

Media Literacy

SECOND EDITION

W. James Potter



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Preface

We all live in two worlds: the real world and the media world. The real world is where we come in direct contact with other people, locations, and events. Most of us feel that the real world is too limited, that is, we cannot get all the experiences and information we want from just the real world.

In order to get those experiences and information, we journey into the media world. For example, you might want to know what songs your favorite musical groups have just written. If these groups are not coming to your town soon, you can enter the media world in order to listen to their songs on the radio, look for their videos on MTV, or buy their latest CDs. Or you might feel that your life is boring and you want to experience some exciting romance. You could read a novel, go to a movie, or watch a television program in order to get this kind of experience. Or you might be curious about whether there were any crimes in your town in the past day. You don't want to wander around town all day looking for crimes that are happening, so you watch the news to be brought up to date on crime.

We are continually entering the media world to get experiences and information we cannot get very well in our real lives. When we find these experiences, we bring them back into our real lives. We are constantly crossing the border between the real world and the media world.

In some places, the border between the two worlds is very clear. Few of us over the age of 3 or 4 have any difficulty knowing that cartoons and farces are clearly in the media world and have no chance of existing in the real world. I say "few of us" because even where the border appears obvious to most of us, there are still some people who have difficulty in perceiving when they have crossed it.

There are many places where the border between the real world and the media world is not so clear. To illustrate this, consider the following question: Is the news real? Some of you may reply, "Of course it is real. It's what happened. Journalists do not make up news stories." But when you expose yourself to the news, aren't you in the media world? Reading a newspaper or watching the evening

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

news on television means you have left your world of direct experience and crossed over into the media world. If you were present when an event happened, then it happened in your real world. However, if your exposure to the event is via television, you are experiencing the event in the media world—not the real world—and this makes a difference. Often news coverage is very different from the real-world occurrence; if we were at the newsworthy event, then later saw the news story, we could clearly see those differences, and the line between the real world and the media world would be very clear to us. But what if we did not attend the event and have only the news coverage to tell us what happened? In this case, all we have is the media-world account of the real-world event, and we blur the line between the two worlds when we believe that we are being exposed to real-world events when we are not.

Increasingly, the border between our real world and the media world is becoming harder to discern. More and more often, the media do not wait for us to cross over into their world; they bring their messages into our world. Because much of our exposure to media messages is not planned by us, we don't realize how great our media exposure is. Consider the exposure you have to media messages every day in your real world without your being aware of them. For example, there are radio messages coming from other people's cars as you walk down the street in your real world; you pass messages on kiosks, billboards, cars, clothing, and so on. As the media pump messages into our world at an ever increasing rate, the border line becomes blurred. We take almost all of this for granted.

Also contributing to the blurring of the line is the media's presenting many of their messages as "reality" programming. Think about what makes the following programs real, as the media claim: *Cops*, *America's Funniest Home Videos*,

Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?, *Who Wants to Marry a MultiMillionaire?*, the *Jerry Springer Show*, *Blind Date*, *Monday Night Football*. To what extent do these shows fit into your real world and resonate with your real experiences?

IMPORTANCE OF BEING MEDIA LITERATE ■

As the media world grows both bigger and more varied, and as the media pump messages into our world without us deciding to cross into the media world to search for experiences, we are in danger of having our sense of reality taken away from us. We can let this happen, or we can take control of our lives.

Taking control is what media literacy is all about. Becoming more media literate gives you a much clearer perspective on the border between your real world and the world manufactured by the media. When you are media literate, you have clear maps to help you navigate better in the media world so that you can get to those experiences and information you want without becoming distracted by things that are harmful to you. You are able to build the life that *you* want rather than letting the media build the life *they* want for you.

Those who fail to develop their literacy in the media will be swept along on a tide of messages. They will have a false sense that they know what is going on in the world simply because they are exposed to so much information. All of this information is superficial unless you analyze it to build a deeper understanding. Learning all the words in a genre of popular music does not translate into expertise about the recording industry or radio broadcasting. This type of learning does not make people more creative or more able to sing. Knowing a lot about current events presented by news organizations does not necessarily mean we know what the problems in the world are—or how to deal with them. The media can give us a false sense that we are knowledgeable.

Our constant exposure to media messages influences the way we think about the world and about ourselves. It influences our beliefs about crime, education, religion, family, and the world in general. If our exposure is mostly passive, then the mundane details in those messages exert their effect without our awareness. From this massive base of misleading or inaccurate images, we infer our beliefs about the world.

We are constantly faced with the challenge of controlling the media's influence on us—the difference between us and the viewers who wrote letters asking the Coast Guard to rescue Gilligan is a matter of degree. All of us must continually decide how closely media messages reflect real life. Sometimes these decisions are relatively easy; it is simple for most of us to realize that there is nothing in real life anything like *Gilligan's Island*. But some of the decisions are harder to make accurately—especially when they are subtly shaped over a long period of

time by the accumulation of thousands of journeys into the media world. Over time, we have come to accept much of the media world as the real world. For example, who is the President of the United States? Are you sure? Have you ever met him? If you have not met him, how do you know he really exists? If you have met him, how do you know he is who he says he is? I am not trying to make you paranoid. I am only asking you to consider the degree to which you trust the information and experiences you bring from the media world back into your real world. When encountering some of that information you should have a high degree of skepticism, while other information should be accepted by you with a feeling of trust. Do you know which is which?

This is why being media literate is so important. Media messages are not always what they seem. There are often many layers of meanings. The more you are aware of the layers of meaning in messages, the more you can control the selection of which meanings you want. Being more analytical is the first step toward controlling how the media affect you. If you are unaware of the meanings, then the media stay in control of how you perceive the world.

Everette Dennis, formerly Executive Director of the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center at Columbia University in New York, refers to media illiteracy as “potentially as damaging and poisonous to the human spirit as contaminated water and food is to our physical well-being” (Dennis, 1993, p. 4). The metaphor of pollution is apt. The media industries provide us with many products that we desire—products that are good for us; but these same media industries also produce harmful byproducts and dump them into our culture. If we are not media literate, we don’t know the difference and we consume the toxic elements along with the good.

This book shows you how you can become more media literate. It presents a plan of action for you. If you work hard at executing this plan, you will develop your media literacy to a much higher degree. You will acquire a great deal of information about media content, the industries, and their effects on us as individuals and on society. But developing a high degree of media literacy requires more than knowledge; it also requires the development of skills. The more you develop your skills, the more levels of meaning you will be able to perceive in the media. By the end of this book, you should have a highly developed set of skills that will help you elaborate the beginning knowledge structures presented in the heart of this book.

■ ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

This book is composed of 20 chapters that are organized into five parts: Foundations, Content Knowledge Structures, Industry Knowledge Structures, Effects Knowledge Structures, and Putting It All Together.

The four chapters in the Foundations section ask you to confront the questions: *Should* I work on developing my knowledge about the media? Why is this important? And how can I get started? In Chapter 1, I present a definition of media literacy that spreads out across a range of skills and knowledge. Chapter 2 shows that certain media literacy skills grow on their own during childhood along several dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and moral. Growth can still take place during adulthood, but we must work at it in specific ways. Chapter 3 lays out the sets of skills required for media literacy, and Chapter 4 defines what I mean by a “knowledge structure.”

Each of the three chapters in Part II helps you build knowledge structures about the content of the media. Chapter 5 focuses on news content, Chapter 6 on entertainment content, and Chapter 7 on advertising content.

The five chapters in Part III deal with important concepts that you can use to build your knowledge structures about media industries. Chapter 8 helps you see the media industries from a historical perspective. Using a life cycle structure, it shows what is behind the innovation and development of the media industries. An economic perspective is used in Chapter 9 in order to show the business foundations of the industries. Chapter 10 shows patterns of ownership and control in the mass media companies. Then in Chapter 11 each of the media industries is profiled to illuminate the historical, economic, and ownership trends. Chapter 12 takes a marketing perspective, as the nature of the audience is presented through the eyes of industry decision makers. The view of the audience has changed drastically from the days of viewing it as a mass.

The five chapters in Part IV deal with the effects of the media. Chapter 13 will help you expand your vision about what constitutes a media effect. Effects are both long term as well as immediate. While they can affect our behavior, they also have profound influences on us cognitively, affectively, and physiologically. And they have positive as well as negative effects.

Chapter 14 lays out the immediate effects, and Chapter 15 lists the long-term effects. The question of how the effects processes work on us is explored in Chapter 16. Those processes are hardly ever simple or direct. More often the media work in concert with many other factors that each serve to increase the probability that an effect may occur. When we take a broader perspective on effects, we can more accurately assess the influence of the media in our lives.

In Chapter 17, the influences of the media are examined in terms of changes in the fundamental institutions of politics, family, religion, and sports. The media, especially television, have forever altered the way these institutions function.

Part V begins with a chapter that illustrates why a broad knowledge of the real world is as important as a thorough knowledge of the media industries. Real-world knowledge helps us check to see if the media are presenting a bal-

anced picture of society. While this chapter cannot present a full inventory of the real-world knowledge a person needs, it presents some examples (such as in the areas of crime, the legal system, government) to illustrate how real-world knowledge is often at odds with the media picture.

The book concludes with two chapters that lay out some key strategies for improving literacy. Chapter 19 synthesizes the findings in the previous 18 chapters to help build your awareness of your own knowledge structures, awareness of how your mind works, and awareness of the key elements in the effects process. This forms the basis for Chapter 20, which presents perspectives to help you develop your own media strategies at three levels: societal, interpersonal, and personal.

As you read each of these chapters, think in terms of developing your knowledge structures. Begin with the thesis statement, the “key idea” of that chapter. Then look at the outline at the beginning of the chapter. It will show you the major branches and each branch’s supporting ideas. Then read the text while continually asking yourself: How does this new information fit in with what I already know? How can I use this? After your first reading, close the book and see how much you can recall. Can you recall only an assortment of facts, or an organized structure? Do the exercises. Continue to think about the ideas as you experience the media in your everyday life. Spontaneously work on parts of the exercise, elaborating and extending your answers. And discuss your growing awareness with others.

This book has a “self-help” tone as it presents guidance and practical exercises to help you achieve higher levels of media literacy. It is not sufficient merely to memorize the facts in each chapter. That alone will not help you increase your media literacy by very much. Instead, you need to internalize the information by drawing it into your own experiences. Continually ask yourself: Can I find an example of this in my own life? How can I apply this when I deal with the media? The exercises at the ends of the chapters will help you get started on this. The more you think through the exercises and the more you develop new exercises for yourself, the more you will be internalizing the information and thus making it more a part of the way you think. For example, in the chapter on media effects, I present a rather long list of possible effects. If you simply memorize this list, it may help you a bit on a test, but it won’t help you become a more empowered consumer of media messages. To develop such power over the effects process, you need to internalize the knowledge about these effects so you can spot them when they occur and protect yourself from the effects you don’t want as well as amplify the effects you do want. The more you practice spotting and naming these effects, the more you will be internalizing the information and acquiring a tool that will be useful for the rest of your life. Thus the concepts are presented as tools to help you achieve more awareness in your everyday life.

In summary, the purpose of this book is to help you develop strong knowledge structures about the media. Will the book provide you with all the information you need? No. That would require too much information to fit in one book; you will need to continue your reading. At the end of most chapters I suggest several books for further reading on the chapter's topic. While some of those books are fairly technical, most are easy to read and very interesting.

This book is an introduction. It is designed to show you the big picture so you can get started efficiently on increasing your own media literacy. It is important to get started now. The world is rapidly changing because of the media. VCRs, computers, the Internet, and other media channels are substantially revising the way the media industries do business and the way we receive information and entertainment.

I hope you will have fun reading this book. And I hope it will expose you to new perspectives from which you can see much more about the media. If it does, you will be gaining new insights into your old habits and interpretations. If this happens, I hope you will share your new insights and "war stories" with me. Much of this book has been written to reflect some of the problems and insights my students have had in the media literacy courses I have taught. I have learned much from them. I'd like to learn even more from you. So let me know what you think and send me a message at: jpotter@ucla.edu.

See you on the journey!

EXERCISE**Becoming Sensitized to Media Message Saturation****PART I: Estimate Your Exposure**

Right now, try to estimate how many minutes and hours you spend with each of the following media during a typical week.

- _____ Watching television (cable, broadcast, movies played on a VCR, etc.)
- _____ Watching films at a theater
- _____ Listening to radio (at home, in your car, etc.)
- _____ Listening to recordings (CDs and tapes)
- _____ Reading newspapers
- _____ Reading magazines of all kinds
- _____ Reading books (texts for class, novels for pleasure, etc.)
- _____ Using computers (games, word processing, surfing the Internet, etc.)
- _____ TOTAL

PART II: Track Your Exposures

Keep a Media Exposure Diary for one week. Get a small notebook—one you can carry with you wherever you go for 7 days. Every time you are exposed to a message from the media, either directly or indirectly, make an entry of the time and what the message was.

Direct exposures are those where you come in contact with a medium and experience a message during that contact. For example, if you watch *Friends*, write: "Message: *Friends*; Time: Monday 7:00 to 7:30." Listening to KXXX for 30 minutes in the car is also direct exposure.

Indirect exposures are those where you see a reminder of a media message, such as seeing a title of a movie on the marquee of a bus stop. You don't see the film itself (which would be a direct exposure); you see something that reminds you of it. Also, listen to conversations. If people talk about something they heard from the media, then you have been exposed to that media message indirectly. For example, if you heard your friends talk about *General Hospital*, then write: "Message: Talked with friends about *General Hospital*; Time: Tuesday morning 10-11:30." If you happened to hear your roommate humming a popular song that is played often on the radio, write: "Message: Roommate hummed X song; Time: Wednesday all day!"

At the end of the week, examine the entries in your diary to answer the following questions:

1. How much total time were you exposed to media messages?
2. How many exposures did you experience during the week?
3. What proportions of the exposures were direct and indirect?
4. What proportion of media exposures were initiated by you (active)?
and what proportion just happened (passive)?
5. How do your diary data compare to your estimates from Part I?
6. What kinds of messages were most prevalent?

PART III: Avoiding Exposure

Choose a day as Media Message Avoidance Day. When you get up in the morning, do not turn on your radio, television, or stereo. See how long you can go without exposing yourself to a message from the media. How long can you go without accidentally seeing/hearing an actual media message or a reference to a media message?

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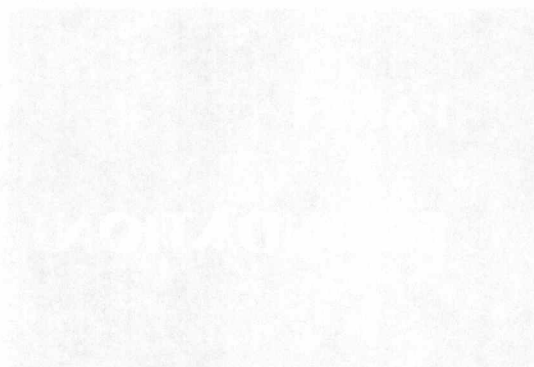
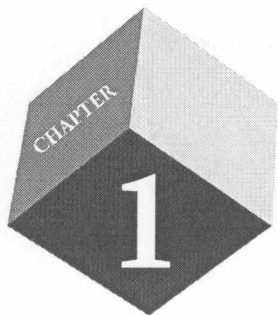
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PART I

FOUNDATIONS



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

Defining Media Literacy

- The Definition

- Importance of Information

- Importance of Skills

Supporting Ideas

- Media literacy is a continuum, not a category.

- Media literacy is multi-dimensional.

- The purpose of media literacy is to give us more control over interpretations.

Conclusion

What Is Media Literacy?

Most of us think we are fairly media literate. We know the names of a great many television shows, films, magazines, books, and songs. We recognize the names and faces of celebrities. We know how to read. We can easily follow plots in movies and television shows. We know what flashbacks mean, and we know enough to get scared when the soft background music builds to a shattering crescendo as a character steps into danger. We might even know how to play games on a computer and program a VCR. Clearly we know how to expose ourselves to the media; we know how to absorb information from them; and we know how to be entertained by them.

Are we media literate? Yes, of course. We have acquired a great deal of information and developed remarkable skills. The ability to speak a language, read, and understand photographs are achievements that we too often take for granted.

We should not overlook what we have accomplished. However, it is also important to acknowledge that we all can be *much more* media literate. So while it is good to celebrate the abilities we have developed, we must also recognize that there is considerable room for improvement.

Improvement in what way? A starting place for thinking about improvement is a broad definition of what it means to be media literate.

DEFINING MEDIA LITERACY ■■

In the minds of many people, the term *literacy* is most associated with the print media, so it means the ability to read (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Sinatra, 1986). Some people expand the term to include *visual literacy* as they think about other media such as film and television (Goodwin & Whannel, 1990; Messaris, 1994). Other writers have used the term *computer literacy* (Adams & Hamm, 1989). Reading literacy, visual literacy, and computer literacy are not synonyms