Seeking Unmediated Truths

Gregg Hoffmann

Before most of us arrive at work, or school, or even this conference, we have been exposed to dozens, perhaps hundreds, of media messages.

You might wake up to a clock radio, stumble downstairs to turn on the TV while perking some coffee. While sipping that coffee, you might read a newspaper, or surf the net on your computer.

On your drive to work or school, you likely have a radio on in your car. You might see several billboards along the way. Once at the office, you could walk through a waiting room with magazines on a table. Then, you might check your email before getting into the bulk of your day.

All of these media convey information, but also values, norms, sales pitches and images that go into forming what I call "mediated truths." By that term, I do not only mean that media companies are bringing you the messages. I also mean that the intended meaning of them has been carefully mediated, or determined, by those within the media industry. They then are further mediated, or negotiated, by you as the receiver.

Without a certain awareness, and careful, critical scrutiny, your own mediation process might become quite passive. You might reject the messages as propaganda or garbage, and thus miss some important elements of them. Research shows that more of you are likely to rather passively digest the messages, and perhaps in a rather unthinking way accept the information, values and norms as truths.

It is my contention that we live and function very much within a mediated world – one that is of our own creation through our feelings, perception, etc. Increasingly over recent decades, media messages – ranging from advertising to entertainment to the news – feed and influence how we formulate those feelings and perceptions. Think of this world as a "bubble" around your head, filled with these images and values we have mentioned, that serves as a filter, in some cases even an obstruction, to your abstracting with the actual territory around you.

I contend that if you "buy into" these mediated truths you can be setting yourself up for a great deal of stress, possible strains in relationships and a lack of tolerance for other world views and perceptions. Individual "goals" can become "demands" in this mediated world. Relationships can be judged by norms established in commercials or fictionalized media accounts rather than on their own strengths and weaknesses. Political and social views can be packaged and sold to you, as commodities. Other world views can be seen as threats, or obstacles, rather than simply diversity.

If you get entrapped within your own mediated world, you can lose touch with your actual environment – nature, friends and family, your community, etc. When you lose touch with that environment, which we will refer interchangeably to as the territory, you risk losing touch with yourself.

Thus, seeking what I label "unmediated truths" can become a very worthy and important effort. But, how do you seek such "truths"? I believe you can do so first by becoming more media literate, second by becoming more aware of your own abstracting process – from the sensory level all the way to the higher order levels of theories and world views – and third by recognizing differing structures between many mediated messages and the structure of the natural world.

General semantics has been my guide in 20 years of developing and teaching media literacy. Using it as my theoretical foundation, as well as practical guide, I developed two university courses, an outreach program to more than 30 middle and high schools in the U.S. and Australia, and have written two books. I am using general semantics now to develop a program and book called, "Seeking Unmediated Truths." In this paper, I will draw from observations made during presentation of this program and numerous courses in media literacy.

Two Worlds

The concept of "two worlds" should not be new to those who have studied general semantics. Alfred Korzybski wrote about the "intensional world," of ideas, feelings, world views, etc. and a world outside our skins, what we often refer to as reality. Korzybski encouraged taking an "extensional" approach, to explore the territory beyond our own skin and to be aware of our own formulations, and what influenced them. *1*

S.I. Hayakawa applied general semantics ideas to analysis of propaganda. Irving Lee used general semantics in teaching and researching verbal communications and rhetoric. *2*

Most of these early general semanticists primarily looked at applications to the written and spoken language. Books, magazines and newspapers served as the primary media through most of their lives.

Of course, today television and computer images dominate. We can create "virtual realities." We have the technology to change the color of your sweater, put Oprah Winfrey's head on Ann Margaret's body (as actually was done in one publication), make Saddam Hussein or George Bush look like Adolph Hitler or have you take a virtual tour of Australia while sitting in Milwaukee. The spoken and printed word remains very important, but we also have to consider the power of visual images.

In recent decades, researchers such as Neil Postman, John Merrill, Geraldine Forsberg and yours truly have used general semantics principles to explore media messages of all types. *3*

The Mediated World

So what are the underlying values of this so-called mediated world? And, what factors go into shaping them?

Research in media show that children and adults pick up the following values as being important from various forms of media: *4*

- Consumerism and materialism. Success often is measured by what we own, where we live, what kind of car are drive or what clothes we wear in the mediated world.

- Patriotism. The United State way of life – freedom, free market economy, etc. – is the best in the world. This value has been conveyed even stronger since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack. Conversely, those who disagree with our way of life are considered the enemy, evil-doers, oppressors, etc.

- Physical attractiveness is very important. This value begins in teen magazines and other media geared at young people, especially female young people. It is carried out through adult media.

- Information must be entertaining. That means it must be relatively easy to understand – dumbed down in some of our opinions – fast-paced, delivered by those physically attractive people mentioned a paragraph earlier. *5*

- Individualism. You can be successful if you act aggressively and take on the world yourself. Work hard, compete, be tough. After all, it's you against the world.

- The natural world primarily provides resources for humans – fuel, food, materials for shelter, recreation, etc.

These values, and others conveyed in media messages, should be understood as constructions that are shaped by world views and paradigms both in broader American society, and within the media industry.

So, a media message producer, like any citizen, is influenced by the broader cultural values, which are conveyed not only by media but also through family, peers, schools and other institutions. Meanwhile, that producer also is influenced by values and paradigms within the media industry. These include ways of doing business within that industry, and longtime values that often are used when making decisions about what is news or what should go into ads or entertainment products. These include values such as timeliness, making deadlines, proximity, conflict, personalization of issues, unusual qualities, etc.

The media producer is in a rather unique position in that the messages he or she produces are then sent right back out into the broader culture, and help feed the values and world views within that culture.

The Unmediated World

If you really examine the natural world – which we are calling the unmediated world – the structure and underlying values differ from those within the mediated world in many ways.

- Basic needs. The natural world requires inhabitants to acquire basic needs of food, shelter, perhaps fuel. It does not demand excessive consumption. It basically only requires that inhabitants do what they must do to survive.

- No boundaries. Political or governmental boundaries within the natural world are meaningless. Yes, some animals will guard a certain territory out of instinct, but this protective instinct does not develop from some philosophy or higher order image or theory. It is not furthered by propaganda.

- The natural world is very much an inner-connected system. Yes, it is true that the strong might survive over the weak, and that physical attractiveness is important in mating, etc. But, an eco-system balances itself out over time – unless human intervention or some other cataclysmic interference becomes involved. All living things in an eco-system are related in some way, and therefore depending on one another – whether it be as part of the food chain, etc.

- Diversity Abounds. Within the eco-system, diversity of species, etc. abounds. In fact, the system is very dependent on a diversity of living things to provide that balance mentioned in the previous section.

This is not a pitch for a "back to nature" movement. Nor is it trying to say we as humans should live like animals in the woods. In fact, this writer has enjoyed a great deal some aspects of the mediated world – financial gain, status, intellectual challenge, sense of achievement, and other rewards. But, to lose touch with the structure and values that can be found in nature creates the risk of disconnection from other living things and oneself. You can easily become entrapped in an either-or structure. If you adopt the values of the mediated world without thinking, you run those risks.

GS-Based Media Literacy

One of the ways to avoid the risk of disconnection is to become more mediate literate. The GS-based media literacy program I have had at UW-Milwaukee has been based on several principles:

Map and territory analogy – Our maps, which are influenced greatly by media messages, never equal the territory. In part, they will always be less than the territory, because the territory always is changing and we often create rather static maps.

Abstracting process – We can better understand our own formulations, as well as those created by others, including the media, if we become aware of the various, abstracting process models in GS. In media literacy, it becomes supremely important to recognize the possibility of becoming trapped in higher order abstractions – media images, world views, etc. – and therefore no longer seeing the environment around us or recognizing sensory and other reactions within us.

Calculus approach – We can better understand any system or whole by breaking it down into smaller parts, understanding those parts and then integrating them back into a whole.

Extensional vs. intensional orientation – Explore the territory beyond the images, and be aware of your own formulations, and how they might be influences by media messages. I encourage the use of extensional devices, such as indexing, dating and others, to become

aware of stereotypes, which are so prevalent in the media, underlying assumptions and premises, etc.

After we have done work with students to help them recognize their own abstracting limits and biases, we look at three main influences on the creation of media messages: 1) the influence of the human limitations of those who produce and consume media messages, 2) the business factors of the media industry and the values that develop from those and 3) the process a media messages goes through. *6*

I have written a textbook, workbook, numerous articles and countless lectures on these topics, but will try to summarize them in the next 500 words or less of this paper. First, all those involved in the media communication process have human limits in perception, their own cultural views and biases, etc. We really never will rid ourselves of those, but by becoming more aware of them we can reach a better understanding or at least develop more tolerance for the content of media messages. Those messages are the product of human endeavor; therefore will never be perfect.

Business factors include: the need to sell advertising, the need to deliver an audience for those advertisements, the need to make deadlines, the need to compete with more and different media, the tendency to fall back on familiar images and stereotypes to help sell and attract audiences, etc. As we strive to meet or maximize these goals, we survey audiences, but also fall back on those long held media values of timeliness, proximity, personalization, conflict/drama, etc. We assume audience members are attracted by these elements in media messages.

The process has become increasingly important in shaping media messages. We now have incredible technical capability of changing reality and creating virtual reality. I already gave some examples of technical manipulation of media messages in the second section of this paper.

For those of us in news media, this capability raises a major ethical question. Are we trying to mirror reality, as much as possible, or are why simply trying to create a nice-looking, attractive product? Certainly, the movement to infotainment almost answers that question in many cases. In entertainment programming, the question seldom is even asked.

Even if we do try to be as unbiased as possible, we can't become completely objective, plus each individual mapmaker inevitably influences the map. A media message goes through a process somewhat similar to a car on a conveyor belt. Numerous individuals work on parts of the message, and therefore influence it along the way.

In addition to using the calculus approach to break down these factors of influence, we use a similar approach to actually go into the media message itself to better understand it. A very important part of my media literacy approach has been to differentiate between what might be a fact, a critical inference or an assumption based on uncritical inferences. We define a fact as "something that seems verifiable within a certain point in time, within the limits of our exploration process." Therefore a fact can change as that territory changes, and as our tools for exploration improve.

We also increasingly break down "visual grammar." We look at the composition, sequencing, color and hue and other factors in visual parts of ads, entertainment programming and news. What might be the influences on audience members?

Over the years, I have become very aware that while these "intellectual" approaches to media literacy are very important for students to better understand how they might be influenced and manipulated in the "mediated world," they are not enough. Students also must "feel" the differences between the mediated and unmediated world.

Sensory Awareness

In recent years, I have added more "sensory awareness" work, ala that done by Charlotte Read and Bruce Kodish in the Institute of General Semantics summer-workshops for years. After doing much of the work described in the previous section of this paper, I will take the class for a day into nature.

For one hour, they are assigned to exploring the territory, without speaking, with no note taking, with the instructions to even "turn off" that inner voice that speaks to oneself.

After that hour, we come together to do another 15-20 minutes of "sensory abstracting" as a group, with only myself giving periodic instructions. Each student then writes a brief description/comparison of the experience. Often I ask them to compare it to our "normal" classroom work.

Many of the reports include:

- A relaxing of their bodies, and an awareness of it. Some day their shoulders "came down." Others say they become more aware of their breathing, or of tension in their arms, legs and backs. *7*

- Hearing more things. They heard birds and other animals, the breeze through the trees, etc. Many report irritation when they heard things from the "mediated" world, such as car or airplane noise, or radios.

- A feeling of oneness, with their surroundings and other living things.

- Frustration with the fact they couldn't really turn off that "inner voice."

We often discuss how even their abstracting with nature is not completely "unmediated." They are negotiating, filtering, abstracting meaning from it. But, they have been able to use a "purer" form of abstracting, in which their senses actually could experience the territory rather than use some media produced message or map as their starting point in the abstracting process. *8*

Not Only Either/Or

Perhaps the most often reached conclusion in these sessions, and one that relates closest to the general theme of this conference, is that an "either-or" structure, and values based on it, really constitutes only one sub-set of all the possible structures out there.

Even our division in GS of the "two worlds," or my work in seeking unmediated and mediated truths, reflects the difficulty in escaping either-or structure once we start using language. This certainly becomes true when we use the "language" of media.

By no means are the media responsible for all the woes in the world, or miscommunication, or disagreements over world views. Many other factors serve to divide us. Media messages also bring information to people around the world, entertain people and at times can serve to bring people together in common activities.

But, if we buy into this either-or structure of the mediated world, and become no longer aware that there are many other possibilities in the natural world, we can look at other world views as competing and threats, we can divide ourselves from our environment and see nature as something to be conquered or utilized, we eventually can become divided ourselves.

Media literacy, especially an approach based on GS ideas, can serve to make us more astute "mappers" of messages, more aware of some of the pitfalls within them, more able to use those messages to promote understanding and learning than division and stereotyping.

Once we become more media literate, we often can also differentiate between the mediated world and the unmediated world of nature. If we stay in better touch with that unmediated world, and draw certain truths that it offers, I believe we can stay in better touch with ourselves, and therefore other living things and humans in the world.

End Notes

1. *Alfred Korzybski Collected Writings 1920-1950*, ed. M. Kendig, International Non-Aristotelian Library and Institute of General Semantics. 1990. pgs. 189-271.

2. *Language In Action*, S.I. Hayakawa, Harcourt Brace & Co., 1939. pgs. 22-23.

3. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neil Postman, Penguin Books, 1986; The Dialectic In Journalism, John C. Merrill, Louisiana State University Press, 1989; Critical Thinking in an Image World, Geraldine Forsberg, University Press of America, 1993.

4. Center for Media Literacy materials, Los Angeles, California; National Telemedia Council materials, Madison, Wisconsin; and original survey research done through the Milwaukee Media Connection media literacy outreach program at UW-Milwaukee.

5. *"*Media as Epistemology" in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. pgs. 16-29.

6. Developed during research for Media Maps & Myths, Gregg Hoffmann, M&T Communications, 1993, and *Mapping the Media*, Gregg Hoffmann, M&T Communications, 1997.

7. Korzybski writes about a similar "neuro-semantic relation" in the Introduction to the second edition of *Science and Sanity*, dated March 1941.

8. These reactions were gathered and observations made by the author in class sessions of Media Literacy, a course at UW-Milwaukee from 1987 until the present, and at two seminars called Seeking Unmediated Truths, conducted in August and October 2000 in Sydney, Australia.