

JCOM 2000—Media Smarts
Intro Chapter

Media Smarts: Making Sense of the Information Age
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CHAPTER 1

SURVEYING THE “INFORMATION AGE”

Nearly 40 years after Canadian media guru Marshall McLuhan postulated an “information age” and the “global village” that he predicted would result, mediated information as a prime commodity in the daily lives of people has truly come into its own in the late 1990s as we prepare to enter a new millennium (McLuhan, 1964).

For generations, scholars and commentators have reflected (often with some alarm) on the impact of the brave new electronic world on the way we live our lives. In the Agrarian Age, commodities were potatoes, fruits, grains and lands on which to grow them. Then came the Industrial Age, when capital and the factories and workers to produce products held sway. Now comes the Information Age, when the most valuable commodities on the market and in the lives of individuals is data—information to trade, sell, barter, produce, consume—which former Citicorp CEO Walter Wriston calls “the preeminent form of capital” (Wriston, 1994).

With the start of the Industrial Age, the *gemeinschaft* of family and small-community life was replaced by a larger but more impersonal and socially mediated *gesselschaft* community structure. It may have been more efficient, but the society of the Industrial Age included many dark corners. Implicit in the modern society always has been a mass information apparatus capable of communication with everyone, tools for independent-thinking participants of a democratic republic. Thomas Jefferson said he would prefer a society of newspapers to one of government. George Orwell’s dark vision of 1984 revolved around mediated information from a “big brother” who directed people’s

existence. Communications scholar Wilbur Schramm saw mass communication as a means to help impoverished peoples' "terrible ascent to modernity." Back in 1938, preeminent American essayist E.B. White predicted that television would be a "saving radiance" or "a new and unbearable disturbance of the general peace. . . . We shall stand or fall by television—of that I am quite sure" (White, 1938).

Whether "terrible" or "saving," enlightening or enslaving, the brave new electronic world has truly come of age in the 1990s. But as goods in the Information Age marketplace have become more diverse and more preeminent as capital in the modern realm—as media products from news and entertainment to talk shows, databases and passive couch-potato fare have spread—the sophistication of media consumers has lagged. Perhaps the flood of information has just worn us down; some call it the "dumbing" of America.

As users, our ability to access the goods in this glittering new marketplace has evolved—even our kids can call up databases, programs and interactive information services undreamed-of a decade ago—but how well are our brains keeping up with what they are subjected to every day in media messages? Our critical understanding of how those products come to us, who owns and creates them, how they are formed and conceived, what's really in them—this knowledge has steadily declined as the content and delivery systems that produces it has grown more complex.

A growing body of evidence suggests that the proliferation of delivery systems for mass communication—from magazines and newspapers to radio and television to cable and satellite to interactive and other computer-based sources—has resulted in both an information overload among users, and a tendency to tune out. This is not a new phenomenon: E.B. White, reflecting on the advent of television in the 1930s, wondered about how TV images and radio sounds (and other stimuli he couldn't have dreamed of then) "may become more familiar to us than their originals." Eventually, he wondered, will we "forget the near and primary in favor of the secondary and remote?" (White,

1938). Occurrences in the street outside your house may be less important to your day-to-day life than events—real or fictional—far away. The O.J. Simpson extravaganza is no more or less real than this week's episode of "Cops" or "ER" or "Beverly Hills 90210." The president's deliberations concerning Bosnia or North Korea are less compelling than those of the Fresh Prince of Bel Aire or Rosanne and Tom Arnold. When one considers that 5-year-olds spent 14 times as much "quality time" with television (35 hours/week) as with their mothers (2 1/2 hours), and 70 times as much as with their dads (1/2 hour/week), it is easy to understand why Barney the ever-lovin' purple dinosaur and Mattel commercials may be more influential opinion leaders among preschool kids than any other influence in their lives, and may be more "real" to tiny couch potatoes than are the other kids in daycare or the family next door.

The dilemma of the new-dawning Information Age is that media consumers don't understand enough about how their media diet is produced to know when to apply the grain of salt. "Media malaise" or "information overload" are not threats just to media industries and information providers, but to the larger society and culture of which they are a part. If participatory democracy is to survive, citizens cannot just tune out as they tune in to the media. And in an era when the media messengers have become as important to our overall culture and society as other primary social institutions—government, religion, finance, education and the rest—individuals require at least rudimentary understanding of how the media system works, what's in it and who creates its content, who owns it and where it goes, if they are to be critical consumers and responsible participants in a democratic discourse that is now almost entirely mediated. Such instruction, which we might refer to as a kind of "media civics" class, is generally lacking. Neither those aiming for careers in media industries as professional communicators, nor those in other fields for whom media will be a product for daily consumption have adequate understanding of how the system works. They all are ill-equipped to live in the mediated world of the Information Age.

This is more than a question of theories and processes of communication. It is a larger issue of arming those who *do* as well as those who *consume* mass media with enough knowledge to be literate in the age of information. “Literacy” in this case means more than simply knowing how they “read” media—although understanding new technologies and how they might affect individual lives and the larger society certainly is part of being media literate. “Literacy” in this complex new world means understanding the whole of the information “elephant,” not just those parts we touch most often, but how the parts work and how they interact. It means more than media criticism in the ways that term is most often used—either as dry and theoretical social science, or referring to the Gene Shalits, the Paulene Kaels, and the Skiskel and Eberts as “media critics.”

Rather, “media literacy” means both, and more. It means a critical and skeptical approach to media processes and content. It means making sense of the information age. Being “media literate” in the 1990s and beyond requires a grasp of theory—how scholars think it all works—plus an understanding of how media messages are produced and by whom, as well as development of the kind of sharp critical eye consumers need when shopping in a mediated marketplace and living in a mediated society.

It may be a coming-of-age that journalism and mass communication education and scholarship are at last addressing questions of how corporations and individuals creating the media messages that pervade society, connect and interact with each other, with other social institutions and processes, and with the media-consuming public. A generation ago, journalists were still the iconoclasts, sporting buttons or bumper stickers (or at least, however quietly, the philosophy) reminding themselves to “Question Authority.” But in the 1990s, the media are the authority. So how do we question them?

This is not the old, stale socialist critique. What we are suggesting is that the entirety of mass media in the 1990s and beyond has become so complex, so linked with other societal institutional interests, so technologically sophisticated and so affluent, that few of us who use the mass media have much of an idea of how they work, where their

money comes from, how they make content and advertising decisions, and—especially—how to evaluate intelligently and critically their content, what we see, read and hear in the media. Talk shows have replaced the backyard fence as a means of opinion formation, and talk show hosts have replaced neighbors and preachers, barbers and bartenders as opinion leaders. Advertising, as much as home and church, creates norms for social behavior and ambitions. Sitcoms are our models for family and personal interaction. Nintendo and other video games replace checkers and “capture the flag” as recreation for kids in their new “electronic childhoods.”

That’s part of what we think students—not just mass communication students, but *all* students—need to know about life in the age of mass information. The work of media and social critical studies scholars certainly is part of this effort to educate both future media professionals *and* future media consumers. But the larger vision of this work goes beyond the social and media critics to include the application of theory to life in a mediated society, and an understanding of how the real-life process of life in the age of information can be explained by theory. Though operating from a base of theory and scholarship, what we envision from this course and this book can be stated more simply: There are philosophical, entrepreneurial, practical, economic, structural, political, social, cultural and (many) other factors that influence media content in advertising, news and entertainment, on radio and television, in books, newspapers, movies and magazines, on the Internet. Most of those who create that content don’t learn about those influences in school, but on the job (if at all). And few of those who consume that content ever have an inkling of what influences help form it.

There is much to be said about the question of citizens’ ability to process critically the content of the media messages that surround them, and we feel deeply about it as a social need and a pedagogical imperative, not only for journalism and mass communication students, but for anyone who will live in the mediated future. Obviously, it is an issue that generates some heat, and should. In an age of proliferation of media

outlets—whether cable channels or video games or movies-on-demand or on-line services—citizens need the tools to examine information skeptically, to filter and understand media content, to make the media more important in their lives than just insect noise or, a radio (for example) is sometimes described, “electronic wallpaper.”

When you see a “demonstration” on the evening news, when “outraged residents” are interviewed, when “parents turn out” for the school board meeting—how do you know what you’re seeing, and whether it conforms to truth? On ABC, a GM pickup truck explodes into flames in a test crash (but a producer had placed incendiaries next to the gas tank). In Teheran, thousands demonstrate against imperialist America (but the crowds, which gathered at a chosen time, quieted and dispersed when the cameras were turned off). At Howard University, Conny Chung interviews irate students about the appearance of the Nation of Islam’s Louis Farrakhan (but they were “spokesmen” for only a handful of students; the majority disagreed).

Who gets covered, how and why? Too often, news that is aired is incorrect, biased, or just plain wrong—why? Because it fits the comfortable perception. Or because it’s dramatic. Or because it’s easy.

What kinds of information are available, and from what perspectives? Media critic Caryl Rivers of Boston University suggests that alien beings, observing Earth, might assume from monitoring the planet’s communications that it is a society of “sensible beings called ‘men’” and a subgroup called “women.” Says Rivers, “In our culture, the male is still the norm, women the ‘other.’ The real story of humanity is the story of men, with women as the helpmates, the onlookers” (Rivers, 1993). In a nation that is 52 percent female, why is it that a fraction of TV commentators and pundits are women (and that has actually gone down since 1983), that women write less than 30 percent of stories that run on the front pages of U.S. newspapers, that women are paid 25 percent less to work in the same media-industry jobs as men?

And what about children? Anyone who has a kid, or who knows one, or who has been one, knows the powerful attraction the mass media hold over them. But how are they served by the media system? How are they covered? Are their lives consumed solely by Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, Barney and Barbie, or is there more to their media existence? Are kids just couch potato-buds, or is there more to the way they use—and are used—by the mass media? Susan Herr, head of a Chicago-based group called Youth Communication, says most of what we see, hear, read about kids in the media is “paternal journalism”—“the notion that media can provide detailed knowledge about people’s lives without including their voices” (Herr, 1994).

That critique can be extended to media portrayals of any non-male, non-white, non-adult group. How do people who are neither white nor children fare in the Information Age? If you watch television, African-Americans (for example) are either violent or silly. If you read newspapers, people who are not Caucasian show up about 5 percent of the time—at best—even though they make up nearly 25 percent of this country’s population. And most of the news about blacks and latinos involve crime; most entertainment is vaudeville and silly. Why is that? Why, in an era that saw a black man elected president of South Africa, does apartheid still rule American mass communications? (Dates & Pease, 1994)

Where our dazzling new technologies could serve to connect society, the media sometimes serve to disconnect. “The ‘information highway’ won’t be a highway, nor will it be dedicated to information,” predicts media critic Leo Bogart (Bogart, 1994). So what will travel on the much-ballyhooed information highway? Who will direct traffic? Who will build the trucks that drive on it and how will all that affect the existing media and the rest of us? Don’t worry about it, says bank president Wriston—communication technologies have freed us up, and regulation can’t (and shouldn’t) keep pace (Wriston, 1994).

But others worry that the so-called information superhighway of 500 channels, interactive everything, instant home-shopping, movies on-demand, home banking and the rest will isolate—not liberate—humanity. Back in what is now fondly called the “old days,” TV news consisted of three channels, and most Americans had access to the same information—sat by the same “electronic hearth” to soak up what they needed to take part in the participatory American Odyssey.

But in an age of interactive media and segmented channels for every possible interest group, where can the nation find its electronic community, its common “hearth,” around which to congregate and debate issues of the day that affect everyone? Les Brown, a noted journalist and media critic, worries about the information superhighway running over participatory democracy. “When the outlets in the system were few, they served an important function as a national forum for the kind of robust, wide-open debate on issues of public concern that are so crucial to the survival of a free and participatory democracy,” he says (Brown, 1992). But when the number of possible channels expands, the number of people watching/reading/attending to them is diluted, and declines. There may be more channels for more perspectives in the brave new electronic world, but fewer of us will have the time or interest to hear all those views.

“Democratization of media made possible by advances in technology may result in a greater openness of expression, while at the same time separating individuals and segregating thought,” Brown suggests. “Where in such a diverse media system will we all be able to get together and talk?” (Brown, 1992)

Is the Information Age, now that it’s arrived, just a “passageway to the great biosphere of the 21st century that will protect the human race from the dangerous real world outside?” Lawrence K. Grossman, former president of NBC News, wonders (Grossman, 1994). And what might be the unanticipated side-effects of the information age? asks Columbia University sociologist Herbert J. Gans. “It could turn the travelers on an information highway into virtual electronic shut-ins,” he says (Gans, 1994). Absorbed,

nurtured, serviced, consumed by our at-home communication video units (AHCVUs), we might never speak directly to one another again!

Making connections between what is real in the mass media in the 1990s and what the media actually do and how they work is a first step on the road to media literacy, an approach to understanding the economic, political, social, workplace, structural, psychological and real-world ingredients that contribute to how the brave new electronic world operates, and how the media influence our lives. Part theory, part scholarship, part real-world practice, part critical analysis and part synthesis—this text won't make you smarter, but it will give you tools to help you navigate a world where the media not only have the message, but are the message.

It's a first step in getting media smarts.

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