

W. JAMES POTTER 10<sup>TH</sup> EDITION

# MEDIA LITERACY



# **Media Literacy**

**Tenth Edition**

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# Media Literacy

## Tenth Edition

**W. James Potter**

*University of California*



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
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## • Preface •

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**M**ost of us think we are fairly media literate. We know how to access all kinds of media to find the music, games, information, and entertainment we want. We recognize the faces of many celebrities and know many facts about their lives. We recognize a range of musical styles and have developed strong preferences for what we like. We can easily create messages through photos, videos, and text and then upload them to various sites on the internet. Clearly, we know how to expose ourselves to the media, we know how to absorb information from them, we know how to be entertained by them, and we know how to use them to create our own messages and share them with others.

Are we media literate? Yes, of course. We have acquired a great deal of information and have developed remarkable skills. The abilities to speak a language, read, understand photographs, and follow narratives are significant achievements, although we often take them for granted.

While we should not overlook what we have accomplished, it is also important to acknowledge that we all can be much more media literate. In many ways, your overall level of media literacy now is probably about the same as it was when you were a teenager. Since that time, your information base has grown enormously about some types of media messages, such as popular songs, internet sites, and video clips. However, your information base may not have grown much in other areas—who controls the mass media, how decisions are made about the production of content, and how that constant flow of content affects you and society in all sorts of subtle as well as powerful ways. Thus, your current level of media literacy allows you to do many things with the media, but you could be exercising much more control and getting *more* out of your media exposures if you grew your knowledge in additional areas.

The more you are aware of how the mass media operate and how they affect you, the more you gain control over those effects, and the more you will distinguish yourself from typical media users who have turned over a great deal of their lives to the mass media without realizing it. By “turning over a great deal of their lives to the mass media,” I mean more than time and money, although both of those are considerable. I also mean that most people have allowed the mass media to program them in ways that they are unaware of. And because they are unaware of these ways, they cannot control the media’s influence or shape the way the media are affecting them.

The purpose of this book is to show you how the media have been shaping your beliefs and behavioral patterns. Until you become aware of how much your beliefs have been formed by media influence and how the media have accomplished all this shaping, you will continue to float along in a flood of media messages, oblivious to their constant, subtle influence. However, once you begin to see things from a media literacy perspective, you can see how this process of influence works, and this understanding will help you to gain control over this shaping process.

## How to Get the Most Out of This Book

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As you read through this book, think beyond the many details and focus on the frameworks it provides as reminders of what is most important. Frameworks are maps. When you have a map to guide your reading journey, you'll always know where you are and where you have to go next. To help you perceive the most important frameworks, each chapter begins with a key idea followed by an outline of the topics covered. When you keep these frameworks in the front of your mind, you will be able to both read faster and get more out of your reading.

As you read each chapter, be strategic. Use the frameworks to ask questions, then actively look for the answers to those questions as you read. By *actively*, I mean don't just scan the words and sentences; instead, start with an agenda of questions, then as you read through each section, look specifically for answers to your questions. After you have finished a chapter, close the book and see how much you can recall. Can you remember only a random assortment of facts or can you envision a structure of knowledge that is organized by your questions?

This book is composed of 15 instructional chapters followed by four issues chapters. The purpose of the 15 core chapters is to provide you with a set of key ideas to help you organize your knowledge structures in four areas: knowledge about media effects, knowledge about media audiences, knowledge about the media industries, and knowledge about media content. To navigate through the detail presented in each chapter, use the outline at the beginning of that chapter as a map. When you have finished reading a chapter, try doing the exercises. These exercises will help you use and elaborate on the information presented in the chapter. If you want to continue elaborating your knowledge beyond what is present in each chapter, look at the sections on further reading that recommend particular books, articles, and websites; I have selected these as particularly interesting extensions of what I have presented in the chapter. Also, because things change so fast these days with the media, I have provided several sources of information—typically websites—where you can access the most current information available.

You will get more out of each of the core instructional chapters if you try to incorporate the information you are learning into your own experience. This book has a self-help tone as it presents guidance and practical exercises to guide you in your journey toward achieving higher levels of media literacy. Do not get caught in the trap of thinking that it is sufficient to memorize the facts in each chapter and then stop thinking about the material. Simply memorizing facts will not help you increase your media literacy much. Instead, you need to internalize the information by drawing it into your own experiences. Continually ask yourself, "How does this new information fit in with what I already know?" "Can I find an example of this in my own life?" and "How can I apply this when I deal with the media?" The exercises at the end of each chapter will help you get started with this. The more you work through the exercises in your everyday life, the more you will internalize the information, thus making it a more natural part of the way you think.

After you have finished with the instructional chapters and building your initial set of knowledge structures, you will be ready to dig deeper into the controversies within media studies. The four issues chapters give you a chance to use your knowledge structures and increase the strength of your skills as you take apart these controversies, appreciate the beauty of their complexity, and construct your own informed opinion on each of these issues. The first issue unpacks the controversy

about whether or not the ownership of the mass media has become too concentrated; some critics argue that there are now too few owners of media businesses. The topic of sports is treated in Issue 2 by examining possible answers to the following question: Is there too much money being spent on sports? Issue 3 tackles the persistent controversy over whether there is too much violence in the media and whether the prevalence of violence in media content is harming individuals and society. This section concludes with Issue 4, which examines the growing concern about privacy and how the new media environment is making it much more difficult for you to exercise control over who gets access to your private information.

If you engage these issues on a superficial level, then you will likely be frustrated by what seem to be unsolvable problems. But if you dig deeper and apply your developing skills of media literacy, you will begin to see how the complexities of these issues may be causing problems in your own life. When you recognize these problems, you will be able to use your greater level of media literacy to develop strategies to reduce their influence. Thus, you will be taking more control over issues that you previously thought were too big, too complicated, and the fault of other people.

## To Conclude

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It is my hope that this book will stimulate you to think more deeply about your media habits and become motivated to increase your control over the process of influence from the media. The information presented in these chapters will get you started in this direction. Will the book provide you with all the information you need to complete this task fully? No. That would require too much information to fit into one book. You will need to continue reading. At the end of most chapters, I suggest several books for further reading on the topic of that chapter. Although some of those books are fairly technical, most of them are easy to read and very interesting.

This book is an introduction. It is designed to show you the big picture so you can get started on increasing your own media literacy efficiently. It is important to get started now and to begin exercising the power that you did not know you had.

I hope you will have fun reading this book. I hope it will expose you to new perspectives from which you can perceive much more about the media. If it does, you will be gaining new insights about your old habits and interpretations. If this happens, I hope you will share your new insights and “war stories” with me. Much of this book has been written to reflect some of the problems and insights my students have had in the media literacy courses I have taught. I have learned much from them. I’d like to learn even more from you. So, let me know what you think and send me a message at [wjpotter@comm.ucsb.edu](mailto:wjpotter@comm.ucsb.edu).

See you on the journey!

## Teaching Resources

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This text includes an array of instructor teaching materials designed to save you time and to help you keep students engaged. To learn more, visit [sagepub.com](http://sagepub.com) or contact your SAGE representative at [sagepub.com/findmyrep](http://sagepub.com/findmyrep).

## • Acknowledgments •

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This book project has traveled a very long distance from its initial conceptualization in the mid-1990s. Since then, I have had the privilege of using various versions of the book with several thousand students at Florida State University, UCLA, Stanford University, and the University of California at Santa Barbara. These students helped me form the idea into a useful book for a broad range of undergraduates and refine the material through nine subsequent editions. I thank them for every question, every puzzled look, and every smile of satisfaction from an insight gained. Over the years, *Media Literacy* has been translated from English into seven other languages, which makes it accessible to readers in many parts of the world. Some of those readers have provided me with their reactions, and I thank them.

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If you like this book, then I share the credit of success with all the people I mentioned above. If you find a mistake, a shortcoming, or a misinterpretation, then it is my fault for not fully assimilating all the high-quality help I have been privileged to experience.

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Kelly A. Berg, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

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## • About the Author •

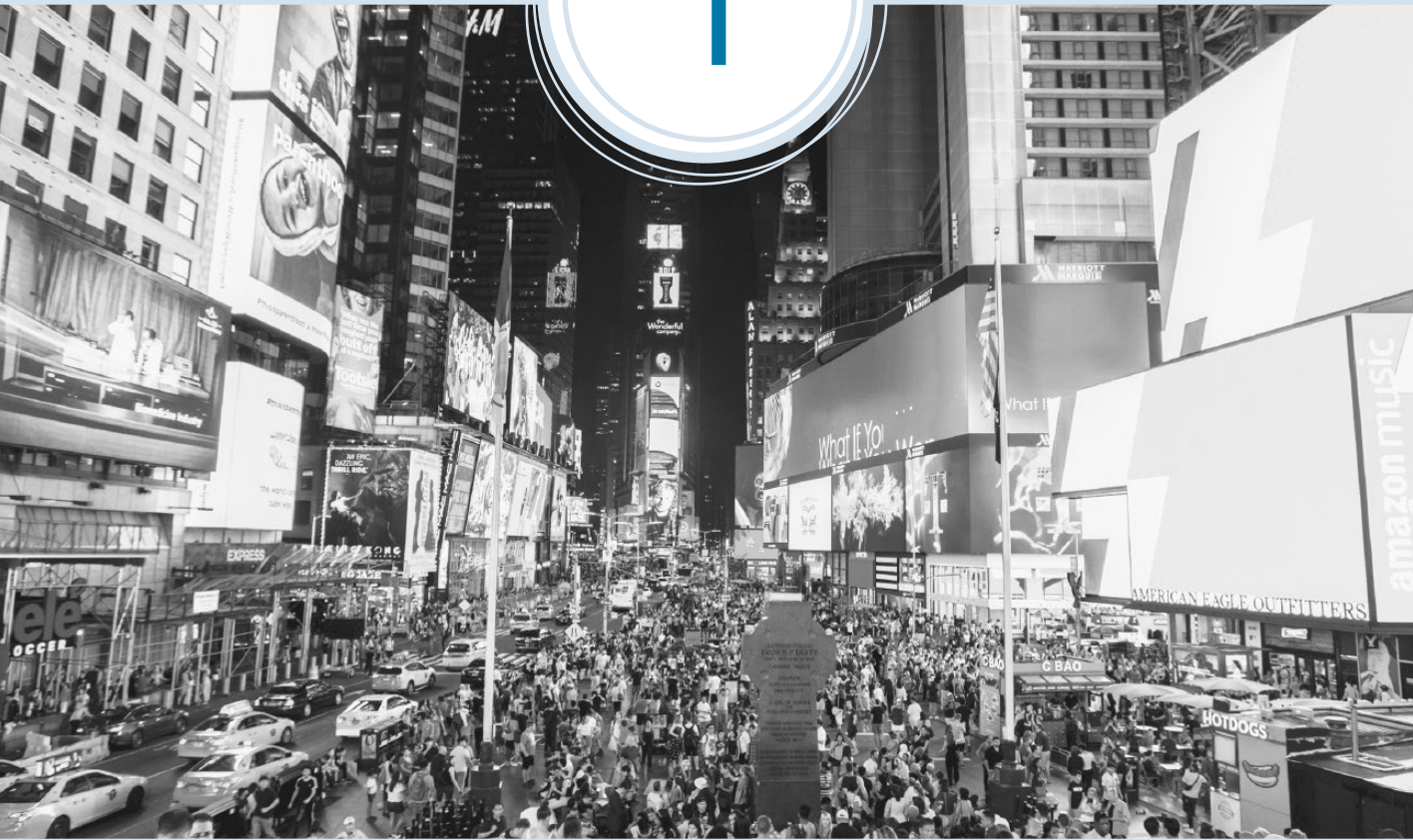
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# Introduction

PART I

# 1



Media literacy increases your ability to exercise control over the vast array of messages you encounter through daily media exposure.

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## Why Increase Media Literacy?

*Key Idea: To survive in our information-saturated culture, we put our minds on “automatic pilot” in order to protect ourselves from the flood of media messages we constantly encounter. The danger with this automatic processing of messages is that it allows the mass media to condition our thought processes.*

The Information Problem	Automatic Routines
Growth Is Accelerating	Advantages and
High Degree of Exposure	Disadvantages
Keeping Up	The Big Question
Dealing with the Information	Summary
Problem	Further Reading
Our Mental Hardware	Keeping Up to Date
Our Mental Software	

**T**he first challenge we all face when confronting a new body of information is motivation. We ask ourselves: Why should I expend all the effort to learn this? How will learning this help me enough to make all that effort worthwhile?

With media literacy, our initial answers to the above questions are likely to make us feel that learning about media literacy is not worth the effort because we feel that we already know a lot about the media. We are familiar with a large number of websites, apps, recording artists, and celebrities. We are already able to access a wide range of entertainment and information, so why would we need to learn a lot more about the media? This book will show you the answer to that question by presenting you with some key insights about the media. This information will expand your perspective into new areas and increase your power to exercise control over your media exposures so that you can get more value from those messages. Let's get started!

In this chapter, I will show you the big picture of our media environment so that you can see how enormous the information problem is. The strategy we use to deal with this problem typically works well on a day-to-day basis because it is efficient; however, over the long term, it is not very effective. That is, the advantages we achieve in the short term when we focus only on efficiency grow into disadvantages over the long term. To show you why this is the case, let's first analyze the information problem.

## The Information Problem

Our culture is saturated with media messages—far more than you may realize. Hollywood film studios release more than 700 hours of feature films each year, which adds to its base of more than 100,000 hours of films they have already released in previous years. Commercial television stations generate about 48 million hours of video messages every year worldwide, and radio stations send out 65.5 million hours of original programming each year. We now have more than 140 million book titles in existence, and another 5,000 new book titles are published throughout the world each day.

Then there is the World Wide Web, which has been estimated to have almost two billion websites (Internet Live Stats, 2018) but is so huge that no one knows how big

it really is. Each of these websites has the potential to deliver an unlimited amount of information. For example, a video platform such as YouTube has more than five billion videos available for viewing (YouTube, 2018), and users are uploading more than 500 new hours of video *every minute of every day* (Clement, 2019).

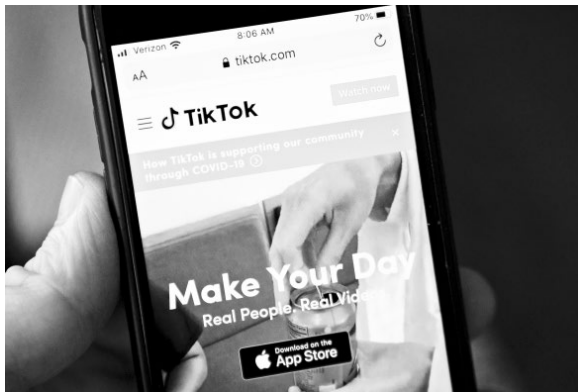
## Growth Is Accelerating

Not only are we already saturated with media messages, the number of messages available from the media continues to grow. More information has been generated since you were born than the sum total of all information throughout all recorded history up until the time of your birth. In 2012, Silver estimated that the amount of information was doubling every year. And the rate continues to accelerate! This means that today, over half of all the information that is available to you (in all the libraries, websites, recordings, etc.) did not exist one year ago.

Why is so much information being produced? One reason is that people are producing more information than ever before. Half of all the scientists who have ever lived are alive today and producing information. Also, the number of people in this country who identify themselves as musicians has more than doubled in the last four decades, the number of artists have tripled, and the number of authors has increased fivefold (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 2017).

Another reason is that the technology now exists to provide easy-to-use platforms to share information. Thus, everyone can generate and share information with large numbers of people every day. You no longer need to be a musician to create songs; you can use Garage Band or other computer synthesizers. You don't need to be signed to a recording contract by a record company to distribute your songs. You can also be a journalist, a fiction writer, a photographer, a filmmaker, or even a video game designer as a hobby and make your messages easily available to millions of people, just like professional artists. Or you could generate and share

smaller forms of information such as emails and tweets. There are now 4.5 billion regular users of the internet worldwide, and they send and receive 300 billion email messages each day (Clement, 2020a). Each minute, 188 million emails are sent, 18.1 million texts are sent, 4.5 million searches are conducted on Google, and 1.4 million swipes are made on Tinder. Furthermore, during any given minute of the day, users of Netflix stream 694,444 hours of video; users of Instagram post 277,777 stories; and 231,840 users of Skype are making calls (Fancycrave1, 2019).



Bloomberg/Getty Images

Social media is one of the fastest growing areas for media exposure, being consumed mostly on smartphones and other mobile devices and increasing in popularity among all age groups.

Each of us is adding to this flood of information like never before. Tucker (2014) explains,

Between checking your phone, using GPS, sending e-mail, tweets, and Facebook posts, and especially streaming movies and music, you create 1.8 million megabytes [of data] a year. It's enough to fill nine CD-ROMs every day. The device-ification of modern life in the developed world is the reason why more than 90 percent of all the data that exists was created in just the last three years. (p. xv)

Tucker continues, “And it's growing exponentially, with 44 times as much digital information in 2020 as there was in 2009” (p. xvi).

## High Degree of Exposure

The media are highly attractive, so we increase the time we spend with media messages each year. Over the last three decades, every new survey of media use has shown that people, on average, have been increasing their exposure time every year. For example, in 2010, people spent an average of 10 hours and 46 minutes with all forms of the media each day; this increased to 12 hours and 14 minutes by 2017 (eMarketer, 2017). The media become increasingly important to us as we absorb information from others and contribute our own information by connecting with friends and sharing our ideas, pictures, and opinions with others every day.



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## Keeping Up

How do we keep up with all this information? One thing we try to do is multitask. For example, a person can listen to recorded music, text friends, and watch a video on a pop-up window all at the same time—thus experiencing three hours of media exposure for each hour of clock time.

Multitasking, however, is not a good strategy for helping us keep up with the flood of information. For example, if you wanted to view all the videos uploaded to YouTube today, it would take you an entire year of viewing and you would have to multitask by watching 20 screens every second of every day! While multitasking helps increase our exposure, it is not a good strategy to help us keep up with even a tiny fraction of media messages in the flood of information every day.

Multitasking, like messaging someone on your smartphone while watching online videos, increases your media exposure. But are you truly multitasking, or are you still missing bits and pieces of information?

## Dealing with the Information Problem

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Although we are all saturated with information and each year the media are more aggressive in seeking our attention, we are able to deal with it. How is this possible? The answer lies in the way the human brain is wired and programmed: its hardware and software.

### Our Mental Hardware

The most remarkable piece of hardware on Earth is the human brain. Although the human brain is relatively small (weighing less than four pounds), it has a remarkable capacity to take in information from the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell); process all that information by either filtering it out or attending to it; process its meaning; store it and later retrieve it; and make decisions that often stimulate action. The human brain is composed of 100 billion neuron cells—which is the number of stars in the Milky Way (Storr, 2019). Each cell is linked by synapses to as many as 100,000 others. That means your brain has created over 500 trillion stringlike fibers (called *axons*) and dendrites that connect with other neurons at junctions (called *synapses*). “These synapses constantly form and dissolve, weakening and strengthening in response to new experiences” (Haven, 2007, p. 22).

As the human brain is constantly monitoring the environment, thousands of neurons are receiving stimulation from thousands of other neurons and must decide whether to ignore the input or respond in some way by sending a signal to another specific neuron. “Somehow, through this freeway maze of links, loops, and electric traffic jams, we each manage to think, perceive, consider, imagine, remember, react, and respond” (Haven, 2007, p. 22).

### Our Mental Software

How does this complex piece of hardware know what to do? The answer to this question is that the brain has been programmed to perform certain functions. This programming or software, which is sometimes referred to collectively as *the mind*, tells the brain how to function, much like the software on your computers tell them which functions to perform and how to perform those functions.

Some of this software has been hardwired into the brain before birth. For example, the brain automatically oversees the body’s internal states by constantly monitoring the performance of the organs (heart, lungs, kidneys, etc.) to keep them functioning properly. The brain also has been programmed to monitor a person’s environment for threats. For example, orienting reflex directs the brain to pay attention to the environment for sudden changes, such as loud noises or flashes of light, and when a potential threat is identified, the brain creates an attentional state that forces the person to examine the thing that triggered the attention to determine whether it is an actual threat or not. Also, the brain has been hardwired with a fight-or-flight reflex so that when a potential threat is encountered, the body is automatically made ready (increased heart rate and blood pressure) to either fight off the threat or run away to safety.

In addition to the hardwiring of the brain to maintain *physical* well-being, the brain has also been hardwired to enhance its *social* well-being. For example, the ability for language has been hardwired into human brains so that people can easily communicate. Throughout history, every culture has developed a language. While the basic ability to learn a language is hardwired, the learning of any particular language must be learned after birth so that each individual can use their language facility to transmit meaning to others and receive meanings from their culture.

As we accumulate experiences in life, our minds create additional programming that tells our brains how to perform additional functions, such as math or logical reasoning; how to work through moral problems; how to control one's emotions; and how to expand and grow the skills that would lead to rewarding careers and relationships. This additional programming initially comes from one's parents and siblings. It also comes from one's contact with cultural institutions, such as education, religion, politics, and government. It comes from one's friends, acquaintances, and even one's enemies. And it comes from the mass media. All of this additional programming shapes how we make decisions in our everyday world about what to wear, what to eat, what is important, how to act, and how to spend our resources of time and money. This programming is constantly running in our unconscious minds in the form of automatic routines.

### Automatic Routines

The human mind can be wondrously efficient. It can perform many everyday tasks quickly by using **automatic routines**, which are sequences of behaviors or thoughts that we learn from experience and then apply again and again with little effort. Once you have learned a sequence—such as tying your shoes, brushing your teeth, driving to school, or playing a song on the guitar—you can perform it over and over again with very little effort compared to the effort it took you to learn it in the first place. As we learn to do something, we are writing the instructions, similar to a computer code in our minds. That code then runs automatically in our unconscious minds and serves to guide us through the task with very little thought or effort. To illustrate, recall your experience in first learning to type. You had to think of the individual letters in each word, think about which key controlled which letter, and then command a finger to press the correct key. It took you a long time to type out each word. But now, after much practice, your fingers (or thumbs) move over the keyboard quickly as you type out messages in seconds. Now when you message someone, you think only about the message while not having to think at all about the mechanics of typing.



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The human brain not only oversees autonomic functions like breathing, it also manages the choices we make and how we act in social situations.



Psychologists refer to this automatic processing of information as **automaticity**. Automaticity is a mental state in which our minds operate without any conscious effort from us. We encounter almost all media messages in a state of automaticity; that is, we put our minds on “automatic pilot” and automatically filter out almost all message options. I realize that this might sound strange, but think about it. We cannot consider every possible message and consciously decide whether to pay attention to it or not. There are too many messages to consider. Over time, we have developed automatic routines that guide this filtering process very quickly and efficiently so we don’t have to spend much, if any, mental effort.

To illustrate this automatic processing, consider what you do when you go to the supermarket to buy food. Let’s say you walk into the store with a list of 25 items you need to buy; 15 minutes later, you walk out of the store with your 25 items. In this scenario, how many decisions have you made? The easy answer is to say 25 decisions, because you made a separate decision to buy each of your 25 items as you put each item into your cart. But what about all the items you decided *not* to buy? The average supermarket today has about 40,000 items on its shelves. You actually made 40,000 decisions in the relatively short time you were

in the supermarket—25 decisions to buy the 25 products and all those other decisions not to buy the remaining 39,975 products. How did you accomplish such an extensive task in such a short period of time? You relied on automatic routines.

Our culture is a grand supermarket of media messages. Those messages are everywhere whether we realize it or not, except that there are far more media messages in our culture than there are products in any supermarket. In our everyday lives—like when we enter a supermarket—a program is loaded into our mind that tells it what to look for and automatically filters out the

rest. This automatic processing guides most—but certainly not all—of our media exposures. With automatic processing, we experience a great deal of media messages without paying any attention to them. Every once in a while, something in the message or in our environment triggers our conscious attention to a media message. To illustrate this, imagine driving in your car; you have music from your smartphone playing through your car’s sound system but your attention is on the conversation you are having with your friend who is seated next to you. Then your favorite song starts playing, and your attention shifts from the conversation to the music. Or perhaps your conversation is interrupted when your friend notices that the sound system is playing her favorite song, and she starts singing along with the music. In both scenarios, you are being exposed to a stream of media messages from your car’s sound system without paying conscious attention to them, but then something happens that triggers your conscious attention to the music.



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Deciding which brand is best, trying to tune out advertisements, and determining what you want versus what you need—these are all things we encounter when we’re out shopping, and when we’re engaging with media. How else is shopping in a supermarket similar to consuming media content?

## Advantages and Disadvantages

The huge advantage of automatic processing is efficiency. When the filtering software is running automatically, it is making thousands of decisions for us without requiring us to expend any effort.

There are, however, some significant disadvantages. When we rely exclusively on our automatic routines, we get into a rut and miss out on paying attention to many messages that may be highly useful to us; we never know what we are missing. When our minds are on automatic pilot, we may be missing a lot of messages that might be helpful or enjoyable to us. We might not have programmed all the triggers we need to help us get out of automatic processing when a potentially interesting message comes our way. Returning to the supermarket example from above, let's say you are very health conscious. Had you been less concerned with efficiency when you went into the supermarket, you would have considered a wider range of products and read their labels for ingredients. Not all low-fat products have the same fat content; not all products with vitamins added have the same vitamins or the same proportions. Or perhaps you are very price conscious. Had you been less concerned with efficiency, you would have considered a wider variety of competing products and looked more carefully at the unit pricing so you could get more value for your money. Thus, when we are too concerned with efficiency, we lose opportunities that expand our experience and that put ourselves in a position to make better decisions that can make us healthier, wealthier, and happier.

Another disadvantage of relying on automatic routines is that over the long run, we start to experience message fatigue. When we feel overwhelmed by too many media messages, we try to protect ourselves by narrowing down our attention and thus filtering out even more messages. Eventually, we end up exposing ourselves to the same type of message over and over, and the value of each message keeps decreasing. This process weakens our ability to concentrate. In 1971, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Herbert Simon observed that “a wealth of information crates a poverty of attention” (Angwin, 2009, p. 239). This is illustrated by a study where experimenters set up a jam-tasting table in a food store. In this experiment, the researchers either offered people samples from six jams or 24 jams. While the table with more jams attracted 50% more visitors and tasters, the table with fewer jams stimulated more sales. Among the visitors to the table with the larger number of jams, only 3% bought some jam, while among the visitors to the table with the smaller number of jams, 30% bought some jam (Anderson, 2006). The lesson here is that while choice is attractive, too much choice can paralyze us into inaction. When we feel overwhelmed, we rely more and more on automatic routines and this leads us into a deeper and deeper rut, where we find ourselves doing the same things over and over.

## The Big Question

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Given that we live in a culture highly saturated with information and given that we protect ourselves from this flood of information with automatic routines programmed into our minds, the big question is this: Who benefits the most from the way automaticity has been programmed in your mind?