Teaching the Media in SCHOOLS

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There is no doubt that the media are a crucial political and public issue. That is why media literacy at high school and university levels has been recognized as a crucial component of the curriculum. Today's postmodern culture requires a critical and active audience that not only can scrutinize the persuasive power of the word but also must increasingly know how to deal with the power of the image, for the image has become the dominant form of public address.

Ideally the mass media, both audiovisual and print, are supposed to offer a wide variety of voices and help sustain the political plurality of our society. For too long, however, the media have been allowed to develop pretty much as they wished in the pursuit of the commercial imperative and in the process have managed to undermine cultural considerations and to silence the very voices they are supposed to have aided. Broadcasting and publishing facilities are now in the hands of large global corporations. The media are one area where corporate control is at its most concentrated. Any attempt at meaningful change becomes particularly difficult since alternative programs and publications are either edged out silently and by stealth or drowned out by the stentorian voice of the corporate media.

There are ways to start taking some control over the very media that define much of our daily life. Community radio, alternative magazines and community cable are some of the obvious places where people can begin to make their own culture and pursue their creativity. This is not to suggest that the television and radio spectrum should be immediately crowded with amateur TV and radio shows, but that professional and semi-professional alternative spaces can be created where ordinary individualis and groups normally excluded from the mainstream media—Native people, working people, lesbians and gays, people of colour and people with disabilities—can tell their own stories in their own ways without appropriation by the corporate world.

The educational system is another place where the cultural battle over meaning can be fought. Here, issues such as media ownership, as well as skills such as analyzing television and film, and rudimentary hands-on skills for students' own media productions can be discussed and taught. Once again there is no point minimizing the difficulties of these tasks. In today's educational curriculum there is little that prepares the student to make sense of the rhetoric of the image or the historical development and social implications of popular culture, and there is still less opportunity to study how to use the media for oppositional rather than for corporate
purposes. Nevertheless, it is through education that a constituency for change can be organized and issues can be brought out into a public space where they can be further debated, examined and defined.

On the theoretical front, the proliferation of the mass media and the rise of a "mass culture" have given birth to heated debates. Many people see the mass media, especially television, as the work of some sinister cabal that transforms individuals into zombies with an attention span no longer than that of a gnat. The "epidemic of mass culture," as Dwight MacDonald called it, is perceived by some critics as producing a superficial, shrivelled-up culture that corrupts everything it touches by offering numbing delights to the increasingly alienated masses. Still, there are others who optimistically defend the audience's ability to see through the commercialism and bad faith one finds in television, newspapers, radio and advertising. These critics defend the ability of the audience to be critical of the distortions and noisy sloganeering of the media, and they hold to a belief that the audience can generate from the media its own popular pleasures and their own resistant meanings.

We should be wary of these kinds of theoretical polarities. I believe one cannot easily answer the question about the impact of mass media and the power of the audience to generate its own popular meanings without a good deal of equivocation and contradiction and ambiguity. The fundamentally argumentative nature of a popular democratic culture is captured only sporadically by the mass media. The products of the mass media embody the rules and values of the market system that produce them; nevertheless, they offer the audience a limited opportunity to resist and define aspects of this culture. A more apt analogy is that of a tug-of-war between the forces of cultural indoctrination and the forces of popular resistance. One crucial key to teaching about the media is to understand the nature of these forces and tensions.

Today the cultural industries provide for people resources similar to those which several generations ago were rooted in folk tradition, the family, religion and other traditional institutions. The most accessible cultural materials used and circulated within culture, such as music, songs, visual images, fashion, entertainment and ideas are the outpourings of a varied and vast mass media apparatus. The culture produced largely by the mass media and selected by the audience is powerful because it addresses ideas simply, energetically and with a great deal of feeling. Admittedly, many of these cultural messages lack irony, verve and rely on mollycoddling formulas for arguments; yet their directness and accessibility are their major source of strength. The success of the mass media rests precisely on their ability to deliver a clear emotional message with mind numbing repetition and with a good deal of entertainment. The more powerful the feeling, the more important the message, and the more often it is repeated.

But there is a further point: the media have been successful in shaping our culture, partly because they have been able to deliver messages that make at least partial sense to a large segment of the audience. The recent spat over Murphy Brown is clearly indicative of the ability of the media to touch issues that resonate with a majority of people. Vice President Quayle may rail about the failure of Hollywood to reinforce family values—read heterosexual, middle class, white Christian values—but the reality is that a significant number of women are sole-support parents juggling work, home and child-rearing, usually with considerably less money than Murphy Brown. There is an on-going negotiation between the audience and the media, with the audience choosing those messages that reflect aspects of their everyday experiences and overlooking and rejecting other aspects that do not.

The cultural industries know quite well that their interests are closely connected with the moods and feelings of the majority of the people; that is why they are acutely sensitive to the nation's many publics. Virtually every product of the cultural industries is intent on satisfying some fundamental wish and desire of their audiences. Over the post-decade programming and advertising have become more specific in their demographics; that abstract and older concept known as the "mass audience" has now been broken down into more detailed and particular entities. The "mass" has become more segmented, with more individuated pockets of audiences who have specific interests, ambivalences, desires, anxieties and needs. The pressures of a consumer society, the extra strains imposed on women who are working and at the same time raising a family, the
biant racist racism throughout society, the economic depression and the effects of free trade which have led to plant shutdowns underemployment and mass unemployment, all of these forces affect individual audiences in a number of concrete and different ways.

These are issues of which the cultural industries do take account through a sophisticated technology of polling and the surveying of market preferences—and popular preferences are far more difficult to identify and control than many people believe. If the cultural industries failed to accommodate these factors and offered only escapist fare, their ability to grab and involve an audience would effectively evaporate. The corporate world is compelled to tap into these desires and anxieties and to examine the needs of their audiences. Nevertheless, the individual feelings and the political ideas of specific popular groups cannot be completely incorporated into the products of the cultural industries nor can they be disseminated without alteration by the media since that would represent an unwelcome challenge to their hegemonic power. The media's role has traditionally been to naturalize the status quo, make it look normal and commonsensical, by orchestrating a political and cultural consensus and by selling what Hans Enzensberger calls 'the existing order.' Public issues such as the Gulf War, the environment, feminism, ethnic, race, and gay and lesbian concerns are at best contained by the mass media. These issues are sometimes addressed obliquely and sometimes directly. Most of the times, however, these questions and others as important are defused, and, as in the recent case of the Gulf war, distorted.

We don't need to be inoculated against the media as much as we need to know how they work, who owns them, and how the underlying values and messages of shows, news, and films are structured. Who gets represented in the media and how? Who gets excluded and why? Media literacy should acquaint every student with how the media are organized, what policies have been promoted to regulate the media and how these policies can be changed in order to empower excluded publics, and how to use effectively the media to reach these audiences. Finally, media literacy should examine how different audiences use the messages of the media. One thing that becomes obvious is that teaching the media is not exclusively about the media, but about fundamental social and political issues that have been worked on, transformed and constructed by the media. The task of the instructor is to encourage a critique of the media's naturalized constructions and to stimulate a larger analysis of social, economic and political power.

How then have we fared in teaching the media? In Ontario we have moved perhaps farther than many other provinces. In September 1988 Media Literacy became a mandatory component of the English curriculum in Ontario High Schools. One key organization that has promoted the teaching of the media at the high school level has been the Association for Media Literacy (AML) which to a great degree has set the media
studies curriculum in the Ontario school system. The
AML is made up chiefly of high school teachers and
others who work in the media, and their self-appointed
task has been to encourage the critical study of the
media and to train teachers through conferences and
workshops, to analyze the media and popular culture. A
conference recently held in Guelph, Ontario was the
second that has been held by the AML, and both have
been attended by over 400 teachers from across Canada
and the US, with some participants coming from as far
away as Australia and Europe. Having been to both
conferences I have been generally impressed by the level
of energy, analysis and commitment, though I also have
some critical observations of the AML.

Founded in 1978, the AML has grown to a
membership of over 1200. When in 1987 the Ontario
Ministry of Education was revising its guidelines for
English, it felt a strong need to address the media and
they turned to the AML for guidance.

"When the Ministry,"

noted Barry Duncan, the current president of the
AML.

"came to us and said
we need to write a media
literacy resource guide," I guess that's when
we were institutionalized.
You may say co-opted. But the only way that
we were going to effect change was if we
worked through those traditional structures,
the Ministry of Education, school boards,
teacher's federations."

The recent publication of the Ontario Media Literacy
Resource Guide (1990), and the production of CBC's video
program inside the Box (1990), as well as the NFB's Media
and Society (1990) video program, have all been
prompted in some degree by the efforts of the AML. The
rationale behind media literacy is to enhance students' critical
facilities with regard to new and emergent
audiovisual technology, and to analyze the effective
presence of dominant ideologies: patriarchy,
commodification, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and
consumerism. The theoretical framework of the AML is
eclectic, influenced by McLuhanism, semiotics, feminist
theory and formalist analyses of the media. Much of this
talks into the tradition of media studies, but in this case
influenced by the engaged position of cultural studies
through the tradition of critical pedagogy in the writings
of Henry Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, and
Roger Simon, and more specifically by
way of Australia and England where
media literacy programs at the
secondary school level have been in
place a lot longer and where the AML
originally turned for its pedagogic
models.

The most important factor that
influences the development of media
literacy is classroom practice itself.
Those who teach media literacy quickly
realize that because they deal with
popular texts of which students often
have more knowledge than teachers,
they are being challenged to involve
themselves in a new kind of teaching
that calls into question the very power
and discipline of the classroom. Len
Masterman, an English educator, author
of Teaching the Media and a participant
in the past two AML conferences
emphasizes this crucial point:

"Studying the media,"

he said in an interview,

"actually involves a new way of
education. In traditional pedagogy the
student/teacher relation is part of what
Paulo Freire called the banking process of
education which does not encourage
critical understanding. The expertise of
the tutor is tied up with the education.
What is interesting about media analysis
is that immediately the relationship
changes. Suddenly both teachers and
students are together looking at the
object out there and we can talk about it
and discuss it. Media is transmitting
knowledge and education laterally. You
don't pass down knowledge but we are
creating our own knowledge with our
own critical interaction with whatever
text there is.

Knowledge is not something out
there that we accommodate ourselves to.
Knowledge is something that you
create, that you make your own, and you
do that through your own critical
interaction through the world. That's the
importance of media analysis. If you see
it as reality then you can't change it. If
you see it as a construct then you ask:
who is doing the construction, who is
behind it, who is producing it, for what
purposes, using what techniques, for
what audience, whose interests are
being served, and so on."

What this asks of teachers, of course, is
that they do not privilege a single discourse, or silence the multiple voices within the classroom. The analysis of the media and popular culture is not simply a reading of ideology from texts but a field of practices that can and should empower students through a radically different pedagogical encounter.

This kind of curriculum change means training and retraining teachers with new pedagogical skills. Many high school teachers, already set in their traditional classroom ways, will resist change and will teach media literacy in a way that will meet only minimum requirements. The accomplishments of the AMR are yet to be tested. One of the hurdles it must overcome is the structure of its own organization—its leadership is predominantly white, middle class and male, and seems to feel most comfortable dealing with the educational issues of its own constituency. The other hurdle is the educational structure itself which resists change and innovation to the curriculum.

Having taught media literacy, mostly to teachers at Atkinson College at York, there is another factor that must be added to the equation: there is really no curriculum development at the university level that has forcefully pushed for media literacy and integrated the areas of educational pedagogy, communication and media production so that teachers can be trained in the field. Media Literacy is often a course disconnected from other courses. And while as such it offers students some rudimentary analysis of how the media represent and frame issues, it fails to integrate media analysis with media production. Resources should be made available to people who want to take the next logical step and move on to the production of community-based alternative programs and develop useful skills that can be passed on in the classroom.

The fact that media studies is growing in Canada is heartening, though as I have noted, what gets defined as media literacy is often diffused across a disorganized curriculum both. I would venture to say, at the university and the high school levels. Even if one demystifies the media, there is also little sense that one must carry the investigation further into the areas of the family, school, the work place and politics. It is encouraging that at least in Ontario media literacy programs have eschewed an “inoculation approach” to teaching about the media. There is the opposite danger that in teaching media literacy and in stressing an

creative audience that produces its own unique popular culture we begin to attribute to the audience too much power to decode the messages in their own interests. When media literacy engages the popular forms of entertainment it must be careful that the resistance that is attributed to an audience—its perceived ability to read in its own interests—is real rather than imaginary. It is imperative not to succumb to a subjectivist and populist model that easily dismisses the power of the media and returns that power to the individual viewer and interpreter.

Media literacy must not stop at the classroom door. The most important work is done outside the classroom. For those interested in an activist position there are other venues, such as the Canadian magazine Adbusters and its parent organization the Media Foundation. Despite its smug moralism and simplistic attacks on consumerism, Adbusters does provide an alternative that, if not emulated, at least can be modified. Media analyst John Fiske in a letter to the editor printed in last issue of Adbusters had this to say: “Your message is wonderful and needs to be widely heard—but boy oh boy, do your tactics suck!” Fiske was complaining about the magazine’s irritating habit of positioning the audience as mindless couch-potatoes and frenetic consumers. Fair criticism. Adbusters and the Media Foundation have managed, on the other hand, to attract the attention of a generation of students where a slew of critical academics have failed. Part of the reason for the success of Adbusters is its unabashed cultural guerrilla tactics: a form of artistic terrorism that is both anarchic and locally based, directed against the media and cultural industries.

The most successful Adbusters campaign has been its production of what it calls television non-commercials. The tapes are made available to the public free with information about how to buy local media time and how much it costs. Individuals can then purchase a 30 second spot to show their non commercials, which deal with a range of topics: TV addiction, with a commercial aptly named “Tubeshield”; an anti-logging ad called “Talking Trees”; and an ad against consumerism called “American Excess.” So far this campaign has raised its share of controversy. Last year NBC, CBS, and ABC affiliates in Boston refused to show the commercials on the grounds that they represented advocacy advertising that was “too controversial.” In Canada, the CBC has recently relaxed its 30 year old policy against controversial advocacy advertising, and the Media Foundation will be testing the limits of the new regulations.

Adbusters promotes a form of “culture jamming”: a subversive attack on the symbolic power of the media which takes apart media generated images and turns them upside down, a kind of carnivalesque attack on the power of the media. Billboard bandits who alter billboards to make ironic and anti-commercial messages are the best examples of ways of disrupting the media and turning our familiar commercial world upside down. These kind of strategies are significant in that they allow people to get involved in an individual and immediate way in subverting the power of the media, but they should not be seen as a replacement for a first-rate education in the media and for the building of a wide network of local and oppositional cultures.

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