CHAPTER 3

The Media Literacy Model

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As we learned in the first chapter, we are flooded with messages from the media. We cannot possibly pay attention to all of them or even to a majority of them; we must screen out most of them. To help us do this screening with the least amount of mental effort, we use a default form of processing the messages; that is, we stay in a state of automaticity. While we are in this state, we automatically screen out messages without thinking about the process until a particular message triggers our attention.

There are some serious disadvantages to this default model, as you saw in the previous chapter. To avoid experiencing these disadvantages, we need to get in the habit of using another model of encountering messages—the media literacy model. Learning to use this model requires more effort than simply staying with the default model. But this effort will be worth it because it will help us gain much more control over our exposure habits and the way meaning is constructed in our everyday lives.

The media literacy model (see Figure 3.1) emphasizes four major factors. At the foundation is the factor of knowledge structures. The combination of knowledge structures feeds information into the second factor, which is the personal locus. This is where decisions about information processing are motivated. The third factor is a person's set of

Figure 3.1   The Cognitive Model of Media Literacy
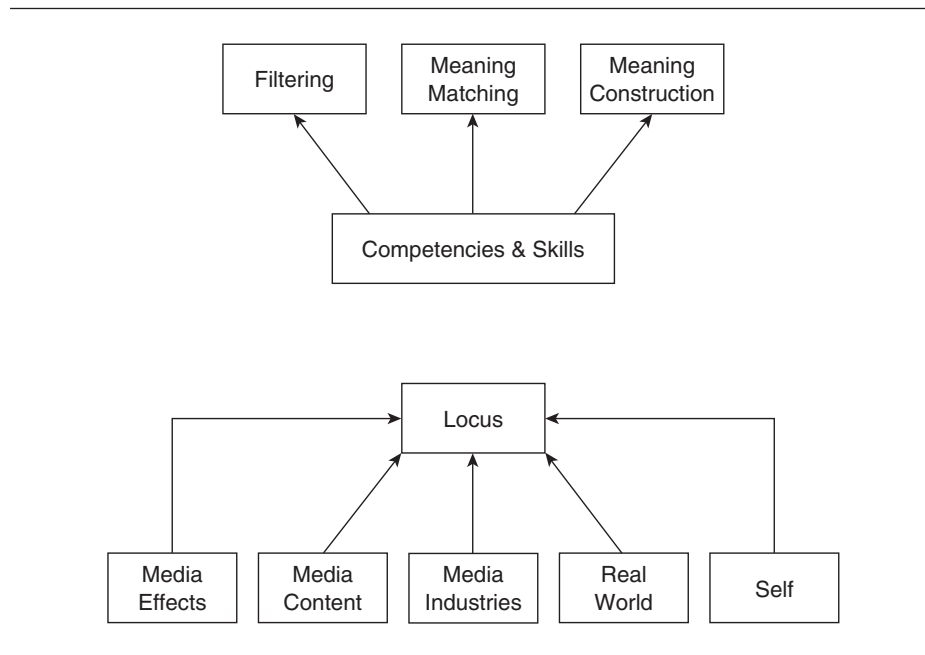
competencies and skills, which are the information-processing tools. And the fourth factor is the flow of information-processing tasks. The four factors work together interactively in a system. Let's examine each of these four factors in more detail.

Knowledge Structures

The foundation of building media literacy is a set of five strong knowledge structures. The foundational knowledge structures are media effects, media content, media industries, the real world, and the self. With knowledge in these five areas, people are much more aware during the information-processing tasks and are therefore more able to make better decisions about seeking out information, working with that information, and constructing meaning from it that will be useful to serve their own goals. The information that makes these awarenesses possible resides in knowledge structures.

Knowledge structures are sets of organized information in a person's memory. Knowledge structures do not occur spontaneously; they must be built with care and precision. They are not just a pile of facts; they are made by carefully crafting pieces of

information into an overall design. To perform such a task, we rely on a set of skills. These skills are the tools. We use these tools to mine through the large piles of facts, so that we can uncover the particular facts we need and brush away the rest. Once we have selected the facts we need, we shape those facts into information and carefully fit those pieces of information into their proper place in a structure. The structure helps us see the patterns. We use these patterns as maps to tell us where to get more information and also where to go to retrieve information we have previously crafted into our knowledge structure.

Information is the essential ingredient in knowledge structures. But not all information is equally useful to building a knowledge structure. Some information is rather superficial, such as the names of television shows or the melodies of popular music. If all a person has is the recognition of surface information such as lyrics to television show theme songs, names of characters and actors, settings for shows, and the like, he or she is operating a low level of media literacy because this type of information only addresses the question of "what." The more useful information comes in the form of the answers to the questions of "how" and "why." But remember that you first need to know something about the "what" before you can delve deeper into the questions of how and why.

People who have had a wider range of experiences in the real world have a broader base from which to appreciate and analyze media messages. For example, those who have helped someone run for political office can understand and analyze press coverage of political campaigns to a greater depth than those who have not had any real-world experience with political campaigns. People who have played sports will be able to appreciate the athletic accomplishments they see on television to a greater depth than those who have not physically tested themselves on those challenges. People who have had a wide range of relationships and family experiences will have a higher degree of understanding and more in-depth emotional reactions to those portrayals in the media.

Knowledge structures provide the context we use when trying to make sense of new media messages. The more knowledge structures we have, the more confident we can be in making sense of a wide range of messages. For example, you may have a very large, well-developed knowledge structure about popular music. You may know the names of all the important musical groups (as well as all of their members and managers), all their songs, the dates of those songs, which awards each group has earned, and what the critics have said about every song. If you have all of this information well organized so that you can recall any of it at a moment's notice, you have a well-developed knowledge structure about popular music. If some people, for example, were to claim that there were only three members of the Backstreet Boys, you would argue with them and have complete confidence that they were wrong and you were right. Your knowledge structure about popular music prevents you from being misled. Are you media literate? Within the small corner of the media world where popular music resides, you are. But if this were the only knowledge structure you had developed, you would have little understanding of the content produced by the other media. You would have difficulty understanding trends about who owns and controls the media, how the media have developed over time, why certain kinds of content

are never seen while other types are continually repeated, and what effects that content may be having on you. With many highly developed knowledge structures, you could understand the entire span of media issues and therefore be able to "see the big picture" about why the media are the way they are.

Personal Locus

Personal locus is a term that refers to that which governs the information-processing tasks. It also shapes meaning matching and meaning construction.

The personal locus is composed of goals and drives. The goals shape the information-processing tasks by determining what gets filtered in and what gets ignored. The more you are aware of your goals, the more you can direct the process of information seeking. And the stronger your drives for information are, the more effort you will expend to attain your goals. However, when the locus is weak (you are not aware of particular goals and your drive energy is low), you will default to media control; that is, you allow the media to exercise a high degree of control over exposures and information processing.

The more you know about this locus and the more you make conscious decisions to shape it, the more you can control the process. The more you pay conscious attention to your locus, the more you control the process of information acquisition and usage. The more you engage your locus, the more you will be increasing your media literacy.

Being media literate, however, does not mean that the locus is always fully engaged. This is an impossible task because no one can maintain that high a degree of concentration continuously. Media literacy is a process, not a product. Therefore, becoming more media literate means that a person uses the locus more (thus less time with mindless exposures) and uses it more actively.

The locus operates in two modes: conscious and unconscious. When the locus operates in the conscious mode, you are aware of options and can exercise your will in making decisions. In contrast, when the locus operates in the unconscious mode, the decisions are made outside of your awareness and control. In both modes, knowledge structures can get formed and elaborated. However, when you are consciously using your locus, you are in control of the information processing and meaning making, but when your locus is operating in the unconscious mode, the media exert their most powerful effect. The locus is in the unconscious mode when we follow the default model and are in a state of automaticity.

Competencies and Skills

After the personal locus provides the plan and the drive energy, tools are needed to execute the plan. Those tools are competencies and skills. Competencies are the tools people

have acquired to help them interact with the media and to access information in the messages. Competencies are learned early in life, then applied automatically. Competencies are relatively dichotomous; that is, either people are able to do something or they are not able. For example, either people know how to recognize a word and match its meaning to a memorized meaning or they do not. Having competencies does not make one media literate, but lacking these competencies prevents one from being media literate because this deficiency prevents a person from accessing particular kinds of information. For example, people who do not have a basic reading competency cannot access printed material. This will greatly limit what they can build into their knowledge structures. This will also suppress the drive states in the locus; people who cannot read will have very low motivation to expose themselves to printed information.

Skills, in contrast, are tools that people develop through practice. Skill ability is not dichotomous; instead, there is a wide range of ability on skills. On any given skill, some people have little ability, whereas other people have enormous ability. Also, skills are like muscles. Without practice, skills become weaker. With practice and exercise, they grow stronger. When the personal locus has strong drive states for using skills, those skills have a much greater chance of developing to stronger levels.

The skills most relevant to media literacy are analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstraction (see Figure 3.2). 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

Figure 3.2   The Seven Skills of Media Literacy

1. Analysis—breaking down a message into meaningful elements

2. Evaluation—judging the value of an element; the judgment is made by comparing the element to some criterion

3. Grouping—determining which elements are alike in some way; determining which elements are different in some way

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

5. Deduction—using general principles to explain particulars

6. Synthesis—assembling elements into a new structure

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

that they have reading competency, yet they still practice reading. At these more advanced grades, however, 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 read aloud in high school, it is to check students' skill at reading for meaning and expression.

Media literacy is much more concerned with addressing improvement of skills rather than the attainment of competencies. Although competencies are relatively high, 20% of the adult population in this country cannot read. This is a large percentage when we think of the educational system failing to teach one in five people the basic competency of reading; these people are having their exposure to media messages severely limited, and it is important that we have advocates for reading literacy to work on shrink this percentage. However, the larger concern is with the other 80% of the adult population who has the basic competencies but may be lacking the level of skills needed to be media literate. 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 control over of how people see the world.

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

Information-Processing Tasks

The three information-processing tasks are filtering, meaning matching, and meaning construction (see Figure 3.3). These tasks are ordered in a sequence of information processing. First, we encounter a message and are faced with the task of deciding whether to filter the message out (ignore it) or filter it in (process it). If we decide to filter it in, then we must make sense of it, that is, to recognize the symbols and match our learned definitions for the symbols. Next, we need to construct the meaning of the message.

Figure 3.3   Summary of Three Tasks of Information Processing

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<u>Filtering Message</u>

Task: To make decisions about which messages to filter out (ignore) and which to filter in (pay attention to)
Goal: To attend to only those messages that have the highest utility and avoid all others
Focus: Messages in the environment

<u>Meaning Matching</u>

Task: To use basic competencies to recognize symbols and locate definitions for each
Goal: To efficiently access previously learned meanings
Focus: Symbols in messages

<u>Meaning Construction</u>

Task: To use skills in order to move beyond meaning matching and construct meaning for one's self to get more out of a message
Goal: To interpret messages from more than one perspective as a means of identifying the range of meaning options, then choosing one or synthesizing across several
Focus: One's own knowledge structures

The processing of information begins with the task of filtering. How can we make good decisions about filtering messages in a way that, on one hand, protects us from the negative effects of being overwhelmed or from having our minds shaped by forces outside our control and, on the other hand, helps us take advantage of the positive effects? And furthermore, how can we achieve this in a relatively efficient manner?

Once we have filtered in messages, we need to determine their meaning. Meaning matching requires basic competencies to recognize elements in the message and access our memory to find out which meaning we have learned is associated with that element. This is a relatively automatic task. Increasing media literacy requires that we not stop with this task but that we move on to meaning construction. If we simply accept the surface meaning from the media messages and do not construct meaning for ourselves, we are in danger of negative effects. Some of these effects are relatively minor, but many are more profound and change the way we think about reality, truth, and ourselves. Ignoring the problem makes it worse because the messages will continue to aggressively invade our subconscious and shape our fundamental values as well as the way we think.

Media messages are not always the way they seem. There are often many layers of meanings. The more that people are aware of the layers of meaning in messages, the more they can control the selection of which meanings they want. The constant exposure to media messages influences the way we think about the world and ourselves. It influences our beliefs about crime, education, religion, families, 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.

Some people perform these information-processing tasks better than others are therefore more media literate than other people. Each of these tasks relies on a different set of skills. The more developed one's set of skills is, the more media literate one is. Each task relies on knowledge structures. The more developed one's knowledge structures are, the more media literate one is.

Summary

Media literacy works in contrast to the default model of processing media information. The media literacy model features four major factors: knowledge structures, personal locus, competencies and skills, and the flow of information-processing tasks. Each of these factors works interactively in a system.

Processing of information can take place either consciously or unconsciously. With conscious processing, the individual is aware of goals, exercises careful selection of information, and is able to exert a relatively high degree of control. With unconscious processing, the individual is unaware of the schema-driven automatic processing and therefore is not able to exercise any degree of control over the process. Media literacy requires that individuals spend more time and effort with conscious processing.

Media literacy is a broad perspective. It is not limited to reading or to any other single skill. Media-literate people are able to see much more in a given message. They are more aware of the levels of meaning. This enhances understanding. They are more in charge of the process of meaning making and selection. This enhances control. They are much more likely to get what they want from the messages. This enhances appreciation. Thus, people operating at higher levels of media literacy fulfill the goals of higher understanding, control, and appreciation.

At the foundation of media literacy is a set of five well-developed knowledge structures. We build these knowledge structures by using our skills to select information. Then we assemble those selections into meaningful designs. These knowledge structures inform our locus and provide context for the information-processing tasks.

Further Reading

Potter, W. J. (2005). *Becoming a strategic thinker.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. (183 pages, including index)

This book focuses on eight skills essential for success in higher education. These are essentially the skills needed for media literacy in the information-processing tasks of filtering and meaning construction.