

JCOM 2010 (the online edition)
MEDIA SMARTS—Making Sense of the Information Age

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<http://mediasmarts2010.blogspot.com/> (additional materials at AskDrTed)
<http://AskDrTed.blogspot.com>

Course Resources: Look at INDEX
<http://mediasmarts2010.blogspot.com/2009/08/smarts-index.html> on Smarts blog. See also Today's WORD on Journalism and AskDrTed.

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Preamble: Wise Guys

1. Whose Reality?

"I don't fret about TV because it's decadent or shortens your attention span or leads to murder. It worries me because it alters perception. TV, and the culture it anchors, masks and drowns out the subtle and vital information that contact with the real world once provided."

—**Bill McKibben**, author, *The Age of Missing Information*, 1993

2. Critical Thinking

"Question Authority!"—1970s slogan

3. The Power of Words

*"Words are sacred. They deserve respect.
If you get the right ones, in the right order, you can nudge the world a little."*

—**Tom Stoppard**, playwright, 1967

4. How Do We Know What We (Think We) Know?

*"I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world, and that in this new opportunity to see beyond the range of our vision we shall discover either a new and unbearable disturbance of the general peace, or a saving radiance in the sky.
We shall stand or fall by television—of that I am quite sure."*

—**E.B. White**, author, 1938

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What we'll do:

Welcome to Media Smarts, where we try to equip you to make sense of the information age—journalism, movies, advertising, books, TV, the Internet, radio. Some issues we'll explore:

- 1) We're being lied to, boys and girls.
- 2) The way we are told to see the world is not necessarily the way it really is.
- 3) Trying to operate in a free and participatory democracy without accurate

knowledge and information is like piloting a boat through the fog without radar or GPS.

The central question driving Media Smarts is this: *How do we know what we (think we) know about _____?* (the economy? Iraq? Harry Potter? Hair care? fill in the blank).

In this information age (which author Bill McKibben said should more correctly be termed an age of *misinformation*), nearly every waking moment is somehow affected by the mass media, which teach us to see the world in particular ways. We are taught to value certain lifestyles and norms and to reject others; we are taught to desire certain products—food, cars, gadgets, political candidates; we are taught how to perceive different groups of people based on their gender, racial background, skin color, height, weight, or religion.

This constant diet of mass media images and values skews how we as individuals and we as a society see and understand the world.

The goal of this course is to help you see past the mass media's version of the world, and to give you the analytical and critical thinking skills you'll need to make sense of the world for yourself.

During the semester, we will critically explore whether, when, how, and to what extent the mass media—both news and entertainment—can influence people's worldview and events, focusing on how mass media messages can cultivate perceptions, perspectives and attitudes, particularly in areas of gender, racial diversity, violence, children, and as regards how Americans “know” their own history. We'll start with general principles of media literacy, and then focus specifically on how the mass media present “reality”—political, social and cultural.

Course Goals:

To expand students' recognition of the role of mass media versions of “truth,” and their critical thinking and analytical skills to make them more savvy consumers of mass media. In particular, the course will ask students to analyze and evaluate various mass media versions of historical events, cultural norms, and individuals in society.

The core question for this course is, ***How we know what we know about the world and the people and events in it, and how sure we are of those facts?***

We will examine the unique and essential social interaction between the individual and the mass media:

- a) How do mass media—from newspapers to TV and radio to Hollywood and the Internet—frame world?
- b) How does this affect the press, culture and participatory democracy?
- c) What stories about cultural norms (race, gender, society, politics, etc.) are told?
- d) And how do we learn to “see” and understand the world through such lessons?

Children, of course, are the most susceptible victims of media images and messages. Humor columnist Erma Bombeck once said, *“In general, my children refuse to eat anything that hasn't danced on television.”*

Most Americans under the age of 50 were raised on such a diet; the world has been created for us, and isn't real unless we've seen it on the tube, or on YouTube. In predicting more than 40 years ago how the information age would change the world, Canadian sociologist Marshall McLuhan used the analogy of a fish. He said he didn't know who discovered water, but he was fairly certain it wasn't a fish.

Hunh?

Well, like fish, McLuhan suggested, most residents of the information age are equally unsuspecting and uncritical about the mass media environment in which they live. We eat TV, we breathe news, we absorb advertising and cultural attitudes through our gills.

This represents an enormous responsibility both for the producers of mass media

messages, and for the individuals who consume them.

As Allen Ginsberg said, *“Whoever controls the media—the images—controls the culture.”* The fundamental assumption of Media Smarts is that most of us are so accustomed to the mass mediated world of the 21st century that we don’t even notice the environment in which we live, the mass media diet that we consume and digest, and which becomes part of what and who we are, and how we think about and perceive the world.

“Television tends to be the main centerpiece in our culture,” says Professor Gary Edgerton. *“TV in a sense creates instant history . . . that shapes how we think about an event.”*

Even beyond the sit-com or reality show fads, Edgerton asserts, most Americans know what they think they “know” about historical events and people from how they are depicted and framed in TV or movies. For example, students can “understand” the events of Pearl Harbor only with Ben Affleck in the middle of them.

Many Americans “know” what they (think they) know about the death of President John F. Kennedy from Oliver Stone’s movie. The story of D-Day is told by Tom Hanks going ashore at Normandy to find a soldier named Ryan.

This is how many college students today “know” the world. I believe that today’s students—you guys—are so steeped in mass media that you need remedial skills to help you recognize how entertainment media affect perceptions of both current and historical “reality.”

Media content-producers—which means not only newspapers and Hollywood producers, but anyone with an Internet connection—decide what to include and exclude, what to highlight or downplay. They make such choices to achieve their own goals, which may transcend simple things like “truth” and “facts.”

“Truth” is in the eye and mind of the beholder—often diluted, distorted and even fabricated by the media to sell you something, to privilege social class, to distort gender and race, and otherwise to reshape social reality.

In the process, in a mass media marketplace that has become more “real” for most Americans than reality itself, the stories we tell and the stories we learn through films, TV and more broadly in popular culture pre-empt truth, and reshape reality for most American media consumers.

Students also will examine the various contemporaneous economic, political, and cultural environment that influence the ways in which society is depicted and limited by the mass media. By the end of the semester, students will have practiced critical and analytical skills in several areas that will help them become more critical consumers of all media products.

Texts and course materials:

Because this course exists within a context of journalism and the role and performance of the press and the mass media, our readings will generally be assigned as “new media”—online articles or other materials placed on the class website.

Aside from assigned online readings, you will need a CD “book,” which you can purchase or “rent” for the semester:

- John McManus, ***Detecting Bull: How to Identify Bias and Junk in Print, Broadcast and on the Wild Web*** (www.gradethenews.org, 2009)

The e-book can be purchased at <http://detectingbull.com> for these rates: Permanent copy of entire book: \$23.95. Temporary copy (18 weeks): \$14.95.

Go to <http://detectingbull.com> immediately and get it. You’ll need a computer with Adobe Flash.

Other assignments will be posted at <http://mediasmarts2010.blogspot.com/> and

<http://askdrtd.blogspot.com>

Assignments and Grading: (Subject to change)

This is a critical thinking course. It's also a talking and writing course. Students will present their thoughts on the mass media and the readings in weekly posts in the discussion area (which we'll call "NewsTalk") of Blackboard. Details on this requirement to follow. Other stuff:

1. Quizzes on readings/news 25 pts
 2. Critical essays/reaction papers (500 words each) 10 pts/20 pts
 3. Weekly NewsTalk chatroom participation 15 pts
 4. Midterm Exam 15
 5. Final Exam 15 pts
- 100 pts

- **Critical Essays:** Two short essays on assigned topics.
- **Chatroom:** We will discuss readings and class-related issues on the class blog. Students must engage substantively at least once a week.
- **Exams:** Comprehensive midterm and final exams. The final is optional: I'll let you know your grade before finals week. If you are satisfied with your grade before the final exam, you may opt out and apply the final exam's 15 points toward your quiz score (e.g., quizzes would then count 40% instead of 25%).
- **Other grading issues:** The instructor takes no prisoners when it comes to writing, grammar, spelling, mechanics, etc. Fair warning. Obviously, **DEADLINES ARE ABSOLUTE**. That's why they're called *deadlines*. In the real world, missing deadlines means you don't get in the paper; in this class, missing deadline means zero for the assignment.

Housekeeping Details:

Some cautions, instructions and threats. Ask anyone; Pease is an irascible old poop and can be testy at times.

Academic Honesty: The University expects students and faculty alike to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty (for a complete definition, see University Catalogue or the Code of Policies and Procedures for Students at Utah State University, Article V, Section 3). The policy states:

"[C]heating, falsification or plagiarism can result in warning, grade reduction, probation, suspension, expulsion, payment of damages, withholding of transcripts, withholding of degrees, removal a class, performance of community service, referral to appropriate counseling" or other penalties as the university judiciary may deem appropriate.

Because public trust and personal credibility are essential to journalists and other professional communicators, I adhere to the JCOM department's zero-tolerance policy regarding academic dishonesty: As per the USU Student Code, any documented form of academic dishonesty—including plagiarism—will result in an automatic F in the course and a report to the Honors director, the dean of the college and the USU vice president for student services. If you have questions about what's acceptable work under strict codes of academic honesty, see the USU Code of Policies and Procedures for Students, or consult your professor. Any suspicious work may be submitted to a web database.

For guidance on plagiarism and how to avoid it, see <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml>

Decorum: It's a funny thing about email and other online communication—people often type things that they would NEVER say in a face-to-face setting. So please read your emails out loud to yourselves (this also will help with typos and stooped language) and count to 10 before sending or posting. We're all in this together. That means that we will need each other in order to succeed. And that means that everyone is expected to treat everyone else with fairness, courtesy and honesty. Central to this subject matter is the willingness to examine our own beliefs and how we arrived at them, and to acknowledge that others may see the world differently. So I hope we all will be able to express and consider opinions collegially, in the spirit of open inquiry. Let us agree to disagree, if necessary, and to accommodate contrarian viewpoints and differing perspectives. Disruptive or abusive behavior will not be tolerated.

Disclaimer: The instructor has no desire to offend anyone's personal or cultural beliefs, and he apologizes in advance if he does so inadvertently. But students should be aware that journalism (and advanced education) often deals with issues and content that some may find disagreeable—from profanity and offensive attitudes and perspectives that may make you uncomfortable. But that's the business of examining society and becoming media-savvy and making sense of the world. It's a critically important job for every citizen of a free society. Please do tell me if you have problems with any of the material, and we will try to accommodate if possible.

Finally, any rumors that you may have heard that Professor Pease is a heartless, obdurate, irritable, demanding, tough, pugnacious, unpleasant SOB probably falls short (and wide) of the truth. The fact is that I will press you hard this semester to develop an advanced level of critical thinking and analysis required for success in the information age. But if you're having a problem—with this class or anything else—please feel free to call or email me, or for those of you on-campus, come find me in my office, for a talk, a coke, career advice, a crying towel or whatever.

SCHEDULE

The advantage to online courses is that you can do the work as your schedule permits, and in your pajamas if you want. In fact, Professor Pease may be in his jammies even now. But you do have to complete the assignments when they are due. Students who wait until the end of the semester to submit everything in a pile will flunk.

The weekly assignments will be posted on Blackboard, many found on the handy and fascinating blogsite <http://AskDrTed.blogspot.com> by clicking on the INDEX in the upper lefthand corner of the main page, and then scrolling down to the Media Smarts listings. There's a lot of other fabulous stuff there, too, for the curious or bored.

- **Chats:** Generally, the weekly SmartTalk posts will be due Saturdays by midnight, beginning Week1. Go to the Discussion tab in Blackboard and click on the current week's SmartTalk topic. Everyone must initiate a substantive thread on the readings or a current media issue, as well as comment/respond substantively to someone else's post.

- **Quizzes** will be posted periodically on readings. They will be due in 48 hours.

- **The Midterm Exam** will be no later than Week 8 (Oct. 11-17), before the last course-drop date.

Other Key Dates:

- Aug. 24: First classes

- Sept. 5: Registration Purge (students with unpaid fees will be dumped)
- Sept. 7: Labor Day
- Oct. 16: “Fall Break”
- Oct. 23: Last day to drop w/ W on transcript; last day to change to P/F
- Nov. 9: Last day to petition for late drop
- Nov. 25-27: Turkey Day break.
- Dec. 4: Last classes
- Dec. 7-11: Final Exam Week

JCOM 2010 (online edition)—Media Smarts Schedule F09 (subject to change)

NOTE: Here’s a start on our readings schedule, which I will add to after Week 4, and may change before then. You’ll be notified of changes through Blackboard email. Fair warning: There may be a news quiz on any given day.

WEEK 1 Aug. 24-29

- Get acquainted with our Blackboard site and the Media Smarts blog.
- Read “Begin Here” orientation posts and syllabus closely.
- Order McManus CD online at <http://detectingbull.com>
- Quiz on syllabus will be emailed.
- Students file introductions of themselves on SmartTalk discussion board.

WEEK 2 Aug 30-Sept. 5 **How Do We Know What We Think We Know?**

READINGS:

- **McManus**, Intro Chapter (pp. 1-4)
- **Reading: What Is Media Smarts?** “Media Smarts—Making Sense of the Information Age,” by Ted Pease & Brenda Cooper, at <http://askdrted.blogspot.com/> (<http://askdrted.blogspot.com/2008/08/media-smartsmaking-sense-of-information.html>)
- Chat on NewsTalk
- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 3 Sept. 6-12 • **“What is media literacy?”**

(<http://www.ced.appstate.edu/departments/ci/programs/edmedia/medialit/article.html#What%20is%20Media%20Literacy>);

- **“Some principles of media literacy”** (<http://www.ced.appstate.edu/departments/ci/programs/edmedia/medialit/article4.html>);
- **McManus**, Ch. 1 (pp. 1-15)
- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 4 Sept. 13-19 (Sept. 14: LAST DAY TO DROP W/ TUITION REFUND)

READING: Mass Communication Theories

(<http://askdrted.blogspot.com/2008/08/media-smartstheories.html>)

- **McManus**, Ch. 2 (pp. 1-10)
- Chat on NewsTalk
- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 5 Sept. 20-26

READING: Journalism Ethics—NOT an Oxymoron!

- Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>
- More readings to be announced.
- Chat on NewsTalk

- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 6 Sept. 27-Oct. 3

READING:

- To be announced.
- Chat on NewsTalk
- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 7 Oct. 4-10

READING:

- To be announced.
- Chat on NewsTalk
- Midterm?

WEEK 8 Oct. 11-17

READING:

- To be announced.
- Chat on NewsTalk
- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 9 Oct. 18-24

READING:

- To be announced.
- Chat on NewsTalk
- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 10 Oct. 25-31

READING:

- To be announced.
- Chat on NewsTalk
- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 11 Nov. 1-7

READING:

- To be announced.
- Chat on NewsTalk
- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 12 Nov. 8-14

READING: To be announced.

- Chat on NewsTalk
- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 13 Nov. 15-21

READING: To be announced.

- Chat on NewsTalk
- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 14 Nov. 22-28 **TURKEY WEEK**

READING: To be announced.

- Chat on NewsTalk

- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 15 Nov. 29-Dec. 5

READING: To be announced.

- Chat on NewsTalk
- Quiz on readings.

WEEK 16 Dec. 6-12

FINAL EXAM