McLuhan was profoundly media. While this legacy of McLuhan is the role the electric medium remains in where it was since the medium has as its the years since the there over the ground manifestations. In the Mayberry wrote devoted to a plethora of HTTP, IM, SMS, more. Yet the electric continue to find the shifting our senses and changed the impact

Mayberry's work he first penned it in which he referred were present today. The argument for Plato's dialectic electric medium as the 1994 or 2006.

As one of the speakers invited to appear in a local church's series on "Messages From the Media: How We Are Shaped by Media Sources of the '90s," I was asked to address "The Urgency of Critical Thinking in the 21st Century." In this context, I wanted to show that relevant issues were identified as well as exemplified in media sources themselves (hence my citation of them as much or more than academic studies). In addition I wanted, by example of the same kind of work I try to do with students, to show the pertinence to these issues of the resources to be found in a general education. Hearing of this intent, a colleague appearing in the same series suggested the title which I now use for this revision of the talk.

As I hope will be evident, my concern is with what can happen to and in our thinking if and when we think about certain matters with the terms, symbols, representations—and their assumptions—put into circulation by the media. A subtext, because of the occasion, was to suggest that Christians might have a calling to engage in critical thinking about public questions, especially under its dialectical conception, as an aspect of their being in but not of the world.

When faced with criticism or what might be criticism of their opinions on disputable subjects, most students I run into in classes seem to be radical relativists. The terms expressing this particular instance of conformity with the "majority's" opinion that everybody is different are something like these:

• who are you to say

• everybody sees something different

• you can't possibly tell what I feel if you haven't been there yourself

Robert W. Mayberry is Professor of Communications at Grand Valley State University. This article was originally prepared for public presentation in Grand Haven, Michigan in 1994. This version has been edited for publication by Roy J. Winegar, Assistant Professor of Communications.
• you get what you want to out of it (referring to a text)

• everybody has a right to their own opinion

• But it's my opinion (meaning, you don't have any right to make me explain or defend it)

• You won't take off for it if it's my opinion, right? (referring to how a paper will be graded)

Listening closely to the phrases, however, I think you will hear that, looked at one way, the same words that appear to express a shocking outbreak of relativism among our children, looked at another way, are a defense of each individual's private dogmatism (in holding stubbornly to opinions that often turn out to be as little individual, as little thought about, and as widely shared as popular relativism itself). Looked at yet a third way, attitudes that seem opposite, relativism and dogmatism, coexist compatibly as aspects of the same individual's attempt to refuse discussion—by contrast to a sort of side by side mere declaration—of beliefs. (We will meet this pattern—different looks, different aspects, opposite characterizations each partly true—several times in the following presentation.)

I find this classroom situation to be a striking confirmation of Alexis de Tocqueville's early 19th century description of Americans. In his work, Democracy in America, he found us to be a nation with almost no interest in the actual study of philosophy. But this had not kept us from developing out of our own conditions of social equality, nor out of reading, a philosophical method shared by all. This turned out to be none other than the doubting method of Descartes. To paraphrase:

No one takes any man’s word as proof of anything (we’re feisty, independent-thinking Cartesian epistemological skeptics when faced with other individuals whose claims to know we have no reason to believe come from judgments any better than our own).

But on fundamental values we accept majority opinion without discussion (we’re isolated, unthinking Cartesian moral conformists when faced with lots of those folks no better than we are who happen to be. They’ve never really been)

I should add that the method of doubt to which we follow the custom Tocqueville found in Descartes. Or, as Louis in a 1993 Harper’s article United States is a country to say whatever they've never really been the same thing."

Tocqueville saw a majority opinion—a democratic opinion—would expand the democratic, meaning and including the risk to replace the no less and aristocrats only

On the connection
I follow Christopher "Voting in the Pass"

Polls are deployed as useful—that is by their quest to make confidence. Indeed, the of depoliticization is consensus...As it is privately, the and greatly influenced as important by television news, to determine who discourse is increased

It is in this context vastly augmented reach of contemporary media in turn offer to use them for the socially powerful for we must think of many "public" as a whole, and "target audiences" we are segmented by governmental agencies
are who happen to agree on the same moral idea they've never really thought about much either).

I should add that, while Descartes was applying the method of doubt to what he knew, he decided in morals to follow the customs of his country—in effect, the split Tocqueville found in us was already present in Descartes. Or, as Louis Menand paraphrased Tocqueville in a 1993 Harper's article, "The Myth of Diversity," "the United States is a country in which people, permitted to say whatever they like, all somehow end up saying the same thing."

Tocqueville saw and foresaw the peculiar power that majority opinion—and could we add reports of majority opinion—would exercise on the formation of beliefs in democratic, meaning egalitarian, societies. Power up to and including the risk that majority tyranny might come to replace the no less unacceptable tyranny of monarchs and aristocrats only recently overturned in Europe.

On the connection of polling reports to this power I follow Christopher Kitchens' 1992 article in Harper's, "Voting in the Passive Voice":

Polls are deployed only when they might prove useful—that is helpful to the powers that be in their quest to maintain their position and influence. Indeed, the polling industry is a powerful ally of depoliticization and its counterpart, which is consensus.... And as all pollsters will tell you privately, the answers to poll questions are very greatly influenced by what has lately been defined as important by the television news.

It is in this context that I believe we must place the vastly augmented technical power and increasingly global reach of contemporary media. These are the powers that media in turn offer to those with the economic power to use them for the diffusion and shaping of the already socially powerful force of majority opinion. And I think we must think of majority opinion both in the national "public" as a whole, and in the many smaller "publics" and "target audiences" and "micro-markets" into which we are segmented by the corporate, academic, and governmental agencies who daily sample and measure our every twitch of trend, opinion—and behavior—for someone's purposes of persuasion, sales, or control.

Would it surprise you to learn that inside the media business itself, many don't look at the main business as delivering messages or selling products (the latter is the advertiser's problem). We, as target audiences, are seen as the product the media deliver to the sponsor. The original idea is Dallas Smythe's. Here I quote Oscar H. Gandy, Jr. ("Tracking the Audience"):

Commercial broadcasters "produce audiences" or, more precisely, blocks of time during which it is possible to communicate with audiences, which they then sell to advertisers. The market that exists is between broadcasters and advertisers or their agents...(to whom) the broadcaster has promised to produce and deliver (the audience).... The broadcaster realizes profits when the costs of producing the audience are substantially less than the advertising fees they are able to charge for access.

In a similar turn the advertiser can be seen as solving his/her marketing problem by getting us, in an ancient rhetorical strategy, to sell ourselves to the audience which it is possible to communicate with, which they then sell to advertisers. The market that exists is between broadcasters and advertisers or their agents...
“fact.” In part this is because of other ads and sponsored program content which seek to establish or reinforce certain value premises in the minds of its audiences....

All of which helps to explain a lengthy American history of increasingly detailed, precise, and pervasive means of determining (discovering and reinforcing) what those cultural facts, our ultimate value premises, our wants, are. As to the length of the history, consider William Leach’s account in Land of Desire, which I quote from a review in The Nation:

In the decades following the Civil War, American capitalism began to produce a distinct culture, unconnected to traditional family or community values, to religion in any conventional sense, or to political democracy. The cardinal features of this culture were acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society.

This is, incidentally, the very impact of American culture now on world culture seen and celebrated by conservative columnist Irving Kristol (cited in William Ecenbarger's "There's No Escaping Us," Chicago Tribune Magazine, February 13, 1994):

It [American culture] has a wonderfully corrosive effect on all totalitarian and strongly authoritarian regimes. The spirit of this culture is profoundly individualist, almost anarchic in fact, and crosses the grain of all collectivist societies. (My question mark is, wouldn’t a conservative have noticed on all traditional societies as well?) The spirit of this culture is also profoundly hedonistic, placing the emphasis on individual appetites and desires as self-defined and, therefore, hostile to any authoritative, political definition of “needs” that takes priority over individually defined appetites and desires.

As to the pervasiveness of the means of determining these cultural facts, I bring to your attention, from the same issue of the Tribune, James Coates's "If You Can't Beat'em, Modem."

Using data called “the TIGER set” and made public by the U.S. Census Bureau after the 1990 census, it now is possible, for researchers to find the racial characteristics of the population's name and phone numbers, to find the phone numbers of libraries on CD-ROM (Only Memory) that are computer equipped with CD-ROM. Millions of home computer equipped with “interactive multimedia” games and other applications.

Using another set of data, USA, which costs $95 for a listed phone in the name and phone number of live on the street with the population's name.

Together, these two sets of data some research power to anybody from community mom-and-pop group to use it for their own research. Using data like that community, (on individual computers at check-out counters) can become greater strides.

Now add the information:

Coping with 500,000 of which ones to use it for.

With the cable box's menu, choosing of what you have to “surf.” Big Brother already knew which ones to use when using the cable box's menu.
of other ads and seek to establish premises in the minds of

A lengthy American precise, and pervasive (encoding and reinforcing) premise value premises, the history, consider the "cult of Desire, which I 

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now is possible, for example, to use home computers to find the racial, ethnic, sexual and economic characteristics of the people living on any street in America.

This data now is distributed to most major public libraries on CD-ROMs (Compact Disc-Read Only Memory) that can be read on any home computer equipped with a device costing about $500. Millions of homes already use these “readers” for “interactive multimedia” encyclopedias, computer games and other applications.

Using another set of CD-ROMS called PhoneDisc USA, which costs $300 and includes nearly every listed phone in this country, it is possible to get the name and phone number of most of the people who live on the street where TIGER data has described the population's makeup.

Together, these two CD-ROM sets can put awesome research powers into the hands of just about anybody from cat burglars to politicians and mom-and-pop grocery-store managers who want to use it for their unique purposes. Combined with data like that compiled by company such as Jewel (on individual consumption patterns scanned at check-out counters) the implications for mischief become greater still.

Now add the information super-highway:

Coping with 500 channels will make the editing of which ones to scan in any one viewing session essential. And, of course, there is an electronic log of what you have been watching recently in the (cable) box’s memory banks that allows the cable companies to "poll" their boxes and track who is watching what. Cable operators can monitor not only what you watch regularly but what makes you pause when using the little plus arrow to “channel surf.”

With the cable box, TV becomes a two way street. That’s how the cable folks now know where to send those pay-per-view movies and other special events. Big Brother already is watching.

It would be comforting in relation to any number of disturbing problems, e.g. violence, to blame the media unilaterally for shaping us. But since the social power Tocqueville points to is one the media derive profoundly from us, whether as a whole people, or as targeted fragments, there is no absolute “we” and “them” here. The “causation” involved is reciprocal and recursive (remember the case of polling). We can no more avoid responsibility for being the shapers as well as the shaped of majority opinion than they, the media, can for both their roles.

Surely the way we think about violent crime and the kind of problem that we think it is comes as much from media shaping as do youthful violent propensities themselves? Is violent crime increasing because punishment is insufficient and uncertain—as assumed to be our assumption by the Congress's Crime Bill? Or as David Rothman suggests, is Punishment the Crime? (See his "Crime of Punishment" in The New York Review of Books, February 17, 1994.)

The United States leads the world with a rate of 455 incarcerated per 100,000 of the population. South Africa is a distant second with 311 per 100,000... comparisons one might make (are also) with the Netherlands (40 per 100,000), or Japan (45), or France (81), or England (97).

Moreover, the prison population is growing at the fastest rate in the world. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of inmates in state and federal prisons rose by
168 percent, from 330,000 to 883,000, and predictions are that the number will reach one million by 1994. The increase in the number of offenders sentenced to probation instead of prison, or paroled from prison, is no less dramatic.

When the focus is on imprisonment there is evidence of increased punishment, in numbers of prisoners and length of sentences, at least for certain categories of crime. The evidence for an increase in violent crime itself is mixed—the FBI figures say yes, the Census Bureau figures say no.

What is clear is that arrests, convictions, and imprisonment for drug offenses, as distinguished from other crimes, have risen sharply, while everyone agrees that the increases reflect a change not in street behavior but in patterns of enforcement and punishment (in the era of mandatory sentencing guidelines). Marc Mauer, the assistant director of Washington, DC's Sentencing Project, calculates that drug arrests increased during the 1980s by 88 percent, and that one out of every four prison inmates is now serving time or awaiting trial for a drug offense. (In 1983 it was one in eleven.) Nearly 60 percent of federal prison inmates have been convicted of drug offenses, receiving on average eight-year sentences, twice the length of the sentences given in 1980. In state prisons, drug offenders make up 22 percent of inmates, up from 6 percent. One third are in prison for possession and two thirds for sale or manufacture, but the distinctions have less to do with street behavior than with plea bargaining (which has increased in the era of mandatory sentences). In New York City offenders sentenced for possession or sale of drugs increased over 600 percent between 1983 and 1989, notwithstanding the increasing severity of prison sentences for drug offenders during this period.

As Rothman had earlier pointed out, when sentencing commissioners and legislators feel they must show they are tough, the repercussions go beyond an increased sentence for one highly publicized case and result, for years to come, in harsher penalties for entire categories of crimes. The real problem...is that once sentencing becomes "a tool in the hands of politicians," we get "democratic crime control." Punishment so long affects the majority.

In a similar vein of thought, youthful criminals often depart from or live in some cases perhaps express (or values)? As reviewed in The Cocaine Myth, Times Book Review of June 23, 1990, by Williams (The Cocaine Myth).

Unable to extract from the community the skills and opportunities to construct an economy, these young people may have their entrepreneurial nature, the trade they have been taught, to obtain status, prestige, and standing in the community.

Mr. Williams's disarming picture of a remarkable similarity to commerce. Moving up requires brains and luck. Successful operators must have repeat business, limit bad debts, keep good records, avoid getting into trouble, handle money, control their buyers, and control and invest in the street and into the economy.

And mind you, quite possibly where around the corner, back and forth not just once, but reported, and on personal levels on all manner of values, being portrayed across the country to entertain us and ourselves in New York Times column." Until the nasty winds debased the wisdom over their children

Mr. Williams's portrayal for shopping spree and land tours and being portrayed as a sort of Playboy Mr. T, far a bigger star than...
In a similar vein one may ask, do we assume that the youthful criminals involved in drug related crime are departing from or living up to the majority's values (in some cases perhaps its real as compared to professed values)? As reviewed by Lisbeth Schorr in the *New York Times Book Review* of April 27, 1989, sociologist Terry Williams (*The Cocaine Kids*) found that:

Unable to extract from family, school and community the skills, credentials, connections and opportunities to compete successfully in the regular economy, these youngsters have found a way to use their entrepreneurial talents. Through the drug trade they have been able to make a living, and to obtain status, prestige and proof they can succeed at something.

Mr. Williams's detailed observations yield a fascinating picture of an underground economy that is remarkable similar to the world of respectable commerce. Moving up requires hard work, skill, intelligence and luck. Successful dealers and distributors generate repeat business, limit their own consumption, keep accurate records and avoid arrest. "A kid who can routinely handle money, control personal use of cocaine, deal with buyers, and control a weapon, may make it out of the street and into the elite world of the super dealer."

And mind you, opinions are being shaped somewhere around the circle between us and the media and back not just on news and public events being reported, and on products and services being sold, but on all manner of values, beliefs, desires and fantasies being portrayed across the board in program content to entertain us and express our feelings. As noted by *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich ("The Road to Neverland," January 30, 1994):

Until the nasty whispers started spreading, few debated the wisdom of real-life parents who turned over their children to Michael Jackson in exchange for shopping sprees at Toys "R" Us, special Disneyland tours and overnights at Neverland Ranch, a sort of Playboy Mansion for tots. Mr. Jackson, so far a bigger star than Robert Redford ("Indecent Proposal"), couldn't possibly be up to no good.

Star worship is the real story in the Jackson case. Americans of all stations are infatuated with the rich and famous, and the most rabid fans will surrender almost anything—from their money to their dignity, principles and children—to brush vicariously against their idols.

In society we all live in the realm of persuasion in any case, and as he says yes, the Census

Many convictions, and convictions earned, as distinguished sharply, while every­

We have seen a change not in the enforcement and sentencing practices, but in public attitudes. In New York City during the 1980s by every four prison inmates, awaiting trial for a felony, there was one in eleven.) According to the state prisons, drug traffickers and drug dealers have increased in number, up from 5% of the inmate population for possession for manufacture, but the same is not true of street dealers. While street behavior has increased in many areas, especially in New York City, the drug war has created a concern for arrest and prosecution. And legislators feel the repercussions of these for one highly visible street behavior for the next few years to come, in that certain individuals and categorizations of crimes.

And sentencing becomes an intractable state, we get "demo­

ocratic crime control." That is, there are no limits to punishment so long as those limits do not adversely affect the majority.

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powerful means of persuasion—hence the weakness, ultimately, of the skeptic's demand for proof—which Aristotle described as a weapon of attack, and self-defense in adversarial proceedings more appropriate than fistfights to humans. (Typical of training in this approach seems to be a textbook for which I have just received an ad. Called Logical Self-Defense, its cover is illustrated by swordsman dueling, and six of eleven chapters are devoted to fallacies.)

Here we reach the first insufficiency of a logical approach for the whole of critical thinking: in persuasion the practical use of logic is usually to support one's own position, while directing the criticism at another's (too much concentration on the mote in our neighbor's eye). As Aristotle also observed, arguments in support of debatable opinions persuade actual audiences most effectively when they take as their premises other commonly accepted opinions that are already believed in by that audience (here is perhaps the origin of marketing research into the psychographies of target audiences). These already accepted premises then gain renewed acceptance as cultural facts each time they prove themselves capable of proving yet another conclusion.

And when a premise is shared, Aristotle notes, it need not be stated. This adds an additional power to the persuasion, as others in the tradition have observed, which derives from the audience's complicity in constructing the argument, supplying support for the conclusion from themselves. Put positively, this has been called a "meeting of the minds" in an argument, a reciprocal "identification" of speaker and audience in the sense of their "reasoning together." In the same positive light, logic has been seen as an ethical restraint upon mere skill at persuasion, a demand that persons and citizens offer genuine rather than specious arguments to their fellows.

More negatively, audience complicity in persuasion is the source of the self-sell advertising strategy referred to earlier. As Aristotle says, by contrast to his dialectician, who is named for possession of a skill, "What makes a man a sophist is not his skill, but his moral purpose."

Here we reach a second insufficiency of a purely logical approach to critical thinking: logic’s business is to show the effect of premises upon conclusions in a given argument or series of arguments in itself to examine premises (majority opinions), test them, of one’s own effort.

In the tradition I mean, in the sense of the term, as in the dialogues Republic and Phaedrus, the relevance of arguments’ premises and especially perhaps hidden assumptions in premises in that argument.

Indeed, in Republic, reliance on proof (with the irony of its context) is actually a limitation of expert’s arguments. By contrast, experts, like Bobby Fischer, are questioned by the experts because of ad hominum attacks, eg, such questioning is personal. And do these unfair attacks, in kind (with ad hominum replies occupying the moral high position and, like our example, refusing the question),

Socrates defines reason as the soul by words, and the notion of premises both requires and develops the sense depends upon toward the truth of a person’s wants. Hence the truth than for wisdom among mortal, creatures gained from a discussion.
a given argument or specialized field of argument, not in itself to examine premises, let alone the premises (majority opinions), if one is tempted not to examine them, of one's own effective argument.

In the tradition I shall call dialectical, following the sense of the term to be found in Plato's Socratic dialogues Republic and Phaedrus, one examines the relevance of arguments to the truth by questioning their premises and especially the taken-for-granted and perhaps hidden assumptions behind the adoption of those premises in that argument or in that specialized field.

Indeed, in Republic VI and VII, Socrates argues that reliance on proof (with its dependence on assumptions) is actually a limitation on the strength of a specialist or expert's arguments. By contrast, I notice that nowadays experts, like Bobby Ray Inman, whose assumptions are questioned by the laity, take the question as unfair because of ad hominem attacks. Does this mean that such questioning is perceived as denial of their expertise? And do these unfair attacks then justify their responding in kind (with ad hominem) while simultaneously occupying the moral high ground accorded the victim's position and, like our students to whom they provide example, refusing the discussion?

Socrates defines rhetoric as an art of influencing the soul by words, and he notices that the examination of premises both requires and develops the soul's ability to recognize what is included and what is left out about a subject by these taken-for-granted assumptions. Thus more understanding of the truth by a person is required and developed by questioning assumptions than by proving conclusions, such that if a person does not have the understanding of his/her own premises that comes from taking them hypothetically (allowing them to be open to question) he/she cannot really be said to know the conclusion proven from them (except by rote or hearsay).

More than upon technical skills, then, the understanding achievable by dialectic in the Socratic-Platonic sense depends upon moral purpose, the disposition toward the truth of a person's character, fundamentally of a person's wants. He/she has to care more for seeking the truth than for winning the argument. In general, among mortal, creaturely beings, more truth is to be gained from a discussion that submits everyone's necessarily incomplete assumptions to examination than from the proof of any one person's conclusion. In contrast, again, to Descartes' and perhaps our American position, found in Descartes' reaction to the controversies which fill the history of philosophy he studied in school, namely, that of the conflicting opinions on a subject, only one can be true.

IV

The importance of applying dialectical critical thinking in particular to media, then, is to examine the premises and assumptions behind the "framing" of mediated public events.

"Framing" refers to the selection of which ones of the "opposites" in a situation calling for diagnosis and decision are included in its portrayal, and to the ways (consciously or unconsciously influential upon choice) the alternatives selected are portrayed in words or pictures. Looking back at the examples I have referred to earlier, I think you can see some effects of framing on how we conceive of current issues. In media shaping of opinion and value, is the problem our being influenced or our being influential? Do we conceive the problem as his criminal to us? Is the problem its increase or punishments? Which of the premises both requires and develops the soul's ability to recognize what is included and what is left out about a subject by these taken-for-granted assumptions? Thus more understanding of the truth by a person is required and developed by questioning assumptions than by proving conclusions, such that if a person does not have the understanding of his/her own premises that comes from taking them hypothetically (allowing them to be open to question) he/she cannot really be said to know the conclusion proven from them (except by rote or hearsay).

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participants' interest. Hence those evenings when the local television news is almost all the equivalent of the newspaper's police blotter and court report (where they are only a couple of columns on p. 2). The corrective or alternative framing of crime statistics which showed the theme or issue of punishment comes from print media, which do not have to worry about boring us with pictures of analysts' "talking heads." (On the effects of television's framing of the news, see Iyengar's *Is Anyone Responsible?*)

Mediated public events are events from the public sphere of activities whose appearance in public we could have witnessed, before the advent of mass communications, only by being in the same locale. Now, the photo-electronic media "skin" some of the appearances from those events—the term is the poet Oliver Wendell Holmes—and replicate them for us seemingly to "witness" in our homes and other private spaces—shall we say apart from, or merged with the original locale? (see also Meyrowitz's *No Sense of Place* and J.B. Thompson's *Ideology and Modern Culture*.)

Events appear in public, however, only when we know we are all discussing the same objects from our different perspectives, only, that is, to the extent that many aspects of the objects can be known in a discussion from many perspectives or "frames," ideally as many as there are citizens of the polity in question. The idea of public here comes from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*.

The special significance of mediated public events, then, is that they are those to which we owe our ability to have an opinion about them primarily to the framed selection of their aspects replicated by relatively few media sources. To the extent that these aspects have been selected and framed from perspectives whose assumptions we are known by research and surveillance to share, they are the events about which we are most apt to be unwittingly complicitous in selling ourselves the decisions about them the corporate or governmental "sponsor" wants.

My question is, can enough of us be caring enough and critical enough in thinking dialectically about these "beams in our own eyes" to make power derived from that complicity difficult to count on? (May I say, lest we render unto Caesar what is God's?)

References


Opposite: Sean Aden Lavelle is Visiting Assistant Professor in the Writing Department at Grand Valley State University. He enjoys running, reading, canoeing, playing disc golf, and eating candy. One day he unwrapped a Charms Blow Pop only to find it fissured with cracks, and so mailed a complaint letter to the company. They quickly responded, with a polite and apologetic reply—along with a package containing 100 Blow Pops.