

8. Using Media

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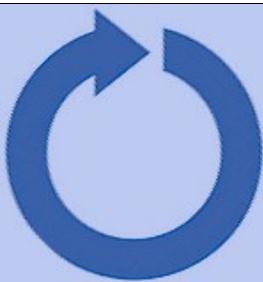
Focus

With diligent study of this guide, you will learn...

Ideas	information, suggestion as impression management; slanting; Gestalt principle; subliminal persuasion; neuromarketing; framing
Skills	recognizing techniques used by print and electronic media to influence and persuade us about issues, people, and products

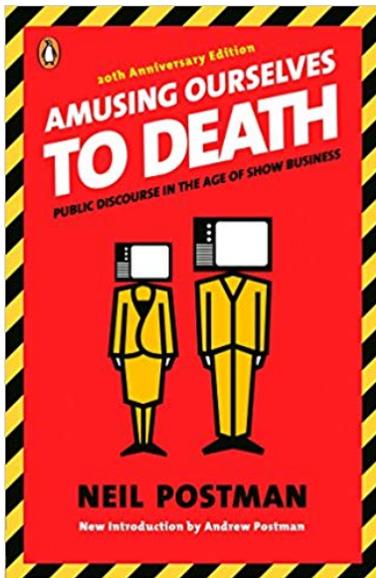
8.1 The Power of Media

Key Ideas/Terms	Definition
slanting	Presenting ideas or images in such a way as to reveal certain aspects or qualities and conceal others.
sensationalism	A method used to attract viewers by presenting more exciting stories over less exciting but perhaps more newsworthy ones. The most bizarre, visually interesting, or sensational elements of these stories are featured.
sound bite	An excerpt from a speech or report that is presented as summarizing, but may actually distort the ideas or intentions of the speaker or writer.
framing	The deliberate or unconscious use of language or presentation techniques like camera angles and the use of adjacent images or sounds to influence an audience. One-sided or "re-contextualized" coverage of an issue.
spin	<p>The use of language, especially in politics and public relations, to create a biased, positive connotation for ideas or events that the speaker favors, and to create a negative impression about the ideas or events that are disliked.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similar in method and effect as the Red Herring fallacy • Putting things in a different light (alternative interpretation) • Reframing the discussion/issue/facts • Trying to put "lipstick on a pig."



PAUSE & REFLECT

- Do modern media manufacture meaning for mass consumption?
- Do the media create or reflect reality?
- Is meaning shaped by media?
- Are my thoughts and feelings manipulated through media?
- Am I vulnerable to any particular media content or technique?



Cover image of the 20th Anniversary Edition (2006)

Amusing Ourselves to Death by Neil Postman was a prophetic vision of what happens when politics, journalism, education, and even religion become forms of entertainment. This book offers a blueprint for regaining control of our media, so they can serve our highest goals.

We will explore the impacts of modern electronic media on how we interpret the world and understand ourselves. We will identify and analyze some of the basic information dynamics in the current mediascape:

- Television / Radio
- Internet
- Smart phones and apps
- Online gaming and shopping
- Virtual and augmented reality systems

8.1.1 Information

There is no doubt about the power of modern media to entertain us with high-fidelity audio and video diversions that are a welcome respite from the comparatively dull and predictable world of daily living. But there are serious questions about the power of media to inform us accurately.

Because our focus will be on how to understand information that is mediated, it is important to first be clear about the meaning of the term *information*. As a point of departure, we will adopt the definition that Albert Borgmann presents in *Holding On to Reality*.

The **central structure of information** is a relation of a sign, a thing, and a person. A **person** is informed by a **sign** about some **thing**.

Person	Sign	Thing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recipient of information ▪ Listener ▪ Reader ▪ Spectator ▪ Investigator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Signal ▪ Symbol ▪ Vehicle ▪ Messenger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Message ▪ Meaning ▪ Content ▪ News / Intelligence ▪ Information (narrow sense)

The economy of signs is normally second nature to us and an inconspicuous part of the natural and cultural ecology. It can, however, come sharply into focus in circumstances where an object oscillates between sign and thing or suddenly reverts from reference to presence. (Borgman, 18)

Professor Borgman says "...an object oscillates between sign and thing or suddenly reverts from reference to presence." He is talking about the *fallacy of reification* that we have already studied.

Reification: A language problem that involves treating words—which are simply abstract symbols composed of sounds and characters—as if they were concrete realities. Words or images become the realities they purport to symbolize.

If an object oscillates between sign and thing, its meaning and existential import are ambiguous. The question of what is real cannot be answered if the "reality" is mediated. The reality of the world must be known directly, through our bodies and minds, here and now, at every moment of our existence on planet Earth in the 21st century.

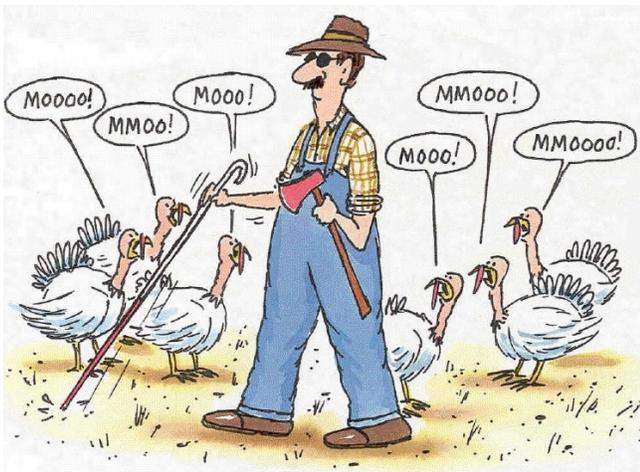
The ambiguity possible between sign and thing is analogous to the perceptual ambiguity of certain figures (*gestalten*)



The Treachery of Images (French: *La Trahison des images*), by René Magritte (1929). Also known as *This is Not a Pipe*.



8.2 Slanting in Media



Fake Mooos! - Anonymous

Media Slanting: Presenting ideas or images in such a way as to reveal certain aspects or qualities and conceal others. For example:

"Are you ready for a test drive in a really fast car?"
(Ignore the \$70,000 price tag.)

"Taste the difference in our new cheddar cheese!"
(Disregard the small print for the biphenyl chloride under Ingredients.)

"Look sharp in our new shoes for people on the go."
(No matter that they were manufactured in a poor country under slave labor conditions.)



Sharpen Your Critical Thinking

- How have online transactions changed social interactions in my life and in the lives of others I know?
- How much time do I spend weekly in watching TV, surfing/researching on the Internet, and online social networking?
- What is the proportion of time spent on my online activities devoted to pleasure and those devoted to personal business and research or study?

8.2.1 Electronic Media Techniques

Slanting Technique	Electronic Media
issue selection	<p>Media producers, directors, reporters and editors all have a say in what stories are presented. Often, the selected stories are perceived to be the most important stories—simply because they are selected. If unselected, a story can be interpreted as being less important. Sensational and bizarre stories appeal to our curiosity and baser interests, and often boost ratings.</p> <p>If their revenue depends primarily on advertising, a commercial medium or channel needs good audience ratings for their success. If more people want it, then it's good for ratings. And if it's good for ratings, it gets broadcast. It's a simple equation that easily leads to the dumbing down of audiences and a coarsening of discourse and the acceptance of rough language.</p>
use of time	<p>Two temporal factors influence viewers' perceptions: Temporal placement—If the story comes early in the broadcast, it is seen to be very important. Duration—the amount of time devoted to a particular story. If the story receives a substantial amount of time coverage, it is perceived as a more important news item or issue.</p>
guest selection	<p>A producer can put an equal number of panelists on both sides of an issue, but make sure that one side is represented by physically attractive and articulate professionals, and that the other side represented by what the audience will perceive as uneducated or fanatical people. Also, guests can be treated differently by the host to suggest the host's preference and approval.</p>
set design	<p>If a director wants to make a speaker seem unimportant, he or she may present the speaker as far away, and may deliberately cut to an audience member who is frowning in obvious disagreement with the speaker. Set designers use lighting and color and geometry to create positive or negative perceptions through props.</p>
camera mechanics	<p>Camera angles and cuts—low angle shots create a sense of authority (the viewer appears to be looking up at the speaker). Camera distance—close up shots add a sense of intimacy; wide angle shots create the illusion of distance or detachment. Camera framing—deliberate or unconscious camera shots determine what and how the media audience can see or hear an event.</p>
non-verbal & verbal	<p>Non verbal—facial expressions, body language, clothing, and other subtle stimuli can suggest character and tone. Verbal—language affects perception; informal fallacies can be smuggled into arguments; labels can be used to enhance or discredit people and ideas; sound bites and summaries can distort the complete or true message</p>

8.2.2 Print Media

Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.
Napolean I, *Maxims*

Slanting Technique	Print Media
use of space	<p>Headlines give readers a “summary” of the meaning of an article. Time-deprived readers can skim headlines as reliable summaries of the full articles. Headlines can distort information by presenting an exciting aspect of a story that is intended to “hook the reader.”</p> <p>Page space is limited in print media. Front page stories are seen as more important than stories which are placed further back. A story may not be covered at all if editors decide not to make space for it. This is similar to issue selection and use of time in electronic media.</p>
lead	<p>The beginning (opening paragraph) of a news story is referred to as a <i>lead</i>. The lead acts like a springboard into the story by setting focus and tone. In the lead, the key issue is framed or positioned. Frequently, the conclusion of the story's argument is presented or hinted at in the lead.</p>
editorial balance	<p>Story selection, editorial essays, letters to the editor, and other types of content can be biased and slanted. Newspapers and magazines often get a reputation for being conservative, liberal, or independent. Their readership expects a certain viewpoint, and they often both receive and choose letters and essays reflecting that viewpoint. This is within the limits of free speech, since no one has to buy a certain newspaper.</p>
image distortion	<p>Photographs can be distorted both by how the photo is framed and by graphic design distortions. A photo may be framed to show a few loud protesters at an event where the vast majority of spectators were peaceful and supportive. In addition, a photo may be distorted using graphic design technology, so that, for example, two people who have never met are shown together by piecing their photographs together on a common background.</p>

**Every breath you take and every move you make,
every bond you break, every step you take, I'll be watching you.
Every single day, every word you say,
every game you play, every night you stay, I'll be watching you.**
—The Police, *Every Breath You Take*

8.3 Advertising & Marketing Techniques

Advertisers and other marketers are always seeking new ways to move their target audiences toward some particular perception or action. Typically, these actions involve buying or consuming something. Here are some of the common techniques to be aware of.

8.3.1 Basic Manipulation Techniques

Manipulation Technique	Advertising & Marketing
fuzzy words	See Study Guide 7.3.3: <i>Language Abuse</i>
clever fallacies	Both formal and informal fallacies can be used to lead the audience in a desired direction. People with weak logic skills are the most vulnerable. Red herrings are common. Also, "opinion leaders" can be used to urge us to get on the bandwagon, join the "in-crowd," or otherwise identify with a super star or hero. The <i>Appeal to Unqualified Authority</i> (Study Guide 6.4.5) is a frequent problem.
response conditioning	Questions or slogans that the consumer is taught to answer, e.g. "Built Ford _____ (tough)," and "You're in good hands with _____ (Allstate)." Repetitive slogans or theme music are often used. Conspicuous product placements create acceptance and reinforce conditioned responses.
surprise	Incongruous images that don't make sense, such as the image of a person walking on the ceiling. Loud music, fast movement, quick camera angles, and bright colors are also effective in holding our attention.
gestalt prompting	The Gestalt principle recognizes that the perceptual whole is greater than the sum of the parts. In our perceptual preference for wholeness, humans fill in incomplete information. Our minds automatically supply the incomplete details. Subliminal persuasion (messages perceived at an unconscious level), can be used in subtle ways to influence your actions.
social media levers	A complex social media landscape continues to expand. An online "community" exists in a virtual world composed only of messaging transactions and reinforcement mechanisms. Be aware that video and audio can be manipulated. "Deep fake" images will probably be with us until the end of time.
ID tracking	No public communication service or tool today should be considered private and completely secure. Your media-usage habits are always being tracked and recorded. Current research data shows that humans are especially attracted by images of children, dogs, sex, death, guns, war, or violence hold readers' attention the most.





Sharpen Your Critical Thinking

- Why do advertisers, program directors, and editors use suggestion and subliminal persuasion?
- How can critical thinkers minimize the impact of subliminal persuasion?
- How can you assess whether you have become caught in a media bubble, information silo, or tribal epistemology?

8.4 Impacts of the Mediascape

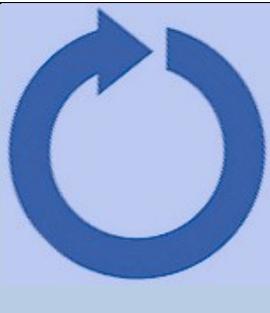
Be careful about how much exposure you have to the mediated world. Practice developing your critical thinking for evaluating mediated content. Take frequent walks, or hikes, or bike rides, in the natural world. The direct experience of Nature helps to ground humans in the real world.

8.4.1 Information Sickness

▶ Read

[Information Sickness](#)

Basha Krasnoff, (2019) *Portland Metrozine*, Fall 2019.



PAUSE & REFLECT

- A. Read the "Information Sickness" article.
- B. Have I experienced "data smog"?
- C. Am I susceptible to "information fatigue syndrome"?
- D. Do I agree that "The computer and its information cannot answer any of our fundamental questions or provide an organizing moral framework."?

8.4.2 Social Networking as News

During the past year, the number of Americans getting at least a portion of their news from social media sites has increased from 62 percent in 2016 to 67 percent in 2017. The findings are part of a [survey conducted via phone by the Pew Research Center](#), polling 4,971 Americans to determine which social media sites they most often turn to for news content.

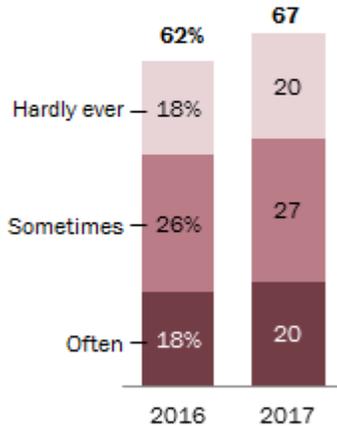
Because of its overall reach, Facebook is the most popular social platform for US adults who get news from a social media site. With 66 percent of Americans using Facebook, Pew Research Center says 45 percent of US adults get at least some of their news from the site.

—[Pew Research Center says 45% of Americans get their news from Facebook](#), Amy Gesenhues, *Marketing Land*, November 8, 2017.

► **Social Media Channels for News**

In 2017, two-thirds of U.S. adults get news from social media

% of U.S. adults who get news from social media sites ...

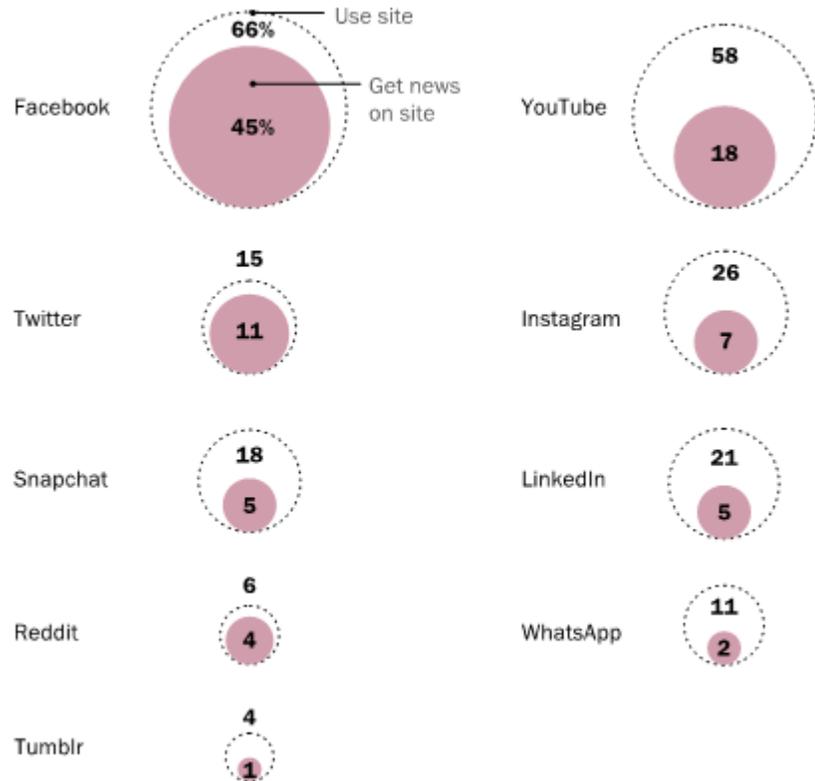


Source: Survey conducted Aug. 8-21, 2017. "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2017"

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Social media sites as pathways to news

% of U.S. adults who use each social media site and % of U.S. adults who get news from each site



Source: Survey conducted Aug. 8-21, 2017. "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2017"

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► **Further Research**

<p>How Facebook Continues to Spread Fake News</p>	<p>Dorothy Wickenden <i>The New Yorker</i>, November 7, 2019</p>
<p>Avaaz: Facebook will see a 'tidal wave' of fake news ahead of the 2020 elections</p>	<p><i>Venture Beat</i>, November 6, 2019.</p>
<p>How Much of the Internet Is Fake? Turns Out, a Lot of It, Actually.</p>	<p>Max Read, <i>Intelligencer</i>, December 26, 2018</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ PolitiFact ▪ Snopes ▪ Hoax-Slayer 	<p>These sites fight misinformation by employing writers, editors and others to fact check rumors and gossip.</p>

► Further Research

- [NewsGuard](#)
- [TrustedNews](#)
- [Official Media Bias Fact Check Icon](#)

Browser plug-ins that display grades, rankings and reports about each news website you visit. You can then use that information to decide for yourself.

8.4.3 Storytelling & Persuasion

Storytelling permeates our contemporary mediascape through novels, movies, television shows, online games, streaming video and audio sites, and other communication channels. Even what passes as broadcast journalism is sometimes little more than a form of entertainment, as Neil Postman argues.

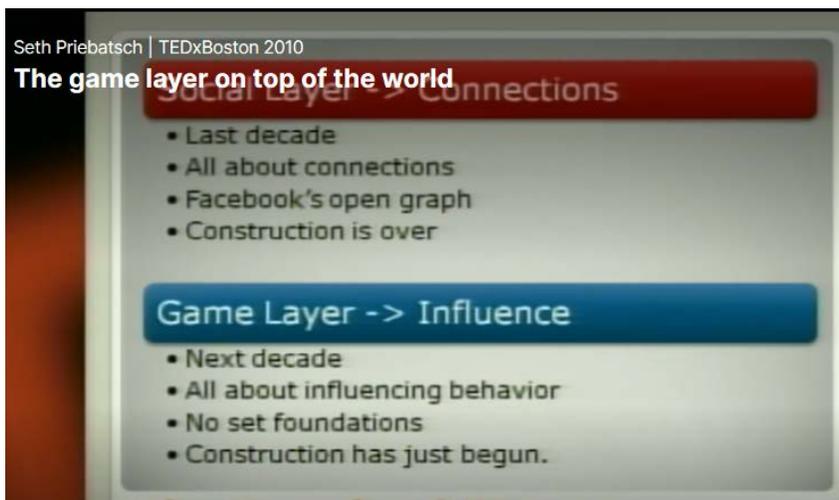
Everyone enjoys a good story. And so, stories are a powerful way to entertain while informing or persuading. Many stories contain concealed arguments. For a few examples:

- Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, argues for a world of unbridled capitalism and ethical egoism.
- In *Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck evokes the harshness of the Great Depression and arouses sympathy for the struggles of migrant farm workers.
- *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding tells a harrowing story that unwinds as an argument about the nature of human nature.
- Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* poses questions about African-American identity and relationships between black and white individuals and communities.

Just as clever fallacies can be smuggled into arguments, persuasive but slanted arguments can be smuggled into stories. Also, non-fiction reports can be framed as merely alternative narratives that "explain" the facts within a coherent story line. Note that Occam's razor is an effective tool for pruning alternative explanations and interpretations.

► View YouTube Lecture

[The game layer on top of the world](#)



Seth Priebatsch, TEDxBoston, 2010.

Argument: Game dynamics are reshaping the world. Get ready to meet the "game layer," a pervasive net of behavior-steering game dynamics that will reshape education and commerce.

8.4.4 Stay Media Savvy

Just as you can learn to outsmart the features and designs that are meant to keep you scrolling and clicking, you can also get smart about spotting news items or posts that are meant to mislead you.

Develop the habit of asking critical questions of any news you consume—especially if it seems surprising, outrageous, in conflict with your background knowledge, contrary to accepted current science, or too good to be true.

► Basic Challenge Questions

—Adapted from the *Data Detox Kit* (<https://datadetoxkit.org/en/wellbeing/fakenews>)

1. Media Source? (URL, site/publication name, date of access)

- Does this website (or other publishing/broadcast medium), have a reputation for professional journalism or more for entertaining or sensational "news"?
- Who funds it? Who are the sponsors or main advertisers?
- What is their organizational or communication mission?
- Is it a satire website or publication? Is it a form of entertainment like rage radio?
- Do they have a political or religious leaning, or another *bias*? (For example, a website focused on homeopathic healing is likely to stand against medical interventions.)
- What is the *actual URL* on this article? (Is there a chance it might be a copycat website, which mimics a trustworthy website, but alters the URL somehow?)

2. Author? (and date of publication)

- Is the author a recognized expert in the field/topic of interest? Does the author's position/argument align with what other experts in the field say?
- Does this piece show up in the "Opinion" section of the website? ("Opinion" pieces have a different standard of fact-checking than standard news pieces.)

3. Content Quality? (assess the soundness or strength of arguments, and careful use of language)

- Does the article (or other medium), reference personal experience or opinion only? Does it refer to credible sources of evidence or information to support the author's positions/arguments?
- Follow links to reference sources and read the primary information sources. Primary sources are more reliable than secondary research sources. For example, a secondary source can easily leave out information or use quotes in which words can be taken out of context.)
- What kinds of language is used? Are there words that are judgment-based (terms like "outrageous", "absurd", "unbelievable") or are the descriptions fact-based ?
- If you are evaluating an image or video, does it look grainy, uncanny or waxy? It might be a sign it was tampered with or otherwise digitally altered.

8.5 Assessing My Critical Thinking

Exercise 8	
<p>If a friend or fellow student is not available to help you with this exercise, simply imagine someone asking you to explain these ideas and answer these questions.</p> <p>▶ If you are confident in the clarity, accuracy, and completeness of your explanations, continue forward on the path. Otherwise, go back and study the areas where you have stumbled, and then return to this exercise.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Describe some ways in which mediated information can be slanted. ▪ What is subliminal persuasion and why should it be of concern to critical thinkers? ▪ Give examples of how online social networking is used for marketing products and points of view. ▪ What are three basic questions to ask when evaluating information from a media source?

Quiet Reflection 8	
<p>Self-reflection requires mental focus and personal honesty. At steps 2 and 3 especially, silence is very important. You must be able to hear your inner voice. Find a place that is quiet and comfortable. Turn off your phone and eliminate other distractions if possible.</p>	
1. Observe/Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Compile a list of the information sources you have used or plan to use for your ICT Letter.
2. Judge/Evaluate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Evaluate the strength and number of arguments that you are putting forward in your ICT Letter. ▪ What is a major objection that the letter's recipient might have to your argument?
3. Act/Decide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Add details, qualifications, and other refinements to your ICT Letter's arguments and your responses to the counter-argument(s). ▪ Continue to reflect on how your commitment to always seek the truth affects your family, neighborhood, community, and the whole planet.



References

Some material in the Integrative Critical Thinking Toolkit is based on, or adapted from material originally published elsewhere. Extended quotes are noted in quotation marks or as indented or highlighted text.

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