

Learning Targets

- Analyze how concessions and refutations can be used to refute an opposing argument.
- Apply strategies of refutation to a set of persuasive elements.

Before Reading

1. You have taken a look at your local newspaper and thought about how often you read the paper. With a partner, discuss the idea of a newspaper made just for you. What might be some of the advantages of a fully personalized newspaper? What might be some of the disadvantages?

During Reading

2. Sunstein’s article first appeared on an English Web site, so you will see many words with the British spellings. Read Sunstein’s article, marking the text to identify support (**reasoning** and **evidence**) he uses to justify his claim that the diminished role of the newspaper is a problem for American democracy. Record your findings in the left-hand column of the graphic organizer on page 185. Be prepared to discuss your findings.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cass Sunstein is a noted American legal scholar who has written dozens of books, essays, and newspaper and magazine articles on public policy, economics, law, and psychology. He has taught at the law schools of the University of Chicago, Harvard University, and Columbia University.

Editorial

How the Rise of the Daily Me Threatens Democracy

by Cass Sunstein

1 More than a decade ago the technology specialist, Nicholas Negroponte, prophesied the emergence of the Daily Me—a fully personalised newspaper. It would allow you to include topics that interest you and screen out those that bore or annoy you. If you wanted to focus on Iraq and tennis, or exclude Iran and golf, you could do that.

2 Many people now use the internet to create something like a Daily Me. This behaviour is reinforced by the rise of social networking forums, collaborative filtering and viral marketing. For politics, the phenomenon is especially important in campaigns. Candidates in the US presidential race can construct information cocoons in which readers are deluged with material that is, in their eyes, politically correct. Supporters of Hillary Clinton construct a Daily Me that includes her campaign’s perspective but offers nothing from Barack Obama, let alone Mitt Romney.

LEARNING STRATEGIES:
Skimming/Scanning, Marking the Text, Discussion Groups, Graphic Organizer, Paraphrasing, Quickwrite

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

Reasoning is the thinking or logic used to make a claim in an argument. **Evidence** is the specific facts, examples, and other details used to support the reasoning.

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Sunstein defines his key term in the first paragraph. Why is that definition necessary for his argument?

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KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Sunstein uses a rhetorical question in paragraph 3—a technique that works in certain situations, but not in others. Does this technique work here? Explain.

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Does Sunstein use convincing *reasoning* and *evidence* to support his claim that the diminished role of the newspaper is a problem for American democracy? Explain.

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

In a deductive argument, the author presents a thesis, and then attempts to support it. In an inductive argument, the model is reversed. The evidence is examined and then a conclusion is reached. Which model does Sunstein employ here? How do you know? Why might he have structured his argument this way?

3 What is wrong with the emerging situation? We can find a clue in a small experiment in democracy conducted in Colorado in 2005. About 60 US citizens were put into 10 groups. They deliberated on controversial issues, such as whether the US should sign an international treaty to combat global warming and whether states should allow same-sex couples to enter into civil unions. The groups consisted of predominantly either leftwing or rightwing members, with the former drawn from left-of-centre Boulder and the latter from Colorado Springs, which tends to be right of centre. The groups, not mixed, were screened to ensure members conformed to stereotypes. (If people in Boulder liked Vice-President Dick Cheney, they were cordially excused.) People were asked to state their opinions anonymously before and after the group discussion.

4 In almost every group, people ended up with more extreme positions. The Boulder groups favoured an international treaty to control global warming before discussion; they favoured it far more strongly afterwards. In Colorado Springs, people were neutral on that treaty before discussion; discussion led them to oppose it strongly. Same-sex unions became much more popular in Boulder and less so in Colorado Springs.

5 Aside from increasing extremism, discussion had another effect: it squelched diversity. Before members talked, many groups displayed internal disagreement. These were greatly reduced: discussion widened the rift between Boulder and Colorado Springs.

6 Countless versions of this experiment are carried out online every day. The result is group polarisation, which occurs when like-minded people speak together and end up in a more extreme position in line with their original inclinations.

7 There are three reasons for this. First is the exchange of information. In Colorado Springs, the members offered many justifications for not signing a climate treaty and a lot fewer for doing so. Since people listened to one another, they became more sceptical. The second reason is that when people find their views corroborated, they become more confident and so are more willing to be extreme. The third reason involves social comparison. People who favour a position think of themselves in a certain way and if they are with people who agree with them, they shift a bit to hold on to their preferred self-conception.

8 Group polarisation clearly occurs on the internet. For example, 80 per cent of readers of the leftwing blog Daily Kos are Democrats and fewer than 1 per cent are Republicans. Many popular bloggers link frequently to those who agree with them and to contrary views, if at all, only to ridicule them. To a significant extent, people are learning about supposed facts from narrow niches and like-minded others.

9 This matters for the electoral process. A high degree of self-sorting leads to more confidence, extremism and increased contempt for those with contrary views. We can already see this in the presidential campaign. It will only intensify when the two parties square off. To the extent that Democratic and Republican candidates seem to live in different political universes, group polarisation is playing a large role.

10 Polarisation, of course, long preceded the internet. Yet given people's new power to create echo chambers, the result will be serious obstacles not merely to civility but also to mutual understanding and constructive problem solving. The Daily Me leads inexorably also to the Daily Them. That is a real problem for democracy.

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Literary Terms

A **concession** is an admission in an argument that the opposing side has points. A **refutation** is the reasoning used to disprove an opposing point.

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

In a newspaper, space is at a premium. As a result, every word, and every paragraph counts. Thus said, what is the purpose of the first paragraph? What is the purpose of the second paragraph?

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Why might the author have felt the need to address the other side's argument? What might this technique do for his argument?

During Reading

4. Read Potter's article, marking the text to identify the **concessions** and **refutations** he uses to counter Sunstein's article and to justify his claim that the diminished role of the newspaper is not a problem for American democracy. Record your findings in the right-hand column of the graphic organizer on page 185.

Editorial

The Newspaper Is Dying— *Hooray for Democracy*

by Andrew Potter

1 The Newspaper Audience Databank (NADbank) released its readership numbers for 2007 a couple of weeks ago, and for those of us in the industry it was grim reading: almost everywhere you look, circulation, ad revenues and page counts are down, which is why you can now fire a cannon through any given newsroom at midday and not have to worry about committing reportericide.

2 But unless you work in the business, is there any reason to be especially concerned? Each year may put another loop in the newspaper's death spiral, but the overall consumption of news is on the rise, almost entirely thanks to the myriad online sources. The Internet is eating the newspaper's lunch, but there's plenty of food on the buffet table.

3 In certain quarters, though, there is growing concern that the demise of the newspaper is a threat to democracy itself. The argument goes something like this: the economic logic of mass circulation meant a newspaper had to try to appeal to as many potential readers as possible. To do so, it brought together in one package a diverse set of voices, presenting each reader with ideas and perspectives that he or she might not otherwise have seen or sought out. This fostered the democratic values of curiosity, enlightenment and toleration, and the worry is that if the newspaper declines, so might democracy.

4 The sharpest version of this argument comes from Cass Sunstein, a law professor at the University of Chicago. In a recent column in the Financial Times, Sunstein fusses about the rise of what he calls the Daily Me, the highly personalized and customized information feeds that will allow you to "include topics that interest you and screen out those that bore or anger you." As Sunstein sees it, the Daily Me is the potential Achilles heel of democracy because of a phenomenon called group polarization: when like-minded people find themselves speaking only with one another, they get into a cycle of ideological reinforcement where they end up endorsing positions far more extreme than the ones they started with.

5 Group polarization is everywhere. It helps explain why, for example, humanities departments are so left-wing, why fraternities are so sexist, why journalists drink so much. But, for the most part, it isn't a problem (for democracy anyway), since we routinely come into contact with so many people from so many different groups that the tendency toward polarization in one is at least somewhat tempered by our encounters with others.

6 Yet Sunstein is worried that group polarization on the Internet will prove far more pernicious. Why? Because of the image of the blogosphere as a series of echo chambers, where every viewpoint is repeated and amplified to a hysterical pitch. As our politics moves online, he thinks we'll end up with a public sphere that is partisan and extreme, and as an example, he points out that 80 per cent of readers of the left-wing blog Daily Kos are Democrats, while fewer than one per cent are Republicans. The result, he claims, "will be serious obstacles not merely to civility but also to mutual understanding."

7 As upside-down arguments go, this one is ingenious. For decades, progressive critics have complained about the anti-democratic influence of the mass media, and that newspapers present a selective and highly biased picture of the world, promoting pseudo-arguments that give the illusion of debate while preserving the status quo. (Remember that the villain in *Manufacturing Consent*, the film about Noam Chomsky, was—wait for it—the New York Times.) And now that the Internet is poised to cast these lumbering dinosaurs of black ink and dead trees into the pit of extinction, we're supposed to say hang on, what about democracy?

8 There's a basic error here, paired with an equally basic misunderstanding of how the marketplace of ideas works. There is no reason at all to be concerned that 80 per cent of Daily Kos readers are Democrats, any more than to worry that 80 per cent of the visitors to McDonald's like hamburgers. Given what each of these outlets is selling, it would be bizarre if it were otherwise. What would be worrisome was if four-fifths of Democrats read only the Daily Kos, but there is absolutely no evidence that is the case.

9 Earlier this month, the Project for Excellence in Journalism, a think tank sponsored by the Pew foundation, released its fifth annual report (at journalism.org) on the state of the news media. For the most part, its analysis of the newspaper business confirmed the trends of declining circulation, revenues and staff. But with respect to public attitudes, the PEJ found that most readers see their newspaper as increasingly biased, and 68 per cent say they prefer to get their news from sources that don't have a point of view. The PEJ also found a substantial disconnect between the issues and events that dominate the news hole (e.g. the Iraq surge, the massacre at Virginia Tech) and what the public wants to see covered—issues such as education, transportation, religion and health. What this suggests, is, aside from some failings of newspapers, that readers go online in search of less bias, not the self-absorption of the Daily Me.

10 Nothing about how people consume media online suggests they are looking for confirmation of pre-existing biases. In fact, we have every reason to believe that as people migrate online, it will be to seek out sources of information that they perceive to be unbiased, and which give them news they can't get anywhere else. The newspaper may be dying, but our democracy will be healthier for it.

After Reading

5. Complete the graphic organizer on page 185 by recording your findings from this article.
6. Identify the writer's use of inductive and deductive reasoning to support his positions. Cite textual evidence.

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS
Potter presents Sunstein's point of view. Does he do so objectively and accurately?

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS
The tone Potter employs in these next paragraphs suggests that Sunstein's position is ridiculous. What words/images most strongly contribute to this tone?

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS
The general formula for presenting an argument involves making a claim, then following that claim with evidence, then explaining how the evidence supports the claim. Does Potter follow this model? Are all of Potter's claims adequately supported?

INDEPENDENT READING LINK
Select one of the argument-style texts from your independent reading log, and identify support the writer uses to justify his or her claim.

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My Notes

Refuting an Argument

To refute an existing argument, authors rely on a variety of strategies of **refutation**. These strategies often “attack” different elements of an opponent’s position. Some of the most common “attacks” include:

- Attack on a claim: A big picture attack focusing on the writer’s overall position.
- Attack on reasoning: Does the evidence the writer uses logically support his or her conclusions?
- Attack on evidence: Is the evidence timely, accurate, and unbiased? Is there counter-evidence?
- Attack on assumption: What does the writer assume to be true, and is that assumption accurate? (A writer’s assumptions are often unstated.)

7. In the following graphic organizer, practice refuting elements adapted from George A. Krinsky’s article “The Role of the Media in a Democracy” from Activity 3.2.

Element	Your Refutation or “Attack”
Claim: In the age of technology, the media is still an essential part of a self-governing society.	
Reasoning: People’s fascination with Brittany Spears shows that celebrity news is more important than traditional news.	
Evidence: People that use MySpace are producers of news.	
Assumption: Everyone has access to a source of news.	

Check Your Understanding

Writing Prompt: Examine the notes you took on Sunstein and Potter to identify which strategies of refutation Potter uses in his response to Sunstein. Then evaluate the effectiveness of those “attacks.” Be sure to:

- Use quotes and paraphrasing to show evidence of claims, reasoning, or assumptions that Potter is refuting.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of Potter’s refutations.