Media & the Mind: Crash Course Media Literacy #4

Crash Course: Media Literacy
https://youtube.com/watch?v=TAdkzxB4WFo
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/TAdkzxB4WFo

Picture this. You sit down in front of a new movie. Or you turn on the radio in the car. What is your brain doing?

Well, a lot of things, hopefully. But your brain is also working to make sense of whatever media you encounter. A flicker of pattern recognition and you realize this new movie has a reference to *Citizen Kane*. A stab of memory, and you're singing the hook of that song. All. Day. Long.

For every conscious reaction and response you have to media, your brain is also subconsciously reacting and responding. Our brains do plenty of things automatically. They tell our lungs to breathe and our heart to beat. And while a lot of these automatic functions are pretty great, there are a few that aren't. – especially when it comes to media.

So today we look at how our minds react to media. You wanna be media literate? Well here's a list of the worst impulses inside your brain that you're going to have to overcome.

This is your brain on media.

[Opening music]

When was the last time you thought about tying your shoes? Like, really had to think about it? Maybe not since you learned how, right? That's because your brain has automated the process. It's muscle memory.

Our brains are pretty good at automating routine stuff. They do this to reduce the cognitive load, or the amount of time and attention needed to finish a task. Imagine your brain is like a computer – it only has so much RAM to use at any moment. To make the best use of that processing power, the brain relies on schema.

A schema is a thought pattern, a way the brain understands a task, the desired outcomes of that task, and the strategy for getting there. If you have a routine, any routine, you have a schema to work through it.

What about news gathering? Maybe before you even open your eyes in the morning you reach for your phone to scroll through the latest headlines on Twitter. Or maybe you turn the TV on while you cook and listen to the news. Or maybe you just hope someone will have a copy of today's paper on the bus so you can read it when they're done.

With any news habit, your brain is not only automating you picking up your phone in the morning or turning on the TV. It's also automating how you make sense of information in that app or article. All that efficiency in our brains, which is ideal for brushing your teeth or opening a door, is not ideal for parsing through complex or new information.

Our brains are basically designed to take shortcuts. And shortcuts are bad for business when we're trying to do the hard work of navigating the media landscape.

So are there other parts of the brain that protect us from this? Whoo-boy, it's not even close. Bad news my friends: It's exactly the opposite.

The human brain is a mysterious thing. We can remember what we did one day 12 years ago, but not remember what we had for breakfast. We'll recall ungodly amounts of song lyrics but can never remember what that one actor's name is. It's Bill Paxton. We'll be totally exhausted, but when our head hits the pillow, suddenly we want to recap every embarrassing thing we've done since second grade.

But for all its wacky inconsistencies, one thing the brain does really well is complete a picture. When we're talking about visual perception – you see a bunch of dots in the shape of a panda, and you think "panda" – that's called the Law of Closure. As we move through the media environment, we're constantly trying to form this type of closure. And our brains don't do this objectively.

Each time we take a bit of info and complete the picture, we're using prior life experiences and knowledge. So, for instance, when you read a headline like "DiCaprio and Winslet recreate epic scene from *Titanic*," you'd use prior knowledge to fill in the gaps. You know Frank DiCaprio and Maggie Winslet didn't star in that film, so it must be referencing Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet.

It's like the brain's version of when Google knows you're searching for "how to know your cat loves you" just from the letter H. No? Is that just me? This inherent desire to connect the dots, to see the whole instead of its parts – is exactly what makes humans vulnerable to misinformation.

Consider another unhelpful brain reflex: false memory. Sometimes when we can't exactly recall the details of an event, our brain will just fill in the blanks with something plausible.

For instance, say you witnessed a robbery. The police show up and ask you, "What color shirt was the robber wearing?" It happened so fast you think, huh I'm not quite sure. And another witness says, "I think it was purple." And suddenly maybe you remember the robber was wearing a purple shirt. It's not that you are trying to lie. It's more like your brain thinks, "Yeah, that sounds about right," and the line between memory and imagination is just too thin to notice.

The trouble with a false memory, especially when it comes to misinformation and "fake news," is it's much easier to create a memory than it is to change one. So when a Facebook page built to spread fake news sends a lie out into the world, readers are more likely to remember that lie than to update their memory of it later. Even when they have the right info.

Another time-saver the brain uses is hunting for information we already believe to be true. This is called confirmation bias, and it's a huge problem.

Let's jump into the Thought Bubble to check it out.

Each and every one of us wakes up in the morning biased. Biased toward early mornings or late nights, biased towards conservatism or liberalism,
biased towards reading news or watching it on TV. Our life's worth of experiences shape us to prefer, understand, and believe certain things.

When we're confronted with an avalanche of information, which is difficult to wade through, we seek out things we already prefer, understand, and believe. It's just easier, cognitively and emotionally, to only deal with things we already like.

This means that if we're presented with a message that aligns with or confirms our biases, we're extra likely to believe it. On the other hand, if that message opposes our biases, we're extra likely to think it's false. It also means that if you and I both experience the same media, we could take away completely different meanings.

Take this *Washington Post* article from October 2017, for example: "Clinton campaign, DNC paid for research that led to Russia dossier."

It says that Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign and the Democratic National Committee paid for research into Donald

Trump's campaign. This dossier was very controversial when it was revealed in 2016. Many Clinton supporters and liberal Americans believed the dossier was proof of Trump's collusion with a foreign power.

Many Trump supporters and conservative Americans believed it was proof that the Democratic party was trying to take down the Republican candidate. Now, if you already have a Democratic bias you might think, "Wow, the dossier must have been legit. Why would the Democratic party spend time and money on a phony story?"

And If you have a Republican bias, you could conclude the opposite: "Wow, the dossier must have been phony the whole time, if it was financed by the Democratic party."

This means that a piece of information can do the same thing for different people: communicate, simply, what you already believe is true is true.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Social media presents an extra obstacle: most platforms, like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, are built to reward confirmation bias. Those companies want you in their apps as long as possible, so their algorithms are tuned to keep showing you stuff you like. Which would be fine, if 38% of U.S. adults didn't rely on them for news.

Which brings us to another brain time-saver: information satisficing – a bizarre combo of "satisfying" and "sufficing." Sometimes when we're busy or not really that concerned with hunting down the right answer, we'll accept whatever answer's laid out in front of us.

Say, your second-favorite celeb couple breaks up. They won't talk to the press about it, but a tabloid at the grocery store says he cheated with the nanny. Scandalous! You think that sounds plausible, and since this info isn't life-or-death important, this answer suffices.

Searching through old interviews to look for clues of a slowly dissolving romance – we've all got things to do, like figure out whether our cat loves us. Age-old tabloid tales like cheating with the nanny prey on another aspect of our brain's desire to complete the picture.

We love stories. Really, we love stories. If it's simple, easy to understand, and fills in the gaps for us, we are ready to believe. But the human instinct for storytelling is straight up dangerous to media literacy. Stories are sense-making tools; they help us understand the world around us.

So when something is complex or difficult to understand and the media turns it into a familiar narrative for us, we welcome it with wide, open arms – even if it's false. To sum up, your brain on media is prone to taking shortcuts and filling in the blanks of a story whenever, and however, it can.

What's worse, publishers, advertisers, and tech companies know all of these tricks, too! They use them against us all the time to hold (or steal) our attention. If you've absolutely never fallen prey to fake news or some other kind of misinformation – well, congratulations.

But for the rest of us, it's not always easy to spot our brain's thought patterns at work, let alone break them. That's where strong critical thinking skills come in, and the shared responsibility of doing this work together, as a society. The more we acknowledge our biases and thought patterns, the better we get at smashing through them to find the truth.

We'll continue that hard work together on the next episode of Crash Course: Media Literacy. For now, I'm Jay Smooth. See you next week!

Crash Course Media Literacy is filmed in the Dr. Cheryl C. Kinney Studio in Missoula, MT. It's made with the help of all of these nice people, and our animation team is Thought Cafe. Crash Course is a Complexly production. If you wanna keep imagining the world complexly with us check out some of our other channels, like The Financial Diet, SciShow Space, and Mental Floss.

If you'd like to keep Crash Course free, for everyone, forever, you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love. Thank you to all of our patrons for making Crash Course possible with their continued support.