Key Idea: Individuals are active when processing media messages as they make decisions either consciously or automatically about filtering, meaning matching, and meaning construction. They continually are making these decisions in one of four exposure states: automatic, attentional, transported, and self-reflexive.

Information-Processing Tasks
- Filtering
- Meaning Matching
- Meaning Construction

Analyzing the Idea of Exposure to Media Messages
- Exposure and Attention
- Exposure States

The Media Literacy Perspective

Harry and Ann are discussing their relationship over lunch on campus.

“Harry, you never pay attention to what I say!”

“How can you say that? We spend almost all day together everyday and you are constantly talking,” Harry replies. “I hear what you say.”

“Maybe, but you don’t understand what I say.”

“Yes, I do. I know a lot about you. I know the names of all your brothers and sisters, and where you went to high school, and your favorite color and...”

Ann interrupts, “Those are facts about me. They are not me! You don’t seem to know me.”

“I know the meaning of every word you say. I don’t need a dictionary!”

“There is more to meaning than the definitions of the words I use!”

In interpersonal conversations, we often get ourselves into trouble if we are not careful to make a distinction between literal meaning—the dictionary-type meanings we all share for common words and phrases—and the deeper meaning that resides in how we say things. This difference is also important with understanding the meaning of media messages. In this chapter, we deal with this distinction as two—meaning...
matching and meaning construction—of the three information-processing tasks in which we are constantly engaged. The third of these tasks is message filtering. After I lay the foundation by defining these three information-processing tasks, we will analyze the idea of what it means to have exposure to media messages. Then I will introduce the idea of exposure states. When you finish reading this chapter, you should have a much better understanding of the psychology of how you experience media messages and how this understanding can empower you to get more out of your media exposures.

**INFORMATION-PROCESSING TASKS**

We are constantly engaged in a series of three information-processing tasks every minute of every day. These tasks are filtering, meaning matching, and meaning construction (see Figure 3.1). 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, recognize the symbols and match our learned definitions to the symbols. Next, we need to construct the meaning of the message.

Sometimes we engage in this sequence of tasks in a very conscious manner, such that we are aware and control our decisions. However, most of the time, we engage in this sequence of tasks unconsciously—that is, our minds are on automatic pilot where our mental code automatically makes filtering and meaning-matching decisions and short-circuits

**FIGURE 3.1** Summary of Three Tasks of Information Processing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Filtering Message</th>
<th>Meaning Matching</th>
<th>Meaning Construction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task:</strong> To make decisions about which messages to filter out (ignore) and which to filter in (pay attention to)</td>
<td><strong>Task:</strong> To use basic competencies to recognize referents and locate previously learned definitions for each</td>
<td><strong>Task:</strong> To use skills in order to move beyond meaning matching and to construct meaning for one’s self in order to personalize and get more out of a message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal:</strong> To attend to only those messages that have some kind of usefulness for the person and ignore all other messages</td>
<td><strong>Goal:</strong> To access previously learned meanings efficiently</td>
<td><strong>Goal:</strong> To interpret messages from more than one perspective as a means of identifying the range of meaning options, then choose one or synthesize across several</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus:</strong> Messages in the environment</td>
<td><strong>Focus:</strong> Referents in messages</td>
<td><strong>Focus:</strong> One’s own knowledge structures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the meaning construction process. Let's examine each of these three information-processing tasks in more detail.

Filtering

As we go through our day, we are constantly flooded with information. In order to protect ourselves from being overwhelmed, we constantly filter that flood by ignoring most and paying attention to a small percentage that gets through our filtering. Recall from the previous chapter that most of this filtering is accomplished when our minds are on automatic pilot. During this automatic process of filtering, our attention is governed by a mental code that tells our senses to avoid paying attention to all messages (filtering them out) until an element in a particular message trips a trigger code in our mind and we begin paying attention to the message.

Once we have filtered in a message (start paying attention to it), we need to determine its meaning. This determination of meaning is two—not one—tasks. First, we match meaning. Oftentimes, the information-processing sequence stops with this task. But sometimes we move into the next task of constructing meaning.

Meaning Matching

With meaning matching, meaning is assumed to reside outside the person in an authority, such as a teacher, an expert, a dictionary, a textbook, or the like. The task for the person is to find those meanings and memorize them. Parents and the educational institution are primarily responsible for housing the authoritative information and teaching it to each next generation. The media are also a major source of information, and for many people, the media have attained the status of an authoritative source, so people accept the meanings presented there and simply memorize those meanings.

Meaning matching is the process of recognizing elements (referents) in the message and accessing our memory to find the meanings we have memorized for those elements. This is a relatively automatic task. It may require a good deal of effort to learn to recognize symbols in media messages and to memorize their standard meanings, but once learned, this process becomes routine. To illustrate, think back to when you first learned to read. You had to learn how to recognize words printed on a page. Then you had to memorize the meaning of each word. The first time you saw the sentence “Dick threw the ball to Jane,” it required a good deal of work to divide the sentence into words, to recall the meaning of each word, and to put it all together. With practice, you were able to perform this process more quickly and more easily. Learning to read in elementary school is essentially the process of being able to recognize a longer list of referents and to memorize their meanings. Some referents in media messages were words, some were numbers, some were pictures, and some were sounds.

This type of learning develops competencies. By competency, I mean that either you are able to do something correctly or you are not. For example, when you see the phrase “2 + 2,” you either recognize the “2” referents as particular quantities or you do not. You either recognize the “+” referent as addition or you do not. You can either perform this mathematical operation and arrive at 4 or you cannot. Working with these referents does not
require—or allow for—individual interpretation and creative meaning construction. Competencies are our abilities to recognize standard referents and recall the memorized denoted meanings for those referents. If we did not have a common set of referents and shared meanings for each of these referents, communication would not be possible. Education at the elementary level is the training of the next generation to develop the basic competencies of recognizing these referents and memorizing the designated meaning for each one.

Meaning Construction

Meaning matching is essentially a task that can be accomplished well automatically once we have acquired some basic competencies. In contrast, meaning construction is a much more challenging task. Meaning construction is a process wherein we must do things to the messages we filter in and create meaning for ourselves. The things we do to messages require the skills of analysis and evaluation for screening messages consciously. Then, when information is screened in, we must use other skills such as induction, deduction, grouping, and synthesis to incorporate the new information with our existing knowledge structures to construct our meaning.

Many meanings can be constructed from any media message; furthermore, there are many ways to go about constructing that meaning. Thus, we cannot learn a complete set of rules to accomplish this task; instead, we need to be guided by our own information goals, and we need to use well-developed skills creatively to construct a path to reach our goals. For these reasons, meaning construction rarely takes place in an automatic fashion. Instead, we need to make conscious decisions when we are constructing meaning for ourselves. Also, every meaning construction task is different, so we cannot program our minds to follow the same one procedure automatically when we are confronted with a range of meaning construction tasks.

While meaning matching relies on competencies, meaning construction relies on skills. This is one of the fundamental differences between the two tasks of meaning matching and meaning construction. Competencies are categorical; that is, either you have a competency or you do not. However, skill ability is not categorical; on any given skill, there is a wide range of ability. That is, 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 higher levels.

To illustrate this distinction between competency and skills, let’s return to the example of “reading” as it is taught in elementary school. Children learn to recognize referents that are words. They learn how to vocalize those words and how to fit those words together into sentences. These are competencies. By the time people have completed elementary school, it is assumed that they have achieved a basic level of 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 to read aloud in high school, it is to check students’ skill at reading.
expression, which indicates how they are constructing their own meaning. Also, at higher grades, students are asked to write essays about a story they have read and express what that story meant to them.

The two processes of meaning matching and meaning construction are not discrete; they are intertwined. To construct meaning, we first have to recognize referents and understand the sense in which those referents are being used in the message. Thus, the meaning-matching process is more fundamental because the product of the meaning-matching process then is imported into the meaning-construction process.

**ANALYZING THE IDEA OF EXPOSURE TO MEDIA MESSAGES**

When we examine the idea of audience from the individual perspective, we need to focus on several important concerns. First, we need to analyze what it means to be exposed to a media message and whether exposure is the same thing as attention. Second, we need to analyze the experience of exposure to sensitize ourselves to the different psychological states in which we experience media messages.

**Exposure and Attention**

In everyday language, *exposure* is a term that is often used synonymously with the term *attention*, but with media literacy, we must draw an important distinction between the two terms. Furthermore, there is a sequence of three types of exposure: physical, perceptual, and psychological. Only when all three conditions of exposure are met can there be attention.

**Physical Exposure.** It would seem that the most foundational criterion for exposure would be some sort of physical presence. A person must experience some proximity to a message in order for exposure to take place. Physical exposure means that the message and the person occupy the same physical space for some period of time. Thus, space and time are regarded as barriers to exposure. If a magazine is lying face up on a table in a room and Harry walks through that room, Harry is physically exposed to the message on the cover of the magazine but not to any of the messages inside the magazine unless Harry picks it up and flips through the pages. Also, if Harry does not walk through that room when the magazine is on the table, there is no physical exposure to the message on the cover of the magazine. Likewise, if a radio program is playing in a room over the lunch hour, then is turned off at 1 P.M., anyone who walks through that room after 1 P.M. is not physically exposed to that radio program.

Physical proximity is a necessary condition for media exposure, but it is not a sufficient condition. Another necessary condition is perceptual exposure.

**Perceptual Exposure.** The perceptual consideration refers to a human’s sensory bandwidth or the ability to receive appropriate sensory input through the visual and auditory senses. There are limits to a human’s sense organs. For example, human sensitivity to sound frequency extends from around 16 to 20,000 Hz, but sounds are heard best when they are between 1,000 and 4,000 Hz (Metallinos, 1996; Plack, 2005). A dog whistle is pitched at a frequency
higher than 20,000 Hz, so humans cannot perceive that sound; that is, it is outside their range of human sensitivity to sounds. With the human eye, people can see light, which travels at a certain frequency, but not sound, which travels at another frequency. Any auditory or visual signal that occurs outside of a sense organ’s ability to perceive it is nonexposure.

The perceptual criterion, however, has a feature beyond simple bandwidth; we must also consider the sensory input/brain connection. There are instances when the sensory input gets to the brain, but when the brain transforms the raw stimuli, we cannot perceive the raw stimuli and therefore cannot be thought of as being exposed to the raw stimuli; instead, we are exposed to the transformed stimuli. For example, when we watch a movie in a theater, we are exposed to individual static images projected at about 24 images per second. But humans cannot perceive 24 individual images in a given second, so our brains miss seeing the 24 individual static pictures and instead “see” motion. Also with film projection, there is a brief time between each of those 24 individual images every second when the screen is blank, but the eye-brain connection is not quick enough to process the blanks, so we do not “see” those blanks as blanks; instead, we only “see” smooth motion. If the projection rate of images were to slow down to under 10 images per second, we would begin to see a flutter—that is, our brains would begin to see the blanks because the replacement of still images is slow enough for the eye-brain connection to begin processing them. The same limits are applied to watching television, where the screen appears to present motion pictures in a full range of color. But the television screen itself only has three colors, and the picture is really more than 250,000 glowing dots (called pixels). Each pixel glows and fades 30 times each second as guided by an interlaced scan of every other line across a 525-line grid. Unless we put our nose on the screen, we cannot see the individual dots. Nor do we see the 525 individual lines of glowing dots. Nor do we see a full-screen pattern of dots and lines. Instead, we perceive images and motion.

Stimuli that are outside the boundaries of human perception are called subliminal. Subliminal messages can leave no psychological trace because they cannot be physically perceived; that is, humans lack the sensory organs to take in stimuli and/or the hardwiring in the brain to be sensitive to them.

There is a widespread misconception that the mass media put people at risk for “subliminal communication.” This belief is based on confusing subliminal with subconscious. There is an important distinction that needs to be made between subliminal and subconscious because they are two very different things and have two very different implications for exposure. Subliminal refers to being outside a human’s ability to sense or perceive, and thus it is always regarded as nonexposure. However, once media stimuli cross over the subliminal line and are able to be sensed and perceived by humans, it is regarded as exposure. However, this does not mean that all exposure is conscious, and this brings us to the third criterion in our definition—psychological.

Psychological Exposure. In order for psychological exposure to occur, there must be some trace element created in a person’s mind. This element can be an image, a sound, an emotion, a pattern, and so on. It can last for a brief time (several seconds in short-term memory, then cleared out) or a lifetime (when cataloged into long-term memory). It can enter the mind consciously (often called the central route), where people are fully aware of the
elements in the exposure, or it can enter the mind unconsciously (often called the peripheral route), where people are unaware that elements are being entered into their minds (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Thus, a great variety of elements potentially can meet this criterion for psychological exposure. The challenge then becomes organizing all these elements into meaningful sets and explaining how different kinds of elements are experienced by the individual and how they are processed as information.

**Attention.** In order for attention to occur, a person must first clear all three of the exposure hurdles described above—physical, perceptual, and psychological exposure. However, these three things alone do not guarantee attention; something else must also occur. That something else is conscious awareness of the media message. As you can now see, a lot of things have to happen in order for us to pay attention to a media message. For this reason, attention rarely occurs. And when we do pay attention to one media message, that attention can be quickly distracted to something else. Harold Pashler, who wrote *The Psychology of Attention* (1998), explains that at any given moment, awareness encompasses only a tiny proportion of the stimuli impinging on a person’s sensory systems. Furthermore, while we are paying attention to one thing, our attention can be distracted away to another thing. He says there are times when “attention is directed or grabbed without any voluntary choice having taken place, even against strong wishes to the contrary” (p. 3). Thus, when we are paying attention to a conversation with our roommate, our attention can be grabbed by an image that pops up on our computer screen, and we shift our attention away from our roommate to the screen.

**Exposure States**

Thus far, I have made a distinction between automatic processing and paying attention to particular media messages. This suggests two exposure states, but there are four. These four exposure states are automatic, attentional, transported, and self-reflexive. Each of these states is a qualitatively different experience for the audience member. By this I mean that they are not distinguished simply by degree of attention. Instead, the crossing the line from one state to another results in a qualitatively different experience with the message.

**Automatic State.** In the automatic state of exposure, people are in environments where they are exposed to media messages but they are not aware of those messages; that is, their mind is on automatic pilot while they screen out all the messages from conscious exposure. There is no conscious goal or strategy for seeking out messages, but screening out messages still takes place. This screening out continues automatically with no effort until some element in a message breaks through people’s default screen and captures their attention.

In the automatic processing state, message elements are physically perceived but processed automatically in an unconscious manner. This exposure state resides above the threshold of human sense perception but below the threshold of conscious awareness. The person is in a perceptual flow that continues until an interruption stops the exposure or “bumps” the person’s perceptual processing into a different state of exposure or until the media message moves outside of a person’s physical or perceptual ability to be exposed to it.
In the automatic state, people can look active to outside observers, but they are not thinking about what they are doing. It is rather like what Robert Penn Warren (1946) said in All The King’s Men: “A man doesn’t make a decision to swim when he falls into the creek. He starts kicking” (p. 304). People in the automatic state can be flipping through the pages of a magazine or clicking through the channels on a TV. While there is evidence of behavior, this does not necessarily mean that people’s minds are engaged and that they are “making” decisions. Rather, the decisions are happening to them automatically.

Exposure to much of the media, especially radio and television, is in the automatic state. People have no conscious awareness of the exposure when it is taking place, nor do they have a recollection of many of the details in the experience if they are asked about it later.

**Attentional State.** Attentional exposure refers to people being aware of the messages and actively interacting with the elements in the messages. This does not mean they must have a high level of concentration, although that is possible. The key is conscious awareness of the messages during exposures.

Within the attentional state, there is a range of attention depending on how much of a person’s mental resources are devoted to the exposure. At minimum, the person must be aware of the message and consciously track it, but there is a fair degree of elasticity in the degree of concentration, which can range from partial to quite extensive processing depending on the number of elements handled and the depth of analysis employed.

**Transported State.** When people are in the attentional state but then are pulled into the message so strongly that they lose awareness of being apart from the message, they cross over into the transported state. In the transported state, audience members lose their sense of separateness from the message; that is, they are swept away with the message, enter the world of the message, and lose track of their own social world surroundings. For example, watching a movie in a theater, people can get so caught up in the action that they feel they are involved with action. They experience the same intense emotions as the characters do. They lose the sense that they are in a theater. Their concentration level is so high that they lose touch with their real-world environment. They lose track of real time; instead, they experience narrative time—that is, they feel time pass like the characters feel time pass.

The transported state is not simply the high end of the attentional state. Instead, the transported state is qualitatively different from the attentional state. While attention is very high in the transported state, the attention is also very narrow; that is, people have tunnel vision and focus on the media message in a way that eliminates the barrier between them and the message. People are swept away and “enter” the message. In this sense, it is the opposite of the automatic state where people stay grounded in their social world and are unaware of the media messages in their perceptual environment; in the transported exposure state, people enter the media message and lose track of their social world.

**Self-Reflexive State.** In the self-reflexive state, people are hyperaware of the message and of their processing of the message. It is as if they are sitting on their shoulder and monitoring their own reactions as they experience the message. This represents the fullest degree of awareness; that is, people are aware of the media message, their own social world, and their position in
the social world while they process the media message. In the self-reflexive exposure state, the viewer exercises the greatest control over perceptions by reflecting on questions such as the following: Why am I exposing myself to this message? What am I getting out of this exposure and why? Why am I making these interpretations of meaning? Not only is there analysis, but there is meta-analysis. This means that the person is not only analyzing the media message, but he or she is also analyzing his or her analysis of the media message.

While the self-reflexive and transported states might appear similar in that they are characterized by high involvement by audience members, the two exposure states are very different. In the transported state, people are highly involved emotionally and lose themselves in the action. In contrast, the self-reflexive state is characterized by people being highly involved cognitively who are very much aware of themselves as they analytically process the exposure messages.

**THE MEDIA LITERACY PERSPECTIVE**

The ideas presented in this chapter can be used to increase one’s media literacy, that is, to increase one’s power over filtering decisions, meaning-matching decisions, and meaning-construction decisions. Remember that increasing your media literacy means doing particular things when you are paying attention to messages so that you control the coding of your mental processes, so that when those mental processes run automatically, they are serving your needs rather than the needs of the mass media or of advertisers.

As for the filtering task, you should periodically examine your media exposure habits and ask yourself why you are spending time with particular media and particular messages while ignoring others. If you have good reasons for your habits, then it is likely that those filtering habits are helping you achieve your own goals. But if you are puzzled by some of your habits, it is time to think about changing those habits to see if your needs can be met better through exposure to different media and different kinds of messages.

As for meaning matching, you should periodically check some of the meanings you have memorized. Perhaps you have acquired some of those meanings by simply memorizing the opinions of so-called experts, such as newscasters, pundits, cultural critics, and so on. Perhaps the experts were later found to be wrong, yet you still hold onto a memorized opinion that is now faulty. Or perhaps you should not have memorized an expert’s opinion but instead constructed your own opinion that fits better with your own personal beliefs and experiences. It is likely that your large set of memorized meanings contains elements that are out of date, are causing friction with what you believe, or are faulty in some way. If you don’t identify them and clear them out of your “mental dictionary,” you will continue to automatically use those meanings, and this can take you further away from your goals.

As for meaning construction, you should identify areas where decisions are most important in your life. As you use the media messages to pull in information, ask yourself if you are simply accepting that information as is or are transforming it to fit into your needs and goals; that is, the more you are working on transforming that information as raw materials, the more you are constructing your own meanings. 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.

The meaning of media messages is not always the way it might seem on the surface. 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. 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.

Some people perform these information-processing tasks better than others and are therefore more media literate than other people. Literacy begins with our personal locus. Some of us have no plan to our lives or for our media exposures; thus, we let the media fully program us. We need to be aware of our personal goals and needs, then exert the drive energy to take control of our meanings. We also need tools to execute our plans. 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 categorical; 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.

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 shrinking this percentage. However, the larger concern is with the other 80% of the adult population who have 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.

**CONCLUSION**

In Chapter 2, I said that we cannot stay in an attentional state all the time. We spend most of our time in the automatic state of exposure. However, when we do move into an attentional state, it is best to make the most of it and try to achieve a self-reflexive state. In this state, you will apply skills and program your code. Then, once you have programmed your code, you can return to the automatic state and trust that the new code will help you better achieve your goals and avoid negative risks.

**FURTHER READING**


In this book, I show that success in higher education rests with how well students have mastered eight skills. Seven of these skills are also key to developing higher levels of media literacy. This book presents lots of examples and exercises for each skill.

Visit the study site at www.sagepub.com/potterm4study for chapter-specific study resources.