase revenues while reducing expenses. Revenues are tied to market demands. If there is no demand for a particular type of message, few companies will undertake the high risk of trying to create a demand. Where demand exists, media companies will continue to provide the demanded messages as long as the demand continues. This is one of the major reasons why the criticism about sex and violence in the media has failed to bring about any substantial reduction in that type of content. The industry responds much more to demand than to criticism.

C. Ownership and Control

Many people criticize the government for allowing media companies to consolidate and grow powerful. Is this a danger? Most people think it is; they are concerned that too many of the media vehicles are in the control of too few people.

This is a complex issue. People who criticize this trend toward consolidation need to analyze carefully the advantages as well as the disadvantages that accrue to the public. For example, the economies of scale available to large companies serve to keep production costs lower, and this can result in lower costs to the public. Also, almost all media companies are publicly held. When these companies make a large profit, that money is passed on to shareholders. This is not to say that there are no negative effects of consolidation and the overwhelming quest to maximize profits; what I am arguing is that

there are both advantages and disadvantages to consolidation. People who argue against consolidation without recognizing the advantages are just as uninformed as those people who argue that there are no negative effects from media consolidation and the messages they market.

D. Marketing Messages

To know how to seek out the messages they want, people need to understand how media companies market their content. Most people still use the term *mass communication,* but there has been no mass communication in any real sense of the term for decades. There is no mass audience; instead, marketing is niche oriented. People need to understand which niches they are in, as media marketers view them. They then need to think about which niches they would want to put themselves in and which ones they want to avoid.

III. Media Effects

A strong knowledge structure on media effects includes three features. First, it needs an expanded vision of media effects. Second, people need to understand how the process of influence works. Third, people need to know the factors that go into that process of influence.

A. Broad Perspective

When people have a narrow perspective on media effects, many effects happen to them outside their perspective. This eliminates the potential for them to control those effects. A good perspective on media effects is not limited to the obvious effects that show up immediately on exposure and can be easily linked to media influence. There are many more effects; thus, I provide a five-dimensional perspective to orient people to expand their vision on effects. These dimensions are: timing, level, direct vs. indirect effects, sought vs. incidental effects, and valence.

1. *Timing of effects.* Media effects can be immediate or long term. This distinction focuses on when the effect occurs, not on how long it lasts. An immediate effect is one that happens during exposure to the media message. If it does not happen during the exposure, the opportunity is lost. If the effect does happen, it might only last for a short period of time (such as becoming afraid during a movie), or it might last forever (such as learning the outcome of a presidential election), but it is still an immediate effect because it changed something in the person during the exposure.

Long-term effects show up only after many exposures. No single exposure or single type of message is responsible for the effect. Instead, the pattern of repeated exposure sets up the conditions for a long-term effect. For example, after watching years of crime programs and news reports, many people come to believe that their neighborhoods are high-crime environments. No single exposure or event "caused" this belief; the belief is slowly and gradually constructed over years of exposures until one day it occurs to people that they better buy another set of locks for their doors.

2. *Level of effect.* Most of the concern about the media focuses on behavioral effects. For example, *some believe* that watching violence will lead people to behave aggressively or that watching portrayals of sexual activity will make people engage in illicit sex acts. However, media have demonstrated effects that are cognitive, attitudinal, emotional, physiological, *and* behavioral (for some examples, see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1   Media Effects Template

Type	*Immediate*	*Long Term*
Cognitive	Temporary learning	Hypermnesia Generalization Exposing secrets Framing of life
Attitudinal	Opinion creation Opinion change	Sleeper effect Reinforcement Internalization
Emotional	Temporary reaction	Sensitization
Physiological	Temporary arousal	Increased tolerance
Behavioral	Imitation Activation	Habit formation Disinhibition Altered behavioral patterns
Societal		Moving mean of society Institutional change

3. *Direct versus indirect effects.* The five levels just listed deal with types of effects in individuals. Those effects are generally regarded as direct. Individuals can also be influenced indirectly, however, when the media exert their influence on large-scale structures such as institutions. When institutions change as an effect of media influence, then the people who participate in

those institutions experience the changes; in this way, the media exert an indirect effect on those people. For example, media portrayals of crime and violence in the news and in entertainment programs could, over time, exert an influence on the criminal justice system so that law enforcement officials are given greater latitude to access individuals' private records, such as Internet usage, library materials used, medical records, and so on. Thus, this loss of privacy would not be a direct effect of the media on the individual; instead, the media influence gradually created a change in law enforcement practices that eventually had an effect on the individual.

4. *Sought versus incidental effects.* People often seek out effects in ways that are easy to observe and to attribute to the media. For example, people read the morning paper to learn about which sports teams won their games yesterday. However, many other effects occur without the person seeking them. These are called incidental effects, because they occur incidental to the motivation of the person seeking exposure.

The sender is not likely to have planned incidental effects. For example, people might watch a highly violent movie to be entertained, that is, excited and pleasantly frightened, and the movie leads to this effect that the person sought. But the movie might also lead to other incidental effects, such as desensitizing the person to the plight of victims of violence and also making the person more fearful that he or she might be a victim of a violent act. The movie's producers did not intend these incidental effects; hence, they think it is unfair when they are criticized for effects that they did not intend to produce.

5. *Valence.* Effects can be constructive or destructive. These are terms that are value laden. Who is to decide what is constructive and destructive? The answer can be approached from two perspectives: the individual and society. From the individual perspective, a person's locus sets the standard. For example, if a person places a high value on a particular kind of information, then finding relevant messages in a book, newspaper, or television show can achieve such a goal and is therefore constructive.

Valence can also be determined by a larger frame than the individual, such as the frame of society. This larger frame is important in two situations. First, the distinction is important when there is a conflict between the individual and society. For example, let's say a person wants to be a master criminal, and so he or she seeks out messages on the Internet, books, and movies to gain information about crimes and how to commit them. In this case, finding such information is positive for the individual but negative from the point of view of society.

A second reason why the distinction between the individual's and society's perspectives on valence is important is that individuals often lack a strong locus to guide judgments about value. For example, when people sit down in front of the television after a hard day at work and want to escape their problems, they are not consciously considering programming, personal goals, drives, and so on. Instead, they simply want an escape experience. But in that flow of television messages, there are all kinds of programmers with their own locus, largely advertisers trying to convince viewers that they have problems that are more serious than people believe them to be—problems such as headaches, allergies, depression, or minor health problems that advertisers want to sell drugs to remedy. This type of message repeated over years leads the general population to believe that they should never feel discomfort and that drugs are good. Also, advertisers often market products that people like but that are not good for society at large: fuel inefficient and polluting cars, guns, boom boxes, and the like.

B. Risk

Once people have a broad perspective on the range of media effects, the important question is: What is my risk for manifesting these effects? The word *risk* refers to positive as well as negative effects. Risk refers to the probability of an effect occurring, and it is used in favor of the word *probability* because it is less quantitative. At the current level of precision in research findings about media effects, we do not have quantitative estimators, but it is not an exaggeration to say that we have a fairly good idea of the factors that go into increasing the risk of many of the effects occurring.

1. *Set-point.* Each effect has its own continuum of influence. On the continuum of influence for each effect, there is a natural point where our risk is normally located. I call this the risk set-point. For example, on the disinhibition influence continuum, a person who is continually exposed to many media messages of violence where the perpetrators are glamorized and the consequences to the victims are sanitized will typically have a risk set-point nearer the manifestation point (where the effect is observed) than will another person who avoids all such messages in the media. Also, a person who has been raised to be highly aggressive, who has low empathy, and who is frustrated is also likely to have a risk set-point nearer the manifestation point than a person who is raised according to the Golden Rule, has high trait empathy, and is rarely frustrated. People's risk set-points are determined by a combination of their traits, typical lifestyle situations, and patterns of media exposure.

A person's set-point on any influence continuum has two properties: position and elasticity. The position is where the set-point is located along the continuum. If the set-point is close to the manifestation pole, then the risk of a person exhibiting the effect is high. The position is determined by traits and long-term conditioning from the media.

Typically, people's risk set-points are fairly far away from behavioral manifestations; that is, it would take a media message with many (or unusually strong) characteristics to push a person all the way up to a behavioral act. In contrast, on cognitive effects, people's risk set-points are fairly close to a manifestation. Thus, some process lines are fairly long and require many factors to move a person all the way to the manifestation, whereas other process lines are fairly short, and the effects require only a factor or two to achieve a manifestation.

2. *Elasticity.* Elasticity refers to the width of the band of probability around the set-point. Movement within the band of elasticity is influenced by current dispositions and states of the person and the present media messages being exposed. If the elasticity is small, then the long-term stable factors (traits and typical story formula) are dominant; but if the elasticity is wide, then the immediate factors (dispositions and idiosyncratic factors in the portrayals) are dominant.

This conceptualization of risk set-point, with the related ideas of positioning and elasticity, are primarily speculation even though it is based on findings from the research literature. At this time, researchers are far from providing estimates of risk as precise as my illustrations indicate. There have been some attempts to construct risk scales (Wilson et al., 2002), but this is an enormously difficult task, which is hampered by the limitations in the effects research we have to date (Potter, 1997). While I believe that this is a fruitful and important direction for empirical research, at the present time this conceptualization is of value primarily as a metaphor for people to use when considering which neighborhoods of risk they may inhabit in psychological space. When people are aware of the factors that go into the determination of a risk set-point, they can better assess the impact of different types of messages in bringing about a manifested effect.

C. Process of Influence

Think of the process of influence as a continuum (Figure 5.1). At one end of the continuum, there is virtually no chance that an effect will be manifested. At the other end of the continuum, there is a certainty that the effect
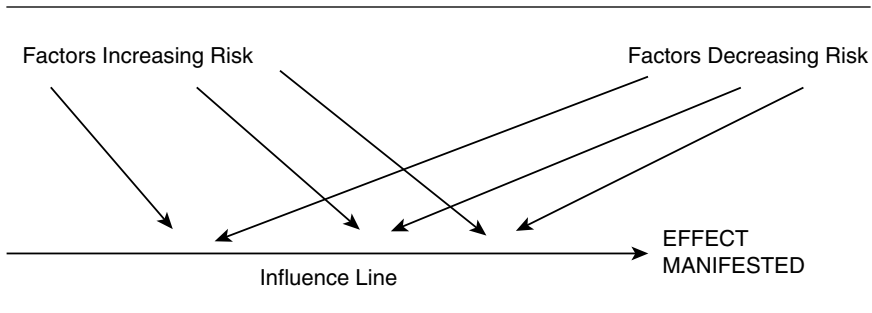
Figure 5.1   Process of Influence

will occur. Thinking of effects as a continuum frees us from categorical thinking, that is, of regarding an effect as either being present or not.

I argue that a continuous process of influence is constantly moving us back and forth along the continuum. Some factors increase risk, that is, move us toward a manifestation, while other factors decrease risk by moving us away from the manifestation point. The movement itself along the continuum is an effect; no outward manifestation is required for an effect to have occurred. Thus, effects are constantly occurring as a result of our unfolding experiences with the media.

The more we know about where we are along the continuum and those factors that move us in the direction we want to go, the more we can control the effects process and the more media literate we are. Such control will allow us to reduce the probability of a negative effect occurring well before it has a chance to manifest itself. Also, such control will allow us to accelerate the manifestation of a positive effect and, if it is a long-term effect, to take comfort in the fact that we are moving toward such an effect even though we have not yet manifested it. Because the purpose of media literacy is to empower people to control effects, it is far better for people to regard effects as movements along a continuum than to see effects as a binary either-or manifestation.

When thinking about how factors increase or decrease our risk for manifesting a negative effect, we need to think beyond a simple additive process. Factors differ in terms of *how* they move the risk point. For purposes of illustration I will mention five here: countervailing influences, nonlinear relationships, thresholds, contingent conditions, and causation.

1. *Countervailing influences.* A given factor might serve to reduce the risk point on a continuum for one particular effect while at the same time

increasing the risk point on the continuum for another particular effect. Thus, the factor is a countervailing influence. One example of a counter-vailing effect is exposure to television violence. Some theorists argue that exposure to high amounts of explicit violence is bad, because it can trigger a learning effect. Other theorists argue that exposure to high amounts of explicit violence might be good, because it can sensitize people to the bru-tal nature of violence and therefore make people more sympathetic to its victims and less likely to perpetrate violence themselves. The two effects of disinhibition and sensitization may be happening simultaneously, thus can-celing each other out so that on the surface no clear manifestation appears.

Another example of this is children's creativity and daydreaming. Some people argue that TV stimulates daydreaming, because programs are so exciting that viewers will want to relive many of the portrayals they see on TV. Other people argue that TV reduces daydreaming and imagination, because programs have such rapid pacing that they leave children no time to stop and reflect or daydream. Television's ready-made images don't engage the imagination like a book would, they say. Also, TV presents so many fan-tasies that viewers can access with very little effort that people lose their motivation to create their own daydreams, it might be argued.

Does television exert these two countervailing influences on children's imaginations? Valkenburg and Van der Voort (1995), in a Dutch study of elementary school age children, examined the effect of television viewing on daydreaming. They found an important interaction between the type of daydreaming and the type of TV program children watched. There is more than one type of daydreaming: positive-intense (characterized by vivid, pleasant, and childlike daydreams), aggressive-heroic (action characters acting violently), and dysphoric (escapist). A positive-intense daydreaming style was found to be stimulated by watching nonviolent children's programs and to be inhibited by watching violent dramatic programs. An aggressive-heroic daydreaming style was stimulated by watching violent dramatic programs and inhibited by watching nonviolent programs.

2. *Nonlinear relationships*. The effects process is rarely linear. A linear process is in evidence when one unit of input is associated with one unit of output. Most things in life are nonlinear. This is especially the case with media literacy, where development needs to be conceptualized in a learning curve-style, nonlinear fashion. People cannot expect to receive one unit of gain in media literacy in return for one unit of effort in developing their skills and knowledge structures. Instead, there is a long "dues-paying phase" where the number of units of effort will exceed the number of units of return. Eventually, once a person's skills reach a relatively strong point, the effort to use the skills will be reduced relative to the return.

3. *Thresholds.* Some effects do not show up until media exposure exceeds a certain point. For example, viewing television generally does not have a negative influence on academic performance until it reaches about 30 hours per week and really begins cutting into study time (Potter, 1987). So if Jane increases her television viewing time from 10 hours to 20 hours per week, she is not likely to show a decrease in academic performance. However, if Bob increases his viewing from 30 to 35 hours per week, his grades are likely to drop. Without an understanding of thresholds, the pattern in this example might not seem possible. It does not seem fair that Jane can increase her TV viewing by 10 hours and experience no negative effect on her grades, but Bob increases his TV viewing time only half as much and his grades go down. This pattern does not make sense unless we understand what it means to cross a threshold. This is why it is so important to understand that the effects process is a continuum. It matters where you are on that continuum. If your risk set-point is close to the manifestation level, a small change in your media exposure may be enough to push you over the threshold, while someone else experiences far more exposures and never manifests the negative effect you suffer.

4. *Contingent conditions.* When we expose ourselves to the media, we bring into play our own motives, expectations, and emotions. Each of these can contribute to or take away from the effect. Also, as we interpret the meaning of messages, our skills come into play. For example, if Greg watches a violent fight on television and sees that the perpetrator was attractive and rewarded, he is likely to begin behaving aggressively. Here, the violent message leads to aggressiveness. If Cindy has poor attention skills as she watches the same violence, she might not understand the meaning of the violence and become confused, not aggressive. The violence in this case leads to confusion. Marcia watches the same violent message but laughs at it, because she thinks it is farcical and unrealistic. In this case, the violence leads to laughter. From these three examples, can we say that violent messages lead to aggressive behavior? In general, there is no consistent pattern. The answer depends on the message and the person. When we use an approach that takes all these simultaneous factors into consideration, we discover that *under certain conditions,* violent messages can cause aggressive behavior. In short, the effect is contingent on certain conditions; it cannot be generalized to all people and all conditions.

5. *Nature of causation.* When we think of attributing effects to the media, we raise the issue of causation. After all, if the media do not cause the effect, how can we say that the media have had an influence? However, there are several ways of thinking about causation. One way is to think about

whether the media determine an effect. Another way is to think about whether the media influence the probability of an effect. Given the nature of social science research, it is far better to think the second way.

Causation has a special meaning for social scientists. If an argument for a causal relationship is to be convincing, it must demonstrate three conditions. First, there must be a relationship between the hypothesized cause and the observed effect. Second, the cause must always precede the effect in time. Third, all alternative causes for the effect must be eliminated.

The problem with making a strong case for the media causing certain effects lies with the second and third conditions. To illustrate, let's consider the hypothesis that television violence causes aggressive behavior among viewers. Because a great deal of research has been conducted to test this hypothesis, researchers are generally able to meet the first condition: showing that there is a relationship between exposure to violence and a person being more likely to exhibit aggressive attitudes and even behaviors. However, researchers have a great deal of difficulty meeting the remaining two conditions. Except for short-term experiments, it is very difficult to argue convincingly that the viewing of TV violence precedes a person's aggression. Aggressive behavior (which is the presumed effect) often precedes the TV viewing (which is the presumed cause). Aggressive people often seek out violent content in programming. Viewing the content, then, reinforces their aggressiveness, which leads them to watch more violence. At best, the relationship is reciprocal where each of the two factors is (to a certain extent) the cause of the other.

The requirement of ruling out alternative explanations is also a problem for social scientists. A person's aggressive behavior could have been triggered by nonmedia factors such as a history of frustration, trait aggressiveness, lack of conditioning to avoid aggressiveness, the need to defend oneself with extreme measures, and so on.

If we can get beyond the simple thinking of looking for one determinant of a negative effect and can think more broadly in terms of combinations of factors working in interaction to cause an effect, we are thinking probabilistically. As we have seen above, deterministic causation seeks to explain influences in a simple manner; that is, the argument is that one thing (the media) caused the effect (aggressive behavior). At times, many of these influences may all act in unison to push someone in a particular direction. When this happens, none of these individual influences can be regarded as causing or determining the outcome by themselves. Instead, each of the factors contributes its own special push; that is, each increases the probability of an effect.

Media effects are almost always probabilistic, not deterministic. There are many factors about the audiences, the messages, and the environment that increase the probability that an effect will manifest itself.

D. Factors in the Process of Influence

Almost an infinite number of factors could conceivably exert some influence on the effects process. However, six groups of factors should command most of our attention. These six factors are: developmental maturity, abilities, drives, sociological factors, states, and media content.

The relative importance of each of those individual influences changes according to the effect. This point emerges clearly when reading reviews of the effects literature on violent television content (Bushman & Huesmann, 2001), horror films (Cantor, 2001), sexual content (Malamuth & Impett, 2001), prosocial content (Mares & Woodward, 2001), advertising (Kunkel, 2001), and popular music (Roberts & Christenson, 2001).

The following discussion is by no means an inventory of all factors. It is far too early in the history of media effects research to have achieved such a goal. It is hoped that this list can serve as an organizer of the information that exists at our current plateau of knowledge and that it will suggest an agenda for future media effects research.

1. *Developmental maturity*. This factor is especially important during childhood, and this is why children are often treated as a special group when it comes to the media. Our capacities increase from infancy through adolescence. This is obvious physically; that is, as we age from infancy, we are able to run faster, jump higher, and lift heavier objects.

We also mature cognitively, emotionally, and morally. When we are very young, our minds, emotions, and moral reasoning are beginning to develop and thus have a lower ceiling of capacity than when these characteristics are more fully developed.

2. *Abilities*. Developmental maturity defines potentialities; that is, at a given age, there are limits to what a person can understand, feel, and reason morally. In this section, I deal with abilities, which are more likely to be under a person's control; when people use their abilities well, they can achieve their potential.

There is evidence that certain people are cognitively developed to a level where they might achieve certain things, but they do not exercise their abilities to achieve that potential. For example, Piaget's theory says that children are fully developed cognitively and therefore are capable of adult thinking (formal operations) at age 12. However, King (1986) conducted a review of the published literature that tested the formal reasoning abilities of adults and concluded that "a rather large proportion of adults do not evidence

formal thinking, even among those who have been enrolled in college" (p. 6). This conclusion holds up over the 25 studies she analyzed, including a variety of tests of formal reasoning ability, and over a variety of samples of adults 18 to 79 years old. In one third of the samples, less than 30% of the respondents exhibited reasoning at the fully formal level, and in almost all samples, no more than 70% of the adults were found to be fully functioning at the formal level.

Ability to reason morally is not always shown to be more advanced with age. For example, Van der Voort (1986) found no evidence that children judge violent behavior more critically in a moral sense as they age. He found no reduction in the approval of "the good guy's" behavior, and as children aged, they were even more likely to approve of the violent actions of "the bad guys." So while children acquire additional cognitive abilities with age, they do not necessarily acquire additional moral insights. There is a range of moral development among people of any given age. Also, older children do not automatically have higher moral development than younger children.

3. *Drives.* Drives energize action. They are shaped by motivations. Some motivations are relatively enduring whereas others are temporary. For example, when people have a conscious need for a particular kind of information, they will actively seek out this type of information in the media, and the chance of their learning from this experience is high. People who are better educated with higher intelligence are more motivated and have a stronger drive to seek out information from the media (Roberts, 1973). These people select the information that has the greatest utility to them.

4. *Sociological factors.* The effects of the mass media are moderated by sociological factors such as conditioning by society and its institutions. If people hear a fact that is counter to their political and religious beliefs, they are likely to discount the fact and forget it or to remember it as an example of a falsehood. Thus, the degree to which people are socialized by certain institutions influences the degree to which the media can have an effect (Comstock, 1980; Murray, 1980).

Another sociological factor is interpersonal networks. People with strong interpersonal ties will use them to filter media messages (Comstock, 1980; Liebert & Schwartzberg, 1977). The more a person identifies with a peer group and the more cohesive that group is, the more the person will be influenced by the group and the less effect the media will have.

5. *States.* A state is a drive or emotional reaction that occurs in response to some temporary stimulus. It is relatively short-lived. Often, something will

happen in our lives that will cause us to feel angry or frustrated. This state can interact with media content and lead to certain effects. For example, someone who is frustrated and then views violence will be much more likely to behave aggressively than if only one of these conditions is present.

The media frequently generate states. Perhaps the most important state is arousal. When viewers are aroused, their attention is more concentrated, and the experience is more vivid for them. They will remember the portrayals more vividly and will be more likely to act while aroused (Comstock et al., 1978; Zillmann, 1991).

Certain production techniques tend to arouse viewers. These techniques include fast cuts, quick motion within a frame, loud music, and sound effects. Also, certain narrative conventions (such as suspense, fear, life-threatening violence, and erotica) can lead to arousal.

Identification with particular characters is also a key factor in the effects process, because people will pay more attention to those characters with whom they identify. We become involved in the media-depicted events through a psychological relationship with the characters in a two-step process. First, we make a judgment about how much we are attracted to the character and how much the character is like us—or how we would like to be. Second, we engage in an "as if" experience in which we imagine ourselves in the role of the character. Viewers form strong attachments to certain characters, depending on what those characters do and say (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). The stronger the attachment is, the stronger the probability of an effect (Bandura, 1986, 1994).

6. *Media content.* The content of the messages matters a great deal. For example, people who expose themselves to news are likely to learn about current events whereas people who expose themselves to soap operas will learn what the characters have done that day. Both types of content result in learning, but the type of learning is different.

Content differences also influence long-term effects. People who watch a lot of television (regardless of the particular shows) have been found to develop a belief that the world is a mean and violent place, because there is so much crime and violence across the television landscape (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979). This is especially true for people who watch mostly crime and action/adventure programs (Potter, 1991). People who watch only prosocial programming, such as *Misterogers Neighborhood, Sesame Street*, and similar programs, are likely to experience a different effect.

When the media present a relatively constant picture of a social world, their effect is more powerful because all the content is pointing to the same

type of effect. When the media present messages that are the same as those presented by institutions such as family, education, religion, and the legal system, then all those messages reinforce one another. When there are differences across messages, the media messages are often regarded as the most important. This is especially true for people who spend more time with the media than other institutions and for people who like, trust, or are aroused more by the media messages than messages from other sources.

The context of portrayals is also influential. People learn social lessons by watching what happens to people and characters they observe in the media. For example, if a character's behavior is portrayed as being successful and rewarded, the viewer will learn that behavior was good and useful. If the behavior is punished, the viewer will learn that the behavior is bad and should not be tried (Bandura, 1994). Also influential are characters who are attractive and who perform actions that appear justified.

IV. Real World

People need a strong knowledge structure of information gained from real-world (in contrast to media) sources. For many experiences, the media provide relatively accurate information; this is the case with in-depth news reporting. Also, with many topics, the media provide the only source of information. For example, very few people know what the President, Cabinet members, and Congress people do all day without the coverage from national news organizations.

The media, however, also present distorted pictures of the real world. When people use that distorted information as a basis for their own decisions about how to function in the real world, they can increase their risk for negative effects.

If a person's knowledge structure is composed primarily of information only from the media, then this structure may be dominated by media-stimulated generalizations and internalizations from the media world. With many topics, we have no choice but to rely primarily on media information. This is what makes the media so powerful a socializing influence: We cannot check out the media information by comparing it to information from other sources such as real life. For example, almost no one knows what it feels like to be a professional athlete. We are given some insights about what the life of a professional athlete might be like, but almost no one has an opportunity to check those insights out for themselves. This is true for almost all content of news. The same is true for much fictional programming. Viewers do not know what it feels like to be a detective, an emergency room doctor, a press secretary, or many other characters portrayed on TV. Because viewers do not have an

opportunity to check it out in real life, it is impossible to prove the messages false or inaccurate. When people are asked if TV entertainment is credible and a reasonable representation of the way people live, most people say yes. As people increase their amount of viewing, their perception of the reality of TV entertainment programs increases. This is especially true among children and those who have the least amount or variety of real world experiences.

But much of the information from the media does not reflect the real world very well (Potter 2001). Analyses of the content of the television world of fiction repeatedly show that the patterns there are different than those in the real world in terms of gender and ethnic make-up (Greenberg, Edison, Korzenny, Fernandez-Collado, & Atkin, 1980), acts of violence (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980; Potter 1999), sexual activity (Kunkel et al., 1999; Sapolsky & Tabarlet, 1990), use of drugs and alcohol (Hartman, 1999), portrayals of families (Douglas & Olsen, 1996), portrayals of government employees (Aversa, 1999), and even values (Comstock, 1989; Potter, 1990). This is the case not only with fiction but also with news. A great many important happenings are not covered by the news (Jensen, 1997). National news overemphasizes only parts of this country (Graber, 1988) and only occurrences that follow a certain formula (Fishman, 1980). Also, news coverage focuses on high-profile examples and ignores the larger context surrounding the issue (Bagdikian, 1992; Parenti, 1986). Thus, it is important that people increase their nonmedia sources of information.

V. The Self

People need a strong knowledge structure about their own self to be media literate. Unless they have a good self-awareness, they will not know their own goals for life, their own strengths and weaknesses, and their own knowledge style. Without awareness in these areas, they cannot build a strong personal locus to control the meaning-construction task.

People are constantly developing their personality—the essence of who they are, as psychologists call it. In this construction of self, people use information they get from the media (Grodin & Lindlof, 1996; McDonald & Kim, 2001). People search out stories with characters who serve as models. Caughey (1986) goes so far as to claim that all contact with media is a form of social interaction and that in these interactions, people identify with characters and try to imitate them in some form. At the extreme case, people try to become the characters they use as role models in the media.

Some people look for themselves in the media, and that can be a positive thing if they realize that the media provide suggestions for what lives could be like in certain settings, with certain types of people, and with certain

professions. To separate themselves from the media world and have their own unique perspective on the media so they can use the media rather than have the media use them, people need to be clear about their personalities in two areas: their personal knowledge style and their personal goals. This awareness is essential to one's locus.

A. Personal Knowledge Style

People differ in terms of their styles of encountering and using information. These styles are based on a person's basic cognitive, emotional, and moral development in general as well as five factors in particular. This idea is developed in detail in the next chapter.

B. Personal Goals

This includes both a person's immediate goals and long-term goals. Media literacy requires that people have a correspondence between immediate and long-term goals. When this occurs, the person's immediate goals contribute to the achieving of the long-term goals.

Every day, we have goals for information and entertainment. We seek out messages in the media. These immediate goals are based on information needs as well as emotional needs. Some of these goals are conscious, such as wanting to find out what the weather will be like tomorrow or what the definition of a word is. We know what messages we need to find, and we are aware of how to locate those messages. Other goals are unconscious. These are governed either by drive states or habits. With drive states, we may be feeling bored and have a drive for excitement. We are not sure what would excite us or where to look specifically, so we automatically search the radio or flip through magazines until something gets our attention.

Longer term goals deal more with the core of who we are, who we think we are, and what we want to become. They are more fundamental than the immediate goals and influence those immediate goals. The long-term goals are focused more on career and relationship matters.

VI. Summary

To provide a strong foundation for media literacy, people need strong knowledge structures in five areas: media content, media industries, media effects, real-world knowledge, and the self. These knowledge structures feed the locus (see next chapter) with information and give people more options for exposures and meaning construction.

The more people know about media content formulas, aggregate patterns of characters, happenings, and values, the more they will be able to appreciate the amazing content of the media and the more they will be able to protect themselves from the spurious content. Also, people need to understand the media industries, how they developed, their economic nature, patterns of ownership and control, and how they market their messages.

Awareness of a full range of media effects is essential to media literacy. We live in a media-saturated environment, and the effects are constantly happening to us as they shape our knowledge patterns, attitudes, emotions, and behaviors. Media effects even trigger physiological reactions, such as our heart rate, blood pressure, and other bodily functions. We don't even need to experience a change to see that the media have had an effect on us, because the most prevalent effect is the movement of risk points along a continuum of influence.

The effects process is a complex one. That is why it requires a person of relatively high media literacy to appreciate the situation. People who are at low levels of awareness about the process of influence will likely think in categorical terms; that is, either there is no effect or there is an effect—in which case it is likely too late to do anything about it. Instead, people need to appreciate that there are many factors that move a person's risk set-point along a continuum of risk. The more people can control the positive factors to influence the positioning of the set-point, the more they will be in a position to make media exposures lead to the effects they want and to avoid the effects they do not want. The more aware people are about what factors influence risk, the better they can control the process of influence. They can arrange to include factors for those effects they want, thus increasing the probability that the desired effect will reach manifestation.

Awareness of the real world and self are also important. Without a good set of real-world information, we cannot evaluate the accuracy of many of the media's messages. Also, each of us has a personal information style, which is our general approach to acquiring and processing information. It is a style based on a lifetime of experience with information from the media and nonmedia sources.

A full awareness in these five areas enriches the personal locus, because it gives the person a full range of potentialities. When people understand the messages and the motivations in the industries that produce them, they can understand better the process of influence. They can plan more realistic goals for their exposures. When people recognize the effects that are having a positive influence on them, they can do things to increase those effects. When people recognize when effects are having a negative influence on them, they can do things to decrease those effects.