explanation for this finding is that educated people are embarrassed to admit that they watch *Judge Judy* or scan the *National Enquirer* while standing at the check-out counter, like everyone else. As a result, well-educated people (in the traditional sense) may be as susceptible to the influence of media messages as members of the general population.

Consequently, a first step in media literacy requires an admission that you are exposed to numerous messages daily through the media and that these messages can influence your attitudes, values, and behavior.

Affective Nature of Photography, Film, Television, Radio, and Digital Media

Imagine glancing up from this text and gazing out the window. Suddenly, you spot an unattended toddler wandering into the street. Your immediate reaction might include:

- Experiencing a sudden jolt as your nervous system carries this information to your brain.
- Feeling a tightening sensation in your stomach.
- Breaking out in an immediate sweat.
- Struggling to translate these feelings into words and actions to help the child.

In contrast with print, visual and aural stimuli initially touch us on an *affective*, or emotional, level. In his discussion of the impact of the visual image, art historian E. H. Gombrich observes,

> The power of visual impressions to arouse our emotions has been observed since ancient times. . . . Preachers and teachers preceded modern advertisers in the knowledge of the ways in which the visual image can affect us, whether we want it to or not. The succulent fruit, the seductive nude, the repellent caricature, the hair-raising horror can all play on our emotions and engage our attention.[20]

Because of the affective nature of visual and aural media, it may seem more natural (and considerably easier) to simply "experience" a song or film rather than undertake the arduous task of conceptualizing, articulating, and analyzing your emotional responses. Consequently, the level of discourse about media programming is often reduced to emotional responses; in the immortal words of Beavis and Butthead, programs are either "cool" or they "suck."

But while affective responses may initially discourage discussion, they can ultimately serve as a springboard for in-depth analysis and discussion. As a result, one effective strategy for the interpretation of media messages is to ask *why* you reacted as you did while watching a program. (For further discussion, see the section titled "Affective Response" in Chapter 2.)

Audience Behavior Patterns

During the communication process, audience members select the most pertinent bits of information to store and assimilate into meaning. However, audiences are often engaged in competing activities while receiving media messages. Because your primary attention may be focused on other activities (driving while listening to the radio, for instance), you may be susceptible to subtle messages that affect your attitudes and behaviors. Further, if you answer the phone or leave the room for a portion of a telecast, the text of information from which to select has been altered. As a result, you may be receiving an altogether *different* message than was originally intended by the media communicator. (For further discussion, see the discussion of audience in Chapter 2, Process.)

Audience Expectations

In many instances, the function of a media activity, or the purpose for which you decide to engage in it, has nothing to do with the critical analysis of media content. For instance, after a long, stress-filled day at school, you may turn on your television to wind down and put the day's events in perspective. This form of "electronic meditation" signals to others that you are not in the mood for conversation. Furthermore, on these occasions, you do not feel particularly inclined to analyze media content. And the only way to *discover* media messages is to *look* for media messages.

Nature of Programming

The American media system is a market-driven industry predicated on turning a profit. Feature films, popular music, and newspapers must attract and maintain an audience in order to remain in business. To illustrate, broadcast journalists are now pressured to present the news in an entertaining fashion. This trend toward "infotainment" has severely compromised the content of many news programs.

Nevertheless, programs that were never intended to instruct the public convey messages about how the world operates, provide models of acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and reinforce cultural definitions of success and failure.

Credibility of Media

Audiences are often predisposed to believe what appears in the media. One particularly dangerous media message is that information presented on television or in the newspaper must be *true,* simply because it appears in the media. To illustrate, a Times-Mirror Poll found that 50 percent of those who watched crime re-creation TV shows interpreted the footage as news, even though disclaimers appeared at the bottom of the TV screen declaring that the program are dramatic reenactment of a crime.[21]

In its ability to preserve a moment of time in space, photography creates the illusion of *verisimilitude,* or lifelike quality. We must remember, however, that photographs only present a *version* of reality. A photograph captures only a brief instant, without the context that gives it meaning. In addition, the audience's attention is confined to the space within the frame. We only see what the photographer or filmmaker *wants* us to see; we cannot see what is happening outside of the boundary of the camera lens. Further, because digital technology enables a photographer to alter images seamlessly, a photograph may not represent what was originally captured by the camera.

Indeed, the very presence of the media alters the event it is intended to capture. Consider the typical wedding. The photographer does not hesitate to interrupt the proceedings and whisk the newlyweds away from the celebration. Like trained seals, the bride and groom strike the conventional poses: holding the rose, cutting the cake, and standing in formation with assorted relatives. The entire occasion has been transformed into a photo session, to be enjoyed later, when the couple leafs through the photo album.

Within this context, one of the fundamental tenants of media literacy, as identified by Canadian Association for Media Literacy, is that "All media are constructions of reality":

> This is arguably the most important concept. The media do not simply reflect external reality. Rather, they present carefully crafted constructions that reflect many decisions and are the result of many determining factors. Media Literacy works towards deconstructing

these constructions (i.e., to taking them apart to show how they are made).[22]

Media-literate individuals have learned to examine the information presented through the media with a healthy skepticism and determine for themselves whether the content is accurate.

Complexity of the Language of Media

Media audiences generally can identify the sign and symbol system of media. For instance, although the narrative in a film is generally presented in chronological order, the filmmaker often manipulates its time sequence to establish relationships between people, locations, and events. Thus, a flashback is a formulaic narrative technique in which a past event is inserted in the narrative to show the influence of the past on the present.

However, as Mark Crispin Miller observes, audience members often underestimate the "language" of media production: "Most Americans still perceive the media image as transparent, a sign that simply says what it means and means what it says. They therefore tend to dismiss any intensive explication as a case study of reading too much into it."[23]

For example, many children are unable to detect spatial and temporal inferences depicted on screen. Daniel Anderson explains, "[Children's] failure to comprehend cinematic transitions cumulatively gives them a fragmented comprehension of lengthy televised narratives. With age and viewing experience, however, the child more rapidly and automatically makes the bridging inferences necessary to achieve connected comprehension."[24]

Understanding the different "languages" of media has become essential in the world of business. In 2009, the average American consumed approximately 34 gigabytes of data and information each day—an increase of about 350 percent over nearly three decades. At the same time, however, the amount of time that individuals spend reading has actually *declined* (Bilton). Consequently, many companies now place a value on employees who have the ability to interpret, construct, and disseminate messages using the different "languages" of media, such as film, television, audio, and the Internet.

In addition, a familiarity with various production elements (i.e., editing, color, lighting, shot selection) can enhance your understanding and appreciation of media content. (For additional discussion of *production elements,* see Chapter 9, Advertising.)

LEVELS OF MEANING: MANIFEST AND LATENT MESSAGES

Manifest messages are direct and clear to the audience. We generally have little trouble recognizing these messages when we are paying full attention to a media presentation. For instance, have you ever noticed how many commercials *tell* you to do something?

- "Insist on Blue Coal" (Radio broadcast, 1947)
- "American Express: Don't leave home without it"
- "Just Do It" (Nike)

But in addition, media presentations may contain *latent messages.* Latent messages are indirect and beneath the surface, and consequently often escape our immediate attention. Latent messages may reinforce manifest messages, or they may suggest entirely different meanings. For example, "G.I. Joe" commercials promote a line of war toys. But at the same time, the G.I. Joe ad campaign conveys latent messages equating violence with masculinity and glorifying war.

Cumulative Messages

Cumulative messages occur with such frequency over time that they form new meanings, independent of any individual production. Consistent messages with regard to gender roles, racial and cultural stereotypes, and measures of success recur throughout many media presentations. As an example, Dwayne Johnson (aka "The Rock") is a popular action-film hero. However, his macho image, characteristic of countless other media figures, including John Wayne, Sylvester Stallone, and the Marlboro Man, sends an aggregate message about the ideal of masculinity.

Point of View

In any media presentation, the story can be told from a range of perspectives, or *points of view:*

- The media communicator
- The characters in the presentation
- The prevailing point of view of the period in which it was produced
- Your own point of view

Point of view has an impact on: 1) how a story is told; 2) what information is conveyed; and 3) how the audience responds to the information being presented.

Identifying the prevailing point of view in a media presentation enables you to filter the information and come to your own conclusions. As an example, Fox television supports a conservative political agenda, while MSNBC generally presents programming from a progressive point of view. But there is nothing wrong with watching an ideological channel like MSNBC news, so long as you know what it *is* and what it *isn't.* The danger lies in thinking that these ideological channels are presenting objective news. (For further discussion, see Chapter 10, American Political Communications.) The Keys to Interpreting Media Messages provide you with tools to identify the point of view of the program, media communicator, or primary character in the presentation.

Affective Strategies

As mentioned earlier, visual and aural media (photography, film, television, radio, and digital media) are particularly well suited to emotional appeals. Media communicators can influence the attitudes and behavior of audiences by appealing to their emotions. For instance, some advertisers sell products by appealing to primal emotions such as guilt or the need for acceptance.

In addition, production elements such as color, shape, lighting, and size convey meaning by evoking emotional responses in the audience. Thus, media communicators convey meaning through their production choices, involving the use of lighting, music, and connotative words and images.

Embedded Values

Media literacy analysis can furnish perspectives into the values of media communicators by identifying the *preferred reading* of the narrative. Media communicators establish a preferred reading, in which the text dictates the responses of the audience. The preferred reading asks the audience to assume the role, perspective, and orientation of the heroes and heroines, who may be surrogates for the media communicator.

Production elements such as music, lighting, and angle distinguish the heroes from the villains, and consequently direct how the audience is to respond to these characters. In this way, the sympathies of the audience are aligned with his/her values and beliefs.

Word choice can also furnish perspectives into the attitudes of the media communicator toward the subject of the presentation. To illustrate, consider the following headlines for two newspaper stories reporting on a car-bombing incident that took place in Baghdad in 2003, during the war in Iraq:

"Five Consecutive Martyrdom Operations Rock Baghdad"[25]	"Bloodied Baghdad; Four Coordinated Suicide Car Bombings Kill 34, Wound 224"[26]

In the first headline, which appeared in an Egyptian government-owned newspaper, the word "martyrdom" is an indication that the media communicator regarded this action as morally justifiable. In contrast, the term "suicide bombings," which appeared in *Newsday*, a mainstream American publication, reveals that the reporter considered this to be a brutal and senseless attack.

NOTES

1. Berkeley Pop Culture Project, *The Whole Pop Catalog* (Berkeley: Avon Books, 1991), 547.
2. Joe Schwartz, "Is There Life before Bed?" *American Demographics* (March 1990): 12.
3. Ibid.
4. NBC, 1991.
5. Media Reform Info Center, "TV Facts," http://www.enviroweb.org.
6. "No Excuse: We All Have More Free Time Than We Think, Experts Say," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* June 6, 1997: A-2.
7. Shelly Freierman, "Drilling Down; We're Spending More Time Watching TV," *New York Times,* January 9, 2006.
8. See Frank Baker, "Media Use Statistics: Resources on Media Habits of Children, Youth and Adults," www.frankwbaker.com/mediause.htm.
9. Ibid.
10. Harper's Index, January 1996, http://www.harpers.org.
11. Presented at the Aspen Institute, "National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy," Queenstown, Maryland, 7-9 December 1992.
12. Frank Absher, "Media on Media," *St. Louis Journalism Review* (October 1999): 3.
13. Bill Moyers, *The Public Mind: Consuming Images,* Public Broadcasting Service, November 8, 1989.