CHAPTER 5

Reality and Media Messages

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

What Is Reality?
   Magic Window
   Other Dimensions

Organizing Principle: Next Step Reality
   Audience’s Perspective
   Programmers’ Perspective

The Importance of Media Literacy

Conclusion

We all live in two worlds: the real world and the media world. Most of us feel that the real world is too limited; that is, we cannot get all the experiences and information we want in the real world. To get those experiences and information, we journey into the media world. For example, you might feel that your life is too boring and you want to experience some exciting romance. You could read a novel, go to a movie, or watch a television program to get this kind of experience. Or you might be curious about what happened in your city today, so you watch the evening news, where reporters take you to all the places of the day’s actions—crime scenes, fire locations, courthouses, sporting arenas. Although these are all real-world locations, you are not visiting them in the real world. Instead, you enter the media world to visit them.
We are continually entering the media world to get experiences and information we cannot get very well in our real lives. We enter the media world to expand our real-world experience and to help us understand the real world better. But those experiences we have in the media world are different than if we had experienced them directly in the real world. We often forget this as we bring media-world experiences back into our real world. As we constantly cross the border between the real world and the media world, the border sometimes gets blurred, and over time we tend to forget which memories are from experiences in the real world and which were originally experienced in the media world.

This blurring of the line and the interlacing of memories makes it important that we spend some mental energy considering the nature of reality and how the reality of the two worlds is different.

What Is Reality?

Reality is one of the most difficult concepts to define in any context. Philosophers have been trying to define it for millennia, and ever since the field of psychology was founded more than a dozen decades ago, psychologists have been almost exclusively dealing with the fundamental problem of how the human mind encounters the world and seeks to make sense of what is real.

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

Magic Window

Media scholars have encountered the issue of determining reality primarily as a concern in dealing with children. The assumption has been that children see the media, especially television, as a magic window on the world. Psychologists believe that young children perceive television as the simple, unvarnished truth of what is happening in the real world. Media researchers have found that very young children (younger than 3 years of age) do regard television as a magic window, but as children's minds mature cognitively (especially from ages 3 to 5), they develop a skepticism about the literal reality of media messages, and they are better able to distinguish reality from fantasy (Taylor & Howell, 1973). By age 5, children can distinguish between fictional programs and news or
documentary. At this point, children clearly know what fiction is, but they continue to develop a better understanding about nonfiction as they grow older and as their experience with news shows messages (Wright, Huston, Reitz, & Piemiat, 1994).

Researchers have labeled this shift away from a magic window belief in the literal reality of media messages as “adult discount,” where children begin thinking like adults and are more skeptical of the reality of the messages (Hawkins, 1977). Most researchers seem to believe that children have fully incorporated an adult discount into their thinking by age 12.

There is evidence, however, that not all people apply an adult discount by the time they reach age 12. For example, Van der Voort (1986) found that although children’s perceptions of reality decreased from ages 9 to 12 for fantasy programs, there was no change in their perceptions of the reality of so-called reality programs. It appears that children base their perceptions of reality not on the accuracy of portrayals or information but on the probability that something could occur in their lives. By age 12, they have not developed an understanding that, in many ways, news is a construction by journalists, just as fiction programming is a creation of writers.

It appears that many adults may not have reached this stage (see Box 5.1). The people who wrote to the Coast Guard, begging them to rescue Gilligan and his friends from the island, appear silly. You might be thinking that such a problem with reality is rare in adults. But is it? How many adults believe the matches in the World Wrestling Federation television programs are real? How many adults who watch docudramas have difficulty perceiving the line between what actually happened and what was fictionalized? How many adults have trouble distinguishing between the reality and fantasy in facts presented by political candidates in mediated debates? How many adults realize that news programs, with their filtering processes and story construction formula, substantially change the picture of what actually happens and instead present a distorted version of what the world is like?

Box 5.1

In 1964, Sherwood Schwartz produced a show called Gilligan’s Island. This was a farcical comedy where seven characters who had been on a pleasure cruise encountered a storm that left them shipwrecked on an island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. After about six episodes had aired, Schwartz was contacted by the Coast Guard and told that it had received several dozen telegrams from people who were complaining that the military should send a ship to rescue these seven people. Those telegrams were serious. Schwartz was dumbfounded, calling this the “most extreme case of suspension of belief I every 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).
Now in the first years of the new millennium, one of the most popular shows on television is Survivor, which bills itself as reality television. This show purportedly takes 16 real people and puts them in a wilderness setting where the individuals depend on each other for survival (food, shelter, fire). At the same time, they are competing against one another for $1 million. In what sense is this show real? The players were selected from thousands of applicants not because they were ordinary people but on the basis of their potential attractiveness to audiences and their ability to generate conflict. The situation is artificial in the sense that none of these people lives their typical life in the wilderness, and none (with the exception of the all-star season) has played this game before—or any game for $1 million. Although the setting looks like a deserted wilderness, the players are not really alone. There are dozens of production people, including camera crews, sound engineers, crews to design and build sets for the challenges and tribal councils, and the host Jeff Probst. Where do these production people live? How do they get to the survivors’ camps to tape them? Are there helicopter and boat crews? How do all these production people eat—are there cooks? How does their food get to the island? The show is not scripted in the sense that dialog has been written by a member of the Writers Guild of America. But each contestant carefully writes his or her own lines, in the sense that the contestant’s interactions are highly calculated to put himself or herself in the best position to win the game. Also, the show is carefully edited to present to the viewing public the most dramatic version of what takes place. The 960 hours over the course of the 40 days of the game are edited down to about 10 hours that are shown to the public. That is only 1% of what happened. This example makes us confront the issue of where we draw the line between reality and fantasy when something appears in the media. Also, do most adults make this distinction better than most children?

As we age, we do not automatically acquire the ability to make accurate differentiations between reality and fantasy. Believing that we do may be the strongest evidence that our belief in what we think is the reality of the situation is actually a fantasy. Misperceptions of reality are not limited to children. If we are to understand how people make decisions about what is real in the media, we need to look at more dimensions than the magic window one.

Multidimensions of Reality

Frequently, the judgment of reality is multidimensional; that is, we consider multiple characteristics in making judgments of reality. For example, it is possible to judge some science fiction movies (such as Aliens or Star Wars) as being more realistic than many situation comedies on television. A science fiction movie may take place in a fantasy world where no human has ever gone, contain characters that only exist in the imagination, and have laws of physics that are unlike anything on earth; however, the plots, dialog, and themes could be judged as very realistic. In contrast, although a situation comedy make
take place in a house very much like the viewers’ own and have characters that dress like
everyday people and engage in everyday problems, many viewers may roll their eyes and
feel that those comedies have nothing to do with real life. Real people do not act like situ-
ation comedy characters act, and problems in the real world never get neatly resolved in
30 minutes like they do in situation comedies.

The beginning point of judging reality is usually with an assessment of whether a
portrayal actually happened. But viewers rarely stop at this judgment. There is more to
judging reality. Viewers—especially with fictional content—make assessments about
whether something could happen as portrayed. That which could never happen is fantasy.
So the judgment must move beyond the actualities of occurrence and consider the possi-
blities that different characters could be people encountered in real life and that particu-
lar situations could actually occur.

Researchers have found that people will go beyond magic-window considerations and
also judge the reality of media messages along the dimensions of social utility and iden-
tity (Dorr, 1981; Hawkins, 1977; W. J. Potter, 1986). The social utility judgment is based on
whether viewers believe they can use the information in the portrayal in their own lives.
The more fantastic the characters and actions, the less viewers believe they can translate
that information into something they can use in their day-to-day interactions with people.
The identity judgment is based on a feeling of parasocial involvement with particular
characters. The closer a viewer feels to a character, the more real that character is to that
viewer.

Viewers make judgments on these three dimensions in an independent manner; that
is, if a program is perceived as highly realistic on one dimension, the person may or may
not perceive the show as being realistic on the other two dimensions. For example, Star
Trek is likely to be regarded as fantasy when considering it along the magic-window
dimension, but it could be regarded as highly realistic by many on the identity and social
utility dimensions.

More recent research also supports the notion of reality having multiple dimensions.
For example, Albada (2000) provides evidence that people talk about the families on televi-
sion in terms of their realism and structure. Furthermore, people feel that the way families
are portrayed on television influences their own expectations of family life, valued features
of family, and communication with family members. Also, Hall (2003) conducted a series of
focus groups in which she asked participants to conceptualize media realism. She found
complex definitions that varied by genre and were based on six ideas: factuality, plausibil-
ity, typicality, emotional involvement, narrative consistency, and perceptual persuasiveness.
Factuality is what actually happened. Plausibility is what could happen. Typicality is what
usually happens. Emotional involvement is the degree to which a person’s feelings and sense
of identity are pulled into a message. Narrative consistency refers to the plot of a story and
how well it makes people feel that sequence actions are believable. Perceptual persuasiveness
refers to how real the images look. Of all these six dimensions, it appears that plausibility is the most often used conceptualization used by people to determine the degree of reality in a media message (Hall, 2003).

Another important point to consider is that differences in judgments of reality in media portrayals are likely to be larger across people of the same age compared to the differences in judgments across different age groups. Not every child of the same age is making the same judgments about reality. For example, Van der Voort (1986) reports that perceptions of reality and the degree of identification with characters vary substantially at any given age. In his research, he found that some children became absorbed in watching the violent videos and judged the violence to be realistic, which led to a stronger emotional reaction, which led to a belief that the violence was terrible, which did not lead to aggressive behavior in real life. In contrast, other children who were also absorbed in viewing violence and believed it to be realistic had an uncritical attitude toward program violence, which led to them being more jaded and less emotionally involved, which led to more aggressive behavior in real life.

Up to this point in the chapter, I have shown you how complex the idea of reality can be. We must consider multiple dimensions that are independent from one another. We must consider that children are less capable than adults in making certain kinds of judgments about reality but become more sophisticated on certain dimensions as they age. We must consider that there is wide range of sophistication in making reality judgments across adults. And we must consider that many adults overestimate the degree of reality on so-called reality programs as well as news.

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

Organizing Principle: Next-Step Reality

Much of the complexity in the research about perceptions of reality can be explained simply by the idea of what I call “next-step reality.” When we think about what audiences really want from media messages, we can see that many of their exposure decisions are guided by a desire for “next-step reality.” Also, when we look at decisions from a programmer’s perspective, we can again see the emergence of “next-step reality.” This idea is embedded in how media messages get produced and why certain messages attract large audiences whereas other messages do not. In this section, I bring this idea to the surface and show you how it serves as a useful organizing principle for thinking about all kinds of media content.
Audience’s Perspective

Why do people expose themselves to media messages? At the most fundamental level, they expose themselves to the media to find messages that they cannot get in real life. If people were getting all the messages they needed in real life, they would have no motivation to go to the expense (money and time) to search through the media for these messages.

There are two reasons why people are motivated to get certain messages but go to the media rather than get those messages in real life. One reason is that it is impossible for them to get those messages in real life. For example, for most people, it is impossible to know what the Earth looks like from outer space or what the surface of other planets look like. It is impossible to know what it was like to live on a farm during the American Civil War, to be a knight of the Round Table in medieval England, or to watch Jesus Christ preach. To get access to these images, sounds, and emotions, people must access messages from the media.

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

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

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

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

Producers of fiction know that their art is in telling stories that are “bigger” than life in some way. Producers can take an ordinary setting and a typical plot (boy meets girl) but change the characters so that they are a little more attractive or a little more interesting than people in real life. Or producers can take ordinary characters and put them in a plot that is a bit more dramatic in events and consequences than what happens to most people in real life. Skilled producers can take the audience on a journey by removing the audience one step at a time until they have taken them willingly to an absurd place. This is the formula with farce. The story begins with what looks like an ordinary everyday situation; then, step-by-step, the producer takes the audience far away from that reality but does it in a way that the audience is not lost but willingly awaits each new step. Thus, producers depend on viewers’ willing suspension of disbelief. To make people willing, producers must take it one step at a time.

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

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

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

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

The Importance of Media Literacy

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

There are many places where the border between the real world and the media world is not so clear. To illustrate this, consider the following question: Is the news real? Some of you may reply, “Of course it is real. It is 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 news on television means that you have left your world of direct experience and crossed over into the media world. If you were present when an event happened, then that happening took place in your real world. However, if your exposure to the event is on 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 and 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 only have 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 lines between the two worlds when we believe that we are being exposed to real-world events when we are not. We are being exposed to the media-world interpretation of real-world events. This might at first seem to be a very subtle, insignificant difference. But this is actually a profoundly important difference.

Also contributing to the blurring of the line is the media presenting many of their messages as “reality” programming. Think about what makes the following programs real, as the media claim: Cops, The Bachelor, Extreme Makeover, Blind Date, Fifth Wheel, Cheaters, and Monday Night Football. To what extent do these shows fit into your real world and resonate with your real experiences?

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

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

All of us must continually decide how closely media messages reflect real life and what the implications of those differences are on our beliefs about reality. Sometimes, these decisions about what is real are relatively easy; it is simple for most of us understand 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 subtlety 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 back from the media world into your real world. When encountering some of that information, you should have a high degree of skepticism, but other information should be accepted by you with a feeling of trust. Do you know which is which?

This is why being media literate is so important. Media messages are not always the way they seem. There are often many layers of meanings. Some of those layers are highly unrealistic (never happened in actuality, never will happen, and never could happen), but
they are interlaced among layers of realistic elements that could transform the overall message in your perception from “fantasy” to “it might happen” to “it is likely to happen” to “I need to try this.” The more you are aware of the layers of meaning in messages, the more you can control the selection of which meanings you want. Being more analytical is the first step toward controlling how the media affect you. If you are unaware of the meanings, then the media stay in control of how you perceive the world.

When you understand this organizing principle of next-step reality, you can better appreciate media content. You can focus your analysis on how different media, different vehicles, and different artists achieve the resonance of reality and then take that one step to remove their message from that reality. This is where the artistic talent comes into play. So a good understanding of this concept can help you develop a keener aesthetic sense as you experience individual messages. Also important, this concept should motivate you to ask questions about patterns in the one-step remove. There are patterns of life in the real world, and there are patterns of stories in the media world. The two patterns are not the same. The more you recognize the story patterns and how they are different from real-world life patterns, the less trouble you will have in recognizing the border between reality and fantasy. The next three chapters focus on those media-world patterns and the ways they deviate from real-world patterns.

**Conclusion**

Clearly, the issue of reality entails more than making a simple decision about whether something actually happened. People are able to think in terms of degrees of reality, and when they are assessing the degree of reality, they take into consider more than one dimension.

It is also important to understand that there is not a huge gap between children’s ability to perceive reality accurately and adults’ ability. This is a trap that adults frequently fall into. Being in this trap gives those adults a false sense of security that they do not need to think carefully about the reality of media messages because they are no longer children and therefore are protected by the adult discount. Because the degree of belief in reality is associated with higher negative effects, adults are vulnerable, as are children (Potter, 1986; Rubin, Perse, & Taylor, 1988).

The most useful way to think about reality is with the “next-step reality” organizing principle. This focuses your attention on the degree to which media messages are both real and fantasy. This then sets up more important questions: Which elements in the message do I regard as real, and how did I arrive at that perception? Which elements in the message do I regard as fantasy? To what extent am I attracted to the fantasy and willing to try to make it my reality? Keep these questions in mind as you read through the next three chapters on different types of media content.
Exercise 5.1  Delineating the Elusive Line Between Reality and Fantasy

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

   - Situation comedy
   - Drama (police drama or family drama)
   - “Reality” program (such as Survivor, The Bachelor, Extreme Makeover, The Apprentice, and Cops)
   - News program

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

2. Tabulate Lists: Count all the items you have listed in the Reality Indicators column and write that number at the bottom of that column. Then count all the items you have listed in the Nonreal World column and write that number at the bottom of that column. Do the same for all sheets, so that you have two totals at the bottom of the page for each program you have analyzed for reality.

   Turn totals into percentages. For example, if on one sheet you listed five things in the left column (reality items) and five things in the right column (nonreality items), then this would compute to 50% reality and 50% nonreality. If instead you had one item in the reality column and four items in the unreality column, this would compute to 20% and 80%.

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

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

- With movies
- With stories in magazines
- With newspaper stories
- With Internet sites
- With video games

Do reality proportions vary across the medium?