

# Mass Media and Critical Thinking: Reasoning for a Second-Hand World

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I have kept a rather large file for some years now on the effects on adolescent behavior that have been attributed to the modern mass media. These effects have been asserted by everyone from sober and reflective members of the PTA to politicians in electoral heat. They have been claimed by everyone from concerned and scholarly academics to an astonishingly broad spectrum of campaigners for public and individual virtue ranging from Bill Bennett to Bill Clinton.

These *presumed*—and I must stress the word *presumed*—media effects on the young vary in seriousness from the merely annoying to the truly dangerous. Such effects, to name only a *very* few, include short attention spans, poor spelling, slovenly grooming habits, illiteracy, inumeracy, lamentable disrespect for parental authority in particular and *all* elders in general, sexism, racism, liberalism, conservatism, revolutionary tendencies, political apathy, rampant consumerism, low self-esteem, unchecked promiscuity, epidemic violence, obesity, and high cholesterol. I suppose it is little wonder that for many parents Prozac is considered the miracle drug of our time and place.

My intent here is **not** to go into which of these supposed media effects are supported by compelling evidence, and which seem more to serve narrow political, economic or social agendas. Certainly, I don't mean to suggest that everyone's favorite whipping boy—the media—isn't in need of a sound thrashing.

What I would like to do, however, is draw some distinctions and suggest a somewhat different line of inquiry about the mass media, and its relationship to our students—not to mention the rest of us as well. In particular, I'd like to offer some thoughts on this hugely important force in our lives in the context of an overriding concern for Critical Thinking.

First, a caveat. The longer I've studied media the more I've become convinced that what we truly understand about the complex effects of technology on human communication and behavior is not nearly so much as we'd like to suppose. In sum, if ever there has been a subject deserving of intellec-

tual humility, this is it. At the same time, if ever there has been a need for critical thinking *about* and *within* a social phenomenon, the moment is at hand.

To begin with, I can't imagine anyone who hasn't already come to conclude that a defining characteristic of modern society is that we live in a *mediated* culture, more so than at any time in history. This means, quite simply, that more than ever we are dependent on the meanings given us by others—rather than through direct experience. This is what the sociologist C. Wright Mills meant when he said we live in “second-hand worlds,” a concept I've borrowed for the title of this paper.

At the same time I should point out that this second-hand world, at least on the scale we see today, is relatively new. The first use of the very term “mass communication” that I've been able to find in the literature does not appear until the early 1950s, and I believe we are still only in the intermediate stages of understanding its full force.

What we may say with some certainty is that modern media play a major if not decisive role in the cultural apparatus that produces a sense of who we are, and who we come to feel we ought to be. But even more important, in the context of this conference, I think that media have everything to do with how we think.

As teachers of critical thinking, therefore, the media deserve our closest attention. After all, people don't think in a vacuum; they must have something to think about. And whether we like it or not, what our students think about as likely as not comes from the mass media. More precisely, the media more often than not tell us *what* to think about and have a great deal to do with *how* we think about it.

If my quick and very unscientific search of the Internet is any indication, there is great deal of interest in the subject of this talk. I found literally thousands of references to mass media and critical thinking. A sampling of these “hits,” however, reveals problems that can be associated with what Richard Paul and others have called the Second Wave of Critical Thinking.

For instance, where discussions of coursework or pedagogy and media criticism are concerned, the concept of “critical thinking” is often taken to mean little more than adopting an adversarial stance to an ideological position to which the writer or teacher happens not to subscribe. In this regard, critical thinking seems to mean little more than *thinking “with an attitude.”*

Similarly and almost as frequently, I found that “critical thinking” is used synonymously with various aspects of “critical *theory*.” To borrow from Mark Twain, this is to confuse “lightening” with the “lightening bug.”

Moreover, at least in the sample I took, the label “critical thinking” itself is almost never defined at all but is used as if its meaning were self-evident to all right-thinking people, which is to say those who agree with the writer's

orientation. This is similar to what Richard Paul has called the "helter-skelter intuitive use" of the concept, but with an ideological twist. Almost wholly absent are explicit or even implicit references to general intellectual standards, or to the sort of principles spelled out in the philosophy of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, or to the responsibility of the individual for his or her own thought, not just the thought of others.

Having criticized others for a failure to define their terms, I'd better be careful to define my own. In the interests of brevity, I'll be content, like so many others, to steal the deceptively simple definition so famously stated by the philosopher Bob Ennis: Critical thinking is "reasonable and reflective thought about what to believe and do." Of course, I could discuss what "reasonable" and "reflective" might mean. I know I usually can occupy most of a semester in this pursuit, but I'll never get to the media if I do.

I'll only add that I believe critical thinking involves both a perspective and a method, a commitment to something and a way of achieving it. It involves the willingness and ability to think in a disciplined way about the thinking of others, to be certain, but even more importantly about your own thinking, hopefully while you're engaged in it. As well, it involves the willingness to correct your thinking when it fails to measure up to acceptable standards of logicalness, sufficiency and credibility of evidence, clarity, depth, fair-mindedness.

After a few weeks into a new semester listening to class discussion about critical thinking, one of my international students offered a wonderful analogy. She likened this process of thinking about your thinking to the efforts she must go through to speak a second language. Routinely, she must ask herself questions about whether she is pronouncing words correctly, using grammar properly, and in general making herself understood. At the same time, she is constantly engaged in self-correction. She told us that to the extent she brings discipline to these tasks and judges her performance against accepted standards of usage, she succeeds in her use of the language. When she doesn't, she fails. Just so with critical thinking.

Turning to the subject at hand, my intention is to move away from a discussion of the usual and more dramatic assumed effects of mass media on how we behave and instead turn to a consideration of how I believe mass media may affect how we *think*. I'll then close with what I think is a useful approach for teaching about mass media in the critical thinking classroom. In all of this, I hope to demonstrate how at least one teacher is struggling to catch the Third Wave of critical thinking.

If you were to ask me to identify the mass media's single most important effect on thinking in contemporary America, I would say it is the undermining of our ability to make distinctions. Distinctions between this and that, what is important and what is not, what deserves our concern or what is more deserving of our contempt, what is truly dangerous or what is merely discomfoting,

what sector of society has a moral claim on public resources as opposed to those interests that should go begging, who is a national enemy and who is ally, and so on.

Put another way, the logical fallacy of our age is the Fallacy of Lack of Proportion—and I think mass media, for reasons I hope to make clear, have had everything to do with its ascendancy.

Certainly, if you've taught very long at all, you'll recognize this lack of proportion in your students—if not yourselves. Only one example was the colleague who recounted her experiences reading Writing Proficiency Examination papers. The topic for this particular essay was one of those hopelessly vague assignments, something to the effect of "What are the major problems facing the world?" The beginning of one student's paper said it all: "There are many problems facing the world today, including poverty, world hunger, AIDS, and the destruction of the environment. The problem that I would like to deal with is the parking situation at Sacramento State."

Whether it's fair to directly link the media with this sort of thinking is doubtful. But consider if you will, in the logic of American news, that information is presented to the citizenry as if everything were of equal significance. A prime example is a talk show once described by Neil Postman whose host announced before the commercial break: "Stay tuned. Coming up is word about a new diet, a demonstration of helpful kitchen gadgets—and a quick look at incest."

Similarly, in a political vein, where is the proportion in equating the Congressional check bouncing scandal, which involved no public funds, with the Savings and Loan debacle, which may involve up to a half a trillion? And how is it that people come to see welfare fraud on the same level as Pentagon fraud? Or what of the thirty second clip on the plight of the homeless, which is squeezed between the weather and a commercial for McDonalds; let alone the space and time devoted to Hillary's purported conversation with Eleanor Roosevelt.

Given my line of reasoning, I hope you'll permit me at least brief mention of the O.J. Simpson trial, to which extraordinary time and journalistic resources were devoted. A study of network news broadcasts revealed that over the year of the Simpson story, the crime and trial accounted for 15% of NBC's total evening news allotment and 13% for ABC and CBS. That's over the whole year, a year in which untoward pain and tragedy swept Rwanda and Bosnia, there occurred the usual gamut of natural disaster, the control of Congress changed hands for the first time since 1954 and there were major moves to balance the federal budget, restructure welfare and cut Medicare. Interestingly, the Simpson trial exceeded the combined coverage of the war in Bosnia *and* the Oklahoma City bombing.

What concerns me here is the sheer amount of *serious* journalistic resources that were devoted to a case that so far as I know will establish no precedents, affect no case law, alter our constitution not one whit.

Indeed, I suppose what concerns me most is that an entire society, not just daytime television viewers, became subject to a media blitz that, in my judgment, made the Simpson case seem considerably more than it was—and far less than it should have been. Some of the key questions of our time, especially those regarding race and justice, were trivialized, sensationalized, turned into yet another commercial enterprise. Imagine what we can look forward to with the trial of Theodore Kozinski, the alleged UNABOMER, who goes on trial in the city where I teach, Sacramento. I suppose that I should count myself lucky; at least I'll get plenty of material for a case study.

In part, the problem of lack of proportion that I've been describing is caused by how the news media present the news. Take the dimension of fragmentation, which simply means that news is served up to us in disjointed, seemingly unrelated fragments or bits of information. Each day, we are confronted with hundreds of pieces of a puzzle, but rarely are we given a look at the picture on the box top so we can begin solving it. The relationship between causes and effects is difficult if not impossible to discern; historical memory evaporates.

I think such disorder is what led James Fallows to write in his recent and very good book, *Breaking the News*, that contemporary Journalism fails to give people "the sense that life is not just a sequence of random occurrences. Useful information helps people understand what can be changed and what must be endured." Yet, he says, "The message of today's news coverage is often that the world cannot be understood, shaped, or controlled, but merely endured or held at arm's length." In other words, we have lost control of our political lives.

And then there is the problem of the size of fragments in the news? How about the local television reporter who called me not once but three times a couple of years ago, pleading that I do a just a quick sound bite, fifteen or 20 seconds, no more, on the journalistic ethics of forcing tennis star Arthur Ashe to go public about having the HIV virus.

Finally, in frustration, I said I'd rather do a 15-second sound bite about the journalistic ethics of doing 15-second sound bites on ethical questions. I'm afraid he didn't get my irony.

To be sure, fragmentation in the news virtually makes impossible the kind of in-depth inquiry called for in critical thinking at the same time it undercuts our sense of proportion and ability to draw distinctions; but it occurs to me that there may be other effects on thinking as well.

Let me briefly touch on only two of them. First, in the logic of news, the world is a certain and simple place in which to live. Unpleasant to be sure, but nonetheless filled with certainties—which usually come in pairs. There are

good guys and bad, either this alternative or that one, a right way to do things and a wrong way. One observer has even suggested that American news media actually encourage bi-polar personality disorders, although I wouldn't go quite that far. It does seem, however, as though we are led away from considering the entire range of viewpoints on most topics. Put another way, the news, by its systematic reliance on stereotyping and deference to established authority, conventional wisdom and existing social arrangements, encourages us to think *deductively* in a largely *inductive* world. For a variety of reasons and through a variety of means, the news would have us believe, as Walter Cronkite used to say, "That's the way it is." In this regard, I wish anchors and reporters would bring back a quaint practice of colonial America, when editors uncertain of a news item would lead the story with the slug, "IMPORTANT—IF TRUE."

A second problem in the logic of news—particularly television news—is that emotion and imagery take precedence over reason. Whether it be the treacle that passes for conversation among news anchors, or the sentimentalized presentation of community charity as a solution to homelessness, the thing that matters is the feeling an image produces. What isn't important is a line of argument that can be analyzed, thought about, tested, accepted or rejected. The one thing we can *not* say about this kind of news is that it encourages us to reason logically in the common understanding of that term, or to worry about the connection between evidence, premises and conclusions.

All of what I've described so far is compounded by a development of the past ten years or so that makes our task even more difficult than it otherwise might be. I'm referring to the blurring of the line between news and entertainment that has produced what some label "Infotainment" and others merely describe as "junk news." I'm speaking here of media coverage of the Marla Maples/Donald Trump press conference of three years ago to announce her pregnancy, or the Zsa Zsa Gabor face-slapping incident, or Roseanne Barr and her antics with the national anthem at the old ball game.

You may be curious to learn—or perhaps not—that by one estimate, between 100 and 125 million people—or roughly half of the U.S. population—watched at least one of the three made-for-TV movies about 17-year-old Amy Fisher's shooting of Mary Jo Buttafuoco, the wife of Fisher's 36-year-old lover, the irrepressible Joey. I have not bothered to do a similar accounting of media attention paid John Wayne Bobbitt, and the severing of his now infamous member, but I assume the results would not differ from the Buttafuoco affair in any significant degree.

On television, programs ranging from "Current Affair" to "Hard Copy" are easy targets. But what of the presumably sober and reliable print media? Certainly, they did not shy away from the O.J. Simpson case. For instance, many newspapers across the country issued "EXTRA" editions the day after the verdict, a practice I haven't seen on such a scale since the assassination of President Kennedy, despite the fact that the news was at least 12 hours old and

anyone who didn't know the verdict by the following morning probably wasn't in shape to know much of anything at all. The explanation I heard was that people would want souvenir editions, something to keep to remind them of this historically momentous time in our presumably uneventful lives.

Chains such as Gannett and owners such as Murdoch have worked to commodify print journalism just as vigorously as broadcasting. The amount of space for news shrinks as the amount devoted to advertising increases. Reporting staffs are cut by layoffs and buyouts while self-help and lifestyle features crowd out the news of the world. For example, the amount of news devoted to foreign affairs in our newspapers is now the least of the industrial democracies, while an increasing number of local and regional papers have followed, to some degree or another, the lead set by *USA Today*, which seems bent on receiving the first Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Weather.

In such a world it was not particularly surprising to me when in 1995 the Times Mirror Company, parent of Los Angeles Times and Newsday, appointed as its CEO Mark H. Willes, whom it brought in from General Mills. Willes, who had no experience whatsoever in news business, said that the same techniques he had used in marketing foods would be useful in newspaper management. He said that newspapers must "refresh" their product offerings, much as General Mills had revamped its lines of food. Asked for examples of what he meant, he cited the successful marketing of cereals, Hamburger Helper and cake mixes." Just so.

It is also not surprising but hardly reassuring when journalists themselves are mistaken for stars, witness the fees that some of them command for public speaking: Cokie Roberts of NPR and ABC getting \$35,000 for a one-day trip and speech, underwritten by local Toyota dealers; Ted Koppel of "Dateline" at one point commanded \$50,000 a speech but now forgoes them; George Will of Newsweek and ABC, \$15,000, just to name a few.

Of course if it is serious discussion of public affairs you want, there is always such as "The McLaughlin Group" or "The Capitol Gang." So far as I can tell, the aim of the featured journalists and pundits on these programs is never to let an opponent finish a sentence, let alone mount a complete argument. I have come to call this "Tag Team Discourse."

Here's a slice of life from CNN's *Crossfire* debate on NAFTA, in which most of the guests spent most of the time all talking at once. Sample exchange: *Pat Buchanan*—"Michael, don't be a simpleton" Michael Kinsley replies: "Pat, you're the simpleton."

Perhaps it is the case, of course, that they both qualify.

Be that as it may, I think the argument, which some observers have advanced that talkshows are proof positive of a democracy of the airwaves, is sheer nonsense. Most of the ones I've seen are to rational discourse and critical thinking as "Baywatch" is to lifeguarding.

I suspect you realize by this point that I have my doubts about two of the most widely held public doctrines of our time. The first doctrine is that this is *The Age of Information*. This notion holds that the marvels of technology make it possible for us to know everything that it is useful to know. The second doctrine is that because our press freedom is wholly unrestricted, we have the widest and most diverse media choices in the world. Taken together, these two doctrines are used to support the notion that we are the *best informed people in the world*. About this I have serious doubts. To the contrary, as one critic has noted, "It's becoming harder and harder to think in a considered way about anything."

While it is not my purpose this evening to go into great detail about why I think today's media perform as they do, I would like to make at least a brief comment in this regard. It seems to me that the origin of what we see today can be traced back to the beginnings of film in this country, and the coming of an industry or industries that for the first time in human history *perfected the mass production of fantasy using visual imagery*. We were the first society to mass produce fantasy on such a large scale, and we are still the most successful at it, and our public discourse has deteriorated accordingly.

Such an outcome was not inevitable to be certain, but when fantasy and profit are co-joined on the scale they have been in this country, the results were pretty much preordained. In the past decade or so in particular, the trend toward the corporatization of the media has taken an unprecedented turn. This extraordinary concentration of ownership in media industries, and the unbridled quest for profit that has accompanied it, has brought us to the present pass—which might be described as the Fortune 500's version of Bread and Circuses.

And what is the attitude of media management in the present circumstance? It's pretty well summed up in the remark of a top network broadcast executive who observed that he and his colleagues were no more responsible for the content on television than a plumber is responsible for what goes through pipes.

As for the consequences of "infotainment" which such a historical development has produced, I do not believe they are either imagined or inconsequential: such stuff occupies intellectual space; it diverts scarce journalistic resources to trivial matters; it is diversionary from real social concerns; and as I suggested earlier, it undermines a vital critical thinking skill—the ability to make distinctions.

I think the novelist Umberto Eco may have had it exactly right when he wrote,

The mass media first convinced us that the imaginary was real, and now they are convincing us that the real is imaginary; and the more reality the TV screen shows us, the more cinematic our everyday world becomes. Until, as some philosophers have insisted, we will think that we are alone in the world, and that everything else is the film that God or some evil spirit is projecting before our eyes."



Now, let me turn at this point to what I think might be a useful approach to teaching about media in the critical thinking classroom.

First and foremost, I think the serious teacher must resist simple media bashing. If there is one thing students know and have enjoyed long before they come to sit at our knee, it is media. Understand that while they may confuse Quantum Mechanics with a punk rock group, they have no trouble at all with their ABCs, NBCs, CBSs and MTVs. Yet all too frequently, media criticism in the class room is confined to a game of "Ain't It Awful."

What I mean by this is that in my experience too many teachers settle for a derisive swipe at popular music, or a snide comment about the shallowness of television news, or a sarcastic reference to the Reader's Digest, or the casual remark that newspapers are hardly worth the bother. Such an approach may feed our sense of superiority and bravery in the face of cultural and intellectual barbarianism, but I'm convinced students only dismiss it as the expected prattle and prejudice of an older generation.

It is here that a careful teaching of critical thinking standards proves most useful. If we can find ways to get students to *routinely apply* the standards of critical thinking—or at least a good number of them—to the content and performance of mass media, they can come to see for themselves the pitfalls of confusing media representations with social reality. But to accomplish this, we can't merely settle for shoving our own *judgments* down their throats; we can't just insist they accept the end product of our own thinking but not share in the process.

Instead, I think we must find ways of showing students that the standards of critical thinking have real meaning, wide acceptability, and extraordinary usefulness. Only through this process do students have any chance of coming to realize that critical thinking standards are not mere expressions of our personal value preferences.

Let me get at this in a slightly different way. If we expect our students to take responsibility for their reasons, we must take responsibility for our own—and we must do it every day of our teaching. If we can't give a persuasive, clear, evidence-based, in-depth critique of the mass media, how can we expect our students to. In criticizing media for some deficiency or another, if we merely voice opinion based on something we've read or heard somewhere with which we happen to agree but can't really say why (which I call "unearned opinion"), how is it we have any good reason to expect our students to accept such a claim out-of-hand?

In sum, we must model the profile of a critical thinker in our own approach to media use. Failing this, you may as well not even bother to bring the subject up; I'm convinced your students will do little more than listen politely and go on with their lives undisturbed.

If you're going to go much further than this with media criticism in the critical thinking classroom, there are some other dimensions that are specific to the field of media studies that are worth mentioning, and if you're a newcomer to the field, some background reading in media studies is essential. For instance, I think it's vital that you have at least some knowledge of the nature of media as a hugely significant part of this society's cultural apparatus and at least a cursory understanding of the ideological and commercial groundwork of media, which is to say a sense of how the media operate and in whose interest and with what effect. That means you'll have to know something about economic concentration of ownership; the psychological aspects of media use; the historical forces that have produced modern media, and so on.

Further, if you're to fulfill the requirements I mentioned above, it will probably be necessary to begin building case studies, simple or uncomplicated as they may be, to persuasively document media performance. Certainly, it will be useful to develop some exercises that students can use to find their own way through the media thicket.

At the more general level, I encourage you to approach the media as an ecological system. Understand that to emphasize only one medium at the expense of all others is to badly misunderstand that media are a multi-faceted phenomenon, that they feed on one another and interrelate to an extraordinary degree.

Similarly, I think you're better off raising the large questions with your students, something I've been reminded of to great profit many times by Jerry Nosich, among others. What are some large questions in this area? Is media bias intentional or unintentional or can it vary? Are media liberal or conservative or merely establishmentarian? What effects might mass media have on self-image? How do media represent foreign conflict? How do media affect the agenda for public discussion? And perhaps the biggest question of all: Is the Pursuit of Public Truth compatible with the pursuit of profit on the scale we see in media today?

No discussion of teaching media would be complete without mention of the problem of bias. It is the one thing on which you can get near unanimous agreement: media, particularly the news media, are biased. The problem is that with a straight face and considerable passion, a Bob Dole can accuse Katy Couric of NBC, a wholly owned subsidiary of General Electric, of being part of the "liberal" media for raising questions about his taking money from tobacco interests, all the while seemingly oblivious to the hard time that journalists have given the Clintons over Whitewater or, for that matter, the First Lady's discussion of public affairs with Eleanor Roosevelt. Ask Hillary what she thinks of the media, and I doubt that she's much happier than Bob.

The point to be made here is that we as teachers must always keep in mind that when people criticize the press for not portraying a "true" picture of reality, what they are usually upset about is that the media have failed to

represent reality as they believe it to be. Of course, the media may be misrepresenting reality. But you will never convince anyone of this who doesn't already agree with you, unless you have a set of standards for measuring performance that is fairminded and does not depend entirely on your personal claims to knowing the "truth."

Several tests of media performance that I've devised and used with modest success that are not wholly dependent on truth value are these: Does the press tell us all that is reasonably knowable about an event? Is language used that to reasonable people could be construed as "loaded"? Who gets quoted as an authority in stories and how frequently? Do news stories provide enough information for a reader to make a reasoned judgment, or are statements of interested parties merely repeated? Is a historical context provided?

Let me add one more cautionary word about teaching media. Sometimes it is the case that my students take my critique of the "mother church" so seriously that they come to replace a touching faith in media with a blind and abiding cynicism. "How can we ever trust the media again?" these new secularists ask. And here we are again, back to the kind of bi-polar thinking that I touched on earlier. If this is what we end up with, I don't think we've done much for their intellectual development. Over the years, I've come to watch very closely in all of my classes for the student who comes to confuse *the critical with the cynical*, and I work especially hard to make sure that she or he understands that critical thinking is, after all, the ability to make distinctions, not blanket indictments. At least from my perspective, cynicism is paralyzing while critical thinking can have a decidedly opposite effect. And we do our students no service by failing to make this point abundantly clear.

In closing, may I remind you of the theme of this year's Sonoma conference, which is "Creating Communities of Thinkers." Indeed, there is no more important task before us as teachers, as citizens, as human beings who have decided to spend their lives making a difference in the lives of others. Yet a community in many important ways is defined by the scope and substance of its discourse. And as I've tried to make plain, *our* public discourse is deteriorating in alarming ways. It follows therefore that part of our community building effort—perhaps even a very large part—must be directed at helping to develop in our students the critical autonomy they will need to see clearly and be fit for living in the second-hand world that is upon us. The alternative, I'm afraid, is a community not worth having.