

# Michael Metzler

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***“Television is a vast wasteland.”  
- Newton Minow***

Dear Media Literacy Students:

When Mr. Minow uttered this famous line back in the ‘60s (before cable & satellite TV and when there were only about three networks on US television), he meant that this new media technology was going to serve up a bunch of crap that’ll have us wasting our time and wasting our minds. Well, decades later, new “vast wasteland” technologies have moved in, like these ol’ Internet and cell phone thingies. And, despite the fact that you’ve grown up with these technologies, they are still very much in their infancy, and we’re still pretty clueless about understanding what they can do *TO* us or *FOR* us.

One of Minow’s contemporaries, Marshall McLuhan, also said something profound about this: “The medium is the message.” He suggested that the devices themselves, the tools through which we receive communications, may have an even greater influence on us than the message itself. In the same way that the printing press and radio shaped our daily behavior, so too will our laptops and cell phones. I’m sure you’ve seen plenty of people running into stuff because they’re intently looking down at their phones rather than up at their fellow humans. Or maybe you and your friends have all put your phones in the middle of the table at a restaurant and agreed that the first person to reach for their device gets stuck paying for dinner. Or maybe you’ve seen the devastating effects of car crashes that could’ve been avoided if only we could have ignored that powerful contraption that controls so much of our lives.

In this class we’ll explore both the medium and the message, and we’ll ask questions about whether or not we are in control of these technologies that seem to control us. We’ll ask about how the media has evolved, about who has the power to shape the media landscape and its messages, about our roles & power as citizens & consumers of information in both our democracy and our capitalist economy, and about the role of a free press. We’ll ask what happens when you click on an online ad or “click-bait” and ask about the messages themselves. (There are a LOT of them – Guess how many media messages you’re exposed to daily, then double or triple it). And, throughout it all, we will ask, “In what ways can we be helped, and in what ways can we be harmed?”

Our new media “vast wasteland” has its own new mantras like, “Content is king” and “If you’re not selling, you’re being sold,” and it’s easy to just let these quaint quips wash over us without thinking, as we do with so many media messages. But we are NOT going to let that happen. We are going to think. We are going to scrutinize and criticize. When we see a media message we won’t simply accept it as fact, but do our due diligence to discern who it came from, what their biases and motivations might be, and what forces have played upon and preyed upon this message. When we see someone paraded in handcuffs across our TV screens, we will train ourselves to remember that presumed innocence is the bedrock of our justice system. And when we encounter an ad, we’ll remember to anatomically engage it from above, rather than below, our shoulders (That means using our head rather than our heart or....uh.... the even lower nether regions).

We are going to equip ourselves with the knowledge and skills to be in control of our own journey through this new and vast media wasteland.

I’m so excited to be a part of this journey with you.

Warmest regards,

Michael Metzler