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## 10 | Media and Media Literacy

So far, you have read about logic, rhetoric, and additional tools that allow you to reason effectively and communicate persuasively. But as powerful as these tools and techniques might be, they're not really going to help much if you don't know what you're talking (or thinking) about.

This is why an understanding of the substance of what you are pondering or debating—what Kevin deLaplante from the Critical Thinker Academy refers to as “background knowledge”—is so vital. For while a talented debater might be able to hide his or her ignorance from equally ignorant members of an audience, he or she will be no match for an opponent who actually understands the subject being debated.

The good news today is that required background information is not hiding in inaccessible scholarly libraries or controlled by a few sources who will only share it with those willing to pay (or agree with them in advance). Instead, new sources of media powered by new technologies means background knowledge is more plentiful and accessible than ever before. Thus the challenge for those of us striving to be (and to raise) critical thinkers is how to find what we're looking for and, once we've found it, how to determine whether what we've discovered is useful or utter rubbish.

To get our hands around this subject, I'd like to start with a look at a source of background knowledge that plays an outsized role in

any presidential election, just a slightly bigger version of the outsized role it plays in every other aspect of our lives: the aforementioned media, a third party (or “fourth estate”) that we’ll be concentrating on in this chapter.

It is hard to underestimate the importance of a media that sometimes seems to upstage the parties, the candidates, and even the voters during the period of a national presidential campaign.

Sometimes a candidate will focus more attention on the media than they do their direct opponent, such as John McCain who in 2008 railed against the “Liberal Media” for trashing his vice presidential pick while allegedly giving his opponent a free ride. But before we can talk about the “Liberal Media” (a pejorative conservatives use when news coverage doesn’t go their way) or the “Corporate Media” (the sneer used by liberals who feel that motivation for profits causes the media to ignore issues of importance to them), what exactly are we referring to when we talk about “the media?”

Traditionally, when we say “the media” we are referencing the news media or, more specifically, the popular news sources of the day. This once consisted primarily of newspapers and magazines. But as technology changed, the media came to include radio, then television, and now the Internet, a technology that is in the process of subsuming all of these other media types.

Now a traditional analysis of this subject might break the media down into specific categories (newspapers, television, the Internet) and see what behavioral, cultural, or economic factors tend to drive each one. But for purposes of critical thinking, we need to look at something far more fundamental: how information delivered by any of these media gets processed by our senses and delivered to our brains where it can be turned into the background information needed to inform judgment.

When we talk about our senses (and again I’m indebted to Jay Heinrichs for his analysis of the topic in the book *Thank You for*

*Arguing*), it's useful to think of our five senses in the context of the three modes of persuasion: logos, pathos, and ethos.

For example, three of our five senses—touch, smell, and taste—do not really come into play during a political campaign or other type of debate that involves some element of logical reasoning since these senses are entirely conduits for emotion and connection, that is, pathos and ethos rather than logos.

The emotional power of smell, for example, is the reason why real estate agents recommend you bake bread before showing a house since the resulting baking odor allegedly triggers a positive emotional response of comfort and happiness. And the emotional power of taste is why most first dates and anniversaries take place in fancy restaurants vs. hotdog stands.

Touch can actually be an ethos driver, especially when we judge our relationship with someone by the strength of their handshake or whether they choose a handshake over a hug. In fact, some cultures have elaborate rules with regard to how touch-based rituals reflect levels of intimacy or hierarchy. Just watch how the French dole out those alternating kisses to the cheek to see what I'm talking about.

But in terms of critical thinking, the most important senses are those we use to engage with the media: hearing and sight.

As Heinrichs points out, hearing is probably our most logos-based sense, which may be one of the reasons why education still leans so heavily on the spoken lecture and why online classes that do not include an audio component tend to feel dissatisfying. As an avid consumer of recorded lecture courses (as well as an on-again, off-again podcaster), I can attest to the efficiency of audio in allowing you to pack a lot of information into a short period of time, which I suspect has something to do with our hearing being so efficient at processing logos-based content.

This is not to say that hearing is all about logos and nothing else. To cite the most obvious example, music is probably the most powerful controller of emotional states one can think of. And the

more our speech tends to resemble music with regard to tone, cadence, or rhyming, the more emotional information we are able to pack into our audio-delivered statements whether BY SHOUTING OUR WORDS to express anger, or raising or lowering our voice in a pattern when we say something like “you’re going out with *him*?” to express scorn or disbelief.

Now you would think that sight is also primarily logos-based, given the role sight plays in reading, with reading skill (under the name “literacy”) used to define the intellectual capacity of an individual or society.

But in addition to seeing words, we also see images—either still images like a photo, drawing, or chart, or moving images like a video or animation. While images can be powerful tools for communicating logos-based information (a picture can speak a thousand words, after all), they are just as powerful if not more so in delivering emotional content. And when words (whether written or spoken) and images are put into conflict with one another, the images invariably win out.

To illustrate this, let’s say that instead of reading a book that contained nothing but words, I instead placed a photo like this one of adorable but utterly irrelevant puppies on each page.



Chances are, no matter how compelling you find these words, you can't take your eyes off those puppies. If similar pictures appeared on every page, then rather than read through a chapter and then get back to the photos, you'd more likely to flip through the pictures first and then get back to your reading (unless you've already thrown this book in the trash and gone off to the pet shop).

The power of images to overwhelm words underlies an arms race between media sources and politicians, each of whom want to control the story coming out of a big event like a national election. This arms race became a media story itself in 1984 when CBS journalist Leslie Stahl ran an extended segment on the nightly news that strung together video of President Ronald Reagan's carefully orchestrated campaign events with the reporter's narration contrasting the candidate's pomp and promises with what she considered to be the darker reality of his administration.

Regardless of what you think about Stahl and CBS's choice to run a piece of this type, the punchline of this tale was that rather than condemning the piece, the Reagan campaign instead called the journalist to thank her and her network for giving their colorful and carefully orchestrated campaign events so much free prime-time exposure. For these campaign operatives understood what CBS did not: that when presented with powerful, celebratory images in the form of exciting campaign activities, no amount of ominous negative narration can overwhelm those positive visuals.

Those who study media literacy, a field that emerged in the 1970s as a way to teach children how to deal with the flood of information they were receiving from modern media sources, especially television, have spent a great deal of time looking at how we should approach visual information.

As just described, our old friends logos and pathos provide one set of analysis tools to use as we think through visuals that make up or accompany media-delivered material we may be evaluating.

For instance, was a photograph or chart included in a newspaper story to add information, which would make it logos-based, or

create a mood that might influence your attitude towards the words you're reading, which would make it more about pathos?

To take one example, during Barack Obama's first term in office a story in the local newspaper about a troubling report released on the US economy was accompanied by a photo of President Obama mopping his brow, with his face showing an expression of obvious discomfort.

This juxtaposition of the story with this image was clearly meant to give the impression that Obama was worried about the negative economic news. But given that there was no information regarding where and when this photo was taken, Obama *might* have become sweaty and worried when he received the report (and may have actually been wiping his brow with a copy of it). Or he might have just gotten off of Air Force One on a hot Washington summer day, in which case his sweat and discomfort had nothing to do with the story in question. So, in this case, I made the assumption that the photo was added to create a mood and was thus pathos-based, meaning I did not need to take it at face value. More importantly, I needed to actively avoid being forced into concluding that the president was fretting about this news so much that it had caused him to lose his cool.

Media literacy also teaches us to think through the origins as well as the relevance of media-delivered visuals.

We should obviously be on the lookout for outright fraud, such as photos that have been doctored using tools like Photoshop in a way that changes their meaning. We also need be mindful of images and video that have been posed or choreographed to generate misinformation or emotional impact. This last technique has become so common with regard to media manipulation related to war news that a cottage industry has emerged to debunk imagery of wins, losses, and casualties (especially civilian casualties) generously provided to the media by different sides in a conflict.

More often than not, however, we are not confronted by fake images so much as images that are too good to be true, like my Obama mopping his brow example.

It is not just the media that creates these images and layouts designed to push you to think one way or another. Politicians and advertisers are also masters of these techniques, which they use to try to control how both we and the news media treat their messages and priorities.

One of my favorite examples of this took place during the first term of Ronald Reagan when, in the course of one week in 1982, the president was dealing with the death of hundreds of Marines from a truck bombing in Lebanon and the decision to invade Grenada, a Caribbean island that had just suffered a Marxist coup.

The image showed Reagan in his pajamas and bathrobe taking a call with a look of awareness and concern on his face. This remarkable image was featured on page one of hundreds of newspapers, as well as many magazine covers. Even TV shows which prefer moving to still images featured it, given the photo's strength in communicating a message that the president was on the job, day and night, dealing with major international crises.

But the first question everyone seeing this image should have asked themselves was "where did it come from?" Did an AP photographer just happen to be walking by the room Reagan was staying in late one night when this call came in? Or was this image taken and maybe even posed by the White House itself to give the impression they wanted the media and public to receive?

Fundamentally, media literacy asks us to grasp that any information we are presented with, be it words, sound, pictures, or video, is the work of human beings, either as individuals or as part of organizations. And these people and organizations are likely to have their own biases, agendas, and desires, including the desire to influence us one way or another.

The Reagan photo example I just gave you, along with negative ads that present tiny snippets of an opponent's speech or the warm

and fuzzy campaign biopics produced for party conventions, are obvious examples where people with an agenda are trying to use the power of media to get you to think and vote in a particular way.

This doesn't mean everything that appears in photos, ads, or videos created by the political parties is false and misleading. It simply means that you should understand the agenda the originators of this material have before either taking what they give you at face value or, just as importantly, dismissing everything they present as lies and propaganda.

Agendas and biases, which are easy to determine in the case of political candidates and parties, are a bit trickier to ascertain with regard to independent news sources such as newspapers, radio, or TV news programs, since most of us like to believe that such news sources (at least the ones we watch, listen to, or subscribe to) are staffed by hard-bitten, skilled reporters who are just interested in getting you the facts and following the story no matter where it leads.

No doubt, this romantic notion of the journalist as truth seeker without an agenda is one that members of the media like to believe about themselves. But we should not dismiss this as a work of fiction just because many news sources hide behind such mythology (especially when they are caught spreading falsehoods or clearly tilting their coverage one way or another).

As I mentioned before, many conservatives tend to condemn the media as liberal, citing facts regarding the voting patterns of many big-name journalists or the pattern of major newspaper endorsements of Democratic vs. Republican candidates. Meanwhile, liberals often point out the fact that many media sources are owned by large, for-profit corporations, implying that this influences what stories they cover and how they cover them.

I don't think either criticism can or should be dismissed outright, although it might be useful to look at media bias from a perspective other than partisanship.



I thought of this while reading an intriguing short book called *Trust Me I'm Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator*, a tell-all written by Ryan Holiday, a marketer and PR man skilled in using the new rules of Internet media to spread his own stories, including marketing messages and rumors, as news.

In that book, he provides a different perspective—a historical perspective—on the economic argument I just mentioned, pointing out that newspapers (to cite his historical precedent) have always been selling a product, but how that product is defined can help us evaluate its strengths and shortcomings with regard to accuracy and bias.

For example, when newspapers were sold one at a time on the street, their owners made more money if people bought more copies. This is why they came out with extra editions (as in “Extra, Extra, Read all about it!”) and why they stressed sensational stories in order to get people to buy their paper vs. someone else’s.

Later, newspapers like *The New York Times* changed the business model to one in which they made their money by selling subscriptions. This meant that their product was no longer individual editions that had to be sold on their own merits, usually based on how interesting or sensational the content, but the ability of the institution to deliver a quality product on a regular basis.

Holiday chose this example to provide some perspective on the “new media,” an Internet-driven media that consists not just of online versions of traditional news venues but a host of new sources such as blogs, social media sites, and Twitter feeds, each with its own norms, requirements, and business model.

I’ll talk more about what else this new media portends in a minute. But for now, I hope you can see how Holiday’s insight into the nature of the news product (sold one at a time based on immediacy vs. sold long term based on trust) can tell us more about the impact of economics on the news than simply dissing the entire media as a bunch of corporate stooges.

For if we think about each of the news sources we encounter as some type of product, we're in a position to evaluate them based on something other than our own partisan beliefs. For instance, some news sources still sell themselves to potential subscribers, viewers, or listeners based on quality and an alleged lack of bias, while others sell themselves based on an assurance of a certain type of bias.

You've already read about the trend of people developing their own newsfeeds consisting of cable and radio talk shows, newspapers, and Web sites designed to conform to their own beliefs and biases. Given that our fractured media age allows us to create such newsfeeds with ease, the onus is on us as critical thinkers to ask the right questions so that we can properly evaluate the sources of our information rather than caving into our confirmation biases or (just as bad) becoming so cynical that we refuse to believe anything we don't discover directly with our own senses which, in the modern world, effectively condemns us to ignorance.

Now I've been dancing around the subject of the Internet since the start of this chapter, but I'd like to dedicate the remaining paragraphs to the subject since this new media technology is in the process of not just transforming the producers of media who use it but the consumers of media as well, including all of us.

When the Net started becoming part of our lives, it was easy to look at it as just one more technology, like radio and television, that might compete with traditional information sources like books, newspapers, and magazines, but would eventually take its place alongside them.

But as the Internet has become the primary delivery system for all of the visual and audio information we've described as the fundamental building blocks of media—including words, images, and video—this has led to fundamental changes in the nature of traditional news sources.

Most importantly, this new technology has broken the monopoly those news sources had for decades, even centuries, over who gets to report the news.

Back in ancient times (i.e., the 1970s and 80s) when the field of media literacy emerged, the underlying assumption behind that field was that people had to develop filters and analytical skills to avoid being manipulated by media created and distributed primarily by large institutions such as corporations and governments. After all, as the old saying goes, “freedom of the press belongs to those who own one” (or can afford one).

But with each technological breakthrough in self-publishing (starting with desktop publishing in the 1980s, moving online through blogging, and continuing today with tools that allow anyone with modest technical competence to become a book or magazine publisher, podcaster, or YouTube broadcaster), “presses” that can get your information to anyone in the world are not just commonplace but are practically free.

Today (in theory anyway), anybody with a free blogging account can break a news story just as easily as *The New York Times*. Likewise, anyone willing to struggle with recording hardware and software and a few Internet tools can become a podcaster or YouTube programmer, competing for listeners and viewers with the major television and radio stations.

But while the tools empowering this democratization of the media may be free, the Internet phenomenon, like most world-changing technical revolutions, comes at a cost.

First off, the Internet is not just sitting alongside newspapers, magazines, radio, and television competing for your attention. Rather, it is in the process of absorbing all those other forms of media, creating cultural changes with economic consequences, especially if you happen to be running a newspaper or magazine that used to have twice as many subscribers and contain twice as many ads as it does today.

Traditional news sources that weather this storm will do so by reinventing themselves, and they may even be able to dominate certain areas of the Net like they used to dominate the newsstands and broadcast spectrum. But even if they manage to pull this off (or just survive), they now have to compete against anyone with a Web browser ready to call him or herself a journalist.

This should not necessarily be considered a bad thing. I remember reading once how journalism is similar to academics in that there are far more qualified people trained and skilled at doing jobs in those fields than there are paid media positions in the case of journalists or tenured teaching positions in the case of college professors. This may explain why there is so much high-quality news and educational content on the Web since the Internet provides outlets for people with these talents that don't require job interviews, long apprenticeships, or tenure fights as the price of entry.

At the same time, this technology allows any nut with a grudge to publish any crap they like worldwide without any need that it be accurate, intelligent, or even coherent.

Back in the day, if a newspaper wanted to publish a story (particularly of a newsworthy event such as a scoop or scandal), they required journalists to double-check their facts and provide multiple sources for their information. If the paper or network got the story wrong (which they frequently did regardless of the checks they allegedly had in place), the public had someone to point a finger at and the institution would have to pay a price, at least in terms of a tarnished reputation.

But as newspapers, radio, and TV news become more and more part of the Internet, they begin to pick up the flaws of Internet journalism, especially with regard to speed, sensationalism, and lack of accountability.

With a news cycle now measured in minutes and rewards (in the form of search engine rankings) going to those who publish first, it's in everyone's interest to get the story out immediately,

regardless of whether it's a confirmed, double-checked story or a rumor sent by anonymous e-mail.

More insidiously, we have created a system referred to as the "link economy," a term first popularized by writer Jeff Jarvis, which Ryan Holiday applies to a current practice whereby journalists pass the buck with regard to avoiding responsibility for their own carelessness and sloppy reporting. This journalistic application of the "link economy" concept works by giving the impression that as long as you link to a source, you've performed your obligation as a researcher. And if what you published ends up being a bunch of hooey, well blame the person you linked to since it was they, not you, that didn't do their job.

Not only does the rush to publish and the willingness to link rather than confirm make Web journalism sloppier than traditional journalism ever was even on its worst day, it also opens up the whole system to manipulation by people like Holiday who know which blogs will publish unsubstantiated rumors (or even lies), which major Web sites will republish the story because it appeared on someone else's blog, and which news services will push the story into the mainstream by presenting it as "a story making its way around the Internet" rather than put the effort into discovering the news themselves.

Now there are many, many occasions when this free-for-all has had positive consequences. Totalitarian societies that can keep ABC News from landing at their airports are struggling to keep dissidents from getting the truth out via social media and Internet journalists from publishing it worldwide. Sometimes even scandals, like President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, break on the blogs before the mainstream media touch a story that eventually becomes major news.

Given that somewhere on the Internet there probably exists high-quality, well-researched news and well-thought-out commentary that can inform our decisions but that this material

may be hidden in a haystack of nonsense, slander, and bunk, we are left with several choices.

One option is to believe whatever we discover online, especially if the author provides links and lots of footnotes and graphs to give the information and analysis weight, regardless of whether those links and graphs mean anything.

Alternatively, we can use these wonderful new tools to create a custom news feed for ourselves that is designed not to filter high-quality from low-quality information but rather to play to our own confirmation biases. If you recall what you read about bias earlier in this book, it is natural for our brains to settle on stories like that of the fabulous Candidate A and his despicable rival Candidate B, and to then accept unquestionably any information that confirms this belief while rejecting anything that challenges it. Well now, thanks to the Internet, we can automate this whole news-filtration process, creating a custom reality for ourselves in which our opinions and preconceptions go perpetually unchallenged.

But if we are taking on the job of becoming critical thinkers, our final (and only) choice is to understand how to locate the right information, evaluate it for quality, organize it so that it makes sense, synthesize it into answers to our questions, and communicate those answers to others responsibly.

Those five processes I just outlined: locating, evaluating, organizing, synthesizing, and communicating information are the five components of another literacy—information literacy—that is so important to critical thinking in our Internet age that the next chapter will be dedicated to the subject.

But as a final segue and commentary on media and the Internet, I'd like to talk not about what the Net is doing to our media or our politics but to us.

*The Shallows, What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*, written by Nicholas Carr, makes the case that the precedent for the Internet is not technological breakthroughs like TV and radio but rather more fundamental inventions such as written language.

Before writing existed, people were not dolts or bumpkins. In fact, one of history's greatest thinkers, Socrates, not only didn't write anything down but questioned the entire value of writing in the first place. For he was living in an oral society, a society where a powerful intellect was fueled by a powerful memory, which is probably why memory is one of those five canons of rhetoric described in the last chapter.

But once writing freed people from having to memorize everything worth talking and thinking about, it also eliminated the need for whatever abilities such prodigious memory empowered. The world was obviously better off with written language, but we did lose something in the process: the brain's ability to store and quickly retrieve the massive amount of memorized information it once could.

Today, our memory is freed even more since whenever a question comes up we cannot answer we can pull out our smartphone, pop up a browser, and look it up. And there is no question that having 24/7 access to a library as big as the Internet is, like writing, a positive thing. But, just as with the invention of writing, the invention of the Internet has come at a cost, including the atrophying of our ability to recall what we can now google.

Think about that the next time you use your computer to remind you of what days your anniversary or kid's birthday fall on. Or remember while skimming through the pages of an e-book, pausing every ten minutes to switch to e-mail, how you used to give similar books your undivided attention just a few years ago when they were printed and you were building up your background knowledge by reading them in silent solitude.

And with that dire warning about what the Internet might be doing to us delivered, it's now time to read the next chapter that discusses what that same Internet can do *for* us—after you've checked your e-mail and Twitter feed, of course (just as I did a hundred times while writing it).