

Don't be taken in by false news, ridiculous claims, and hype

Get Savvy About the Media

The world we live in today resembles a crowded bazaar. We dwell immersed in a sea of messages. The commercials, infomercials, and editorials we constantly deal with are just the start. Online are trolls spreading fake news, spammers and phishers trying to steal our money, friends on social media showing off, and ads and opinion pieces carefully and precisely targeted at our interests and deepest fears.

The swirl of competing information can easily confuse us, making us vulnerable to irrational claims. Therefore, some method to sort out the truth is desperately needed. **Media literacy**, understanding how the various means of communication from which we derive our model of the world work, can help by teaching us how to see critically beyond the hype.

Needed now more than ever, media literacy seems to be woefully neglected in schools these days. Yet once it was the sole foundation of all formal education.

The ancient Greeks so loved to argue that they invented democracy; and just like law, politics depends upon expressing compelling arguments. Other endeavors, like history and poetry, also required convincing oratorical skills. Therefore the Greeks elevated **rhetoric**, the art of **persuasion** through speech, to a near science. Along with **logic**, the study of how to determine truth, and **grammar**, the rules for using language clearly and effectively, these formed the **trivium**, the high arts of discourse.

For over a thousand years, they remained the sturdy pillars of higher education. Only the rise of modern science and the gradual academic split between the sciences and the humanities dethroned the trivium from its exalted place. But the need for a firm grounding in critical thinking is even more important now.

While it would be helpful to master Greek **rhetorical devices** and their names, fortunately no degree is necessary. You can become a critical thinker basically by watching and questioning everything.

Everybody's selling something

Plato or Socrates might be amazed by all our dazzling technologies for displaying information, but they would understand what is really going on quickly enough. They knew that **all media is persuasive**.

It's *everything*: not just ads and opinion pieces. Every single image you see, word that you read, and voice you hear, is trying to convince you of something, and often more than just one thing. The bouncy music video may inspire you to feel good and dance, but the artist went through the trouble to record it in hopes that you would like her and her music, and buy an album or see a show. And those who helped produce it, make sets and costumes, run the cameras, and publish it online all have their agendas, too.

In this society, that agenda usually is to make money, but not always. So the first question you need to ask yourself is, as the Romans put it, "*cui bono?*" "**Who benefits from it?**" And *how* do they benefit?

Trust no one

The Romans also advised, "*caveat lector*" – "**let the reader beware**". By finding who or what the message is intended to help, you can go a long way to determining whether to trust it or not. That's why the Russians have been so careful to disguise their divisive propaganda on Facebook as pleas from Americans. But that situation shows just how hard it can be sometimes to ascertain the ultimate beneficiaries.

The way to become a critical media consumer is to question *everything* presented to you. A little common sense goes a long way. For instance, any story with a lurid headline or shocking graphic isn't news, it's likely **propaganda** which should be discounted.

Anything that makes you wonder if it could be true likely isn't. Check it out online at sites like **Snopes**. If news stories all sound alike, that's because they all have the same source, and are therefore dubious.

A good **argument** is *logical*, appealing to reason, based on the speaker's *expertise* and credibility, touches on the *needs and beliefs* of the audience, and is *timely*. Anything that exaggerates one of these at the expense of the others - for example, highly touting the fame and achievements of the speaker - is somewhat manipulative and may even be deceptive.

Arguments are based on **premises**. Those assertions may be flawed, conclusions drawn from them may be twisted, the whole thing could be circular, or it could use analogies or comparisons that don't really work. For instance, "**straw man**" arguments, where one side builds up a false position which it attributes to the other (often on flawed premises) and then logically destroys it, is commonly used in politics.

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Analyze presentations for what they do and how. Since all media seeks to persuade, media must not only have a *purpose* that it benefits, but a target *audience*, and a *means* of influencing that audience. This is done by the basic human way of communicating information and needs: **storytelling**.

As **Superbowl advertising** consistently demonstrates year after year, such storytelling can be done with incredible economy – a few carefully-edited film clips can suggest an entire situation, with sympathetic characters, an internal conflict, and a happy resolution, even without words – in only *30 seconds*. And if done well, it can catch you right in the feels.

Whether by pictures, words, music, dance, or a combination, media creates a particular representation of reality that it then interprets. The argument or appeal is embedded in a whole world-view, and the more you fall for that view, the easier it will be to lead you to whatever conclusion is desired. So Apple is not really selling a phone but “an experience”.

The hype of hype

The basic truth of advertising is that **there is no truth in advertising**. *Everything* is fair game. Yes, the government may bust someone for making blatantly dangerous claims, but if the ad shows true love blossoming as a result of a new deodorant, or life’s rich fulfillment from an antacid, nobody objects. Nor will they complain if absurdity or magic is used, humor, even showing the product causing an obsession or effect which would be obnoxious in real life. Anything to win your attention, and hopefully, your affection and ultimately your dollars is okay.

Advertising has but one basic purpose: to create a favorable impression of a product, person, or service in your mind so you will automatically choose it when it’s time to commit. To that end, it will seek to establish a desire, or associate a need with the product and position it to block out all competitors.

To this end, there are many theories and widely-varying techniques which have evolved greatly over time. Ads range from crude, loud, exaggerated, constantly repeated claims, for instance, to very refined pieces leaving a vague haze of associations behind.

In the 1950s, musical jingles and cartoon mascots were how advertisers burrowed their goods into the public’s mind. Testimonials from movie stars, like Ronald Reagan hawking cigarettes, were used to build trust and lend an aura of Hollywood glamor.

By the time Reagan became president, advertising had shifted. He won largely on ads that blatantly appealed to nostalgia for an ideal lost America, long on feelings but devoid of any intellectual content.

That emotional trend continues to this day. More comedy was introduced, even self-denigration. Ads became visually bolder – in the 70s there was a concern about **subliminal messages**, often sexual in

content, concealed to manipulate unconscious biases. But arguably the most famous ad of all time, Apple’s **1984 Superbowl announcement** of the Macintosh, changed the ad game forever. Vivid, iconically striking, nothing was subtle about it at all.

Not only did it position Apple as a tech giant even before its first Mac was retailed, it established the Superbowl as the **commercial love-fest** it became. **“1984”** was only shown once – due to copyright violations rather than intent – but that made it legendary. The spot inspired everything from rock videos to scifi movies and sold a lot of Macs, but ironically, it also ushered in the age of **mass surveillance**.

This is where the modern tech of persuasion has us all at a grave disadvantage. Ads may look the same as before, but nowadays they are designed to effortlessly fit our individual wants and prejudices. We are being carefully manipulated by media in ways we cannot control and most of the time don’t suspect.

This is why critical thinking is even more vital than before. Parents can teach it to their kids by talking to them about the commercials and programs they see, and thinking aloud about what they really mean and how they do it. Because at this point, hard, discriminating logic is our most trustworthy guide.

WordPress Security Tune-Up

Starting in July, the Chrome browser began labeling websites that don’t use SSL/HTTPS encryption as “Not Secure.” This is one of the final steps to convert all website traffic to use encryption, which we wrote about in the **May, 2018 Portal**.

Let Southwest Cyberport help you make the one-time conversion from HTTP to HTTPS for your web site. For a limited time we are offering WordPress site-security tune-ups for only \$99. This includes:

- Register a new SSL certificate
- Convert the site to use HTTPS URLs
- Upgrade hosting to current versions of PHP and MySQL
- Update WordPress core to latest release
- Update plugins and themes to latest versions where possible

See <https://www.swcp.com/wordpress-tune-ups/>.



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