

The Struggle Over Media Literacy

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First published in the
Journal of Communication
Winter, 1998/ Vol. 48, #1

Abstract

The goal of media literacy is to help people become sophisticated citizens rather than sophisticated consumers. The authors argue against a purely “text-centered” approach in which media texts can be deconstructed and analyzed so we can choose among them. Instead, media literacy should integrate a textual analysis with questions of production and reception. An analysis of the structure of media institutions is particularly important if Americans are able to appreciate and argue for alternatives to a lightly regulated commercial media system. Media literacy is, therefore, a way of extending democracy to the place where democracy is increasingly scripted and defined.

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The argument we wish to make is, in essence, a simple one: Media literacy should be about helping people to become sophisticated citizens rather than sophisticated consumers. The mass media, in other words, should be understood as more than a collection of texts to be deconstructed and analyzed so that we can distinguish or choose among them. They should be analyzed as sets of institutions with particular social and economic structures that are neither inevitable nor irreversible. Media education should certainly teach students to engage media texts, but it should also, in our view, teach them to engage and challenge media institutions.

Although we see textual analysis as an integral part of media education, we suggest that in any media system, the reason why we see some messages and not others raises the question of power and the active construction of the social world. Our arguments here are prompted by comments made by a pioneer in the U.S. media literacy movement, Renée Hobbs, following the National Media Literacy Conference held in Los Angeles in October 1996. Hobbs was concerned that “for some participants, media literacy has been either deliberately or accidentally conflated with activism around media reform issues.” In her view, “it is inappropriate to lump media activism together with media literacy.” Instead, she argued that “at the heart of the media literacy movement is the open, questioning, reflective, critical stance towards messages.” Hobbs (1996) defined *media literacy* as “the process of accessing, critically analyzing media messages and creating messages using media tools. The goal of media literacy is to promote autonomy through the development of analysis, reasoning, communication and self-expression skills” (p. iii).

We argue that such avoidance of thorny political territory sidesteps widespread citizen concerns and misses an opportunity to demonstrate the valence and necessity of not merely understanding the world, but of changing it. In making this argument, we take our lead from the work of Len Masterman, for whom,

The democratization of institutions, and the long march toward a truly participatory democracy, will be highly dependent upon the ability of majorities of citizens to take control, become effective change agents, make rational decisions (often on the basis of media evidence) and to communicate effectively perhaps through an active involvement with the media. (Masterman, 1997, p. 60)

This is particularly important in a media system in which most messages are either explicitly or implicitly commercial – either straightforward advertisements or content designed to deliver audiences to advertisers in the most efficient and profitable way (see Barnouw, 1978; Jhally 1990). The mass media may be producing art, but they are also producing commerce. We feel that it is impossible to understand one fully without comprehending the other. Unlike some of the more public service-oriented broadcasting systems in Europe and elsewhere, the goals of a

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loosely regulated, commercial media have no educational, cultural, or informational imperatives. As much of the literature on the political economy of the media suggests, they are there to maximize profits and to serve a set of corporate interests. These imperatives provide a framework that helps to shape both the form and content of media texts (Bagdikian, 1997; Garnham, 1990; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Schiller, 1984, 1989, 1996).

We therefore argue for a contextual approach to media education, one in which the media text is a stage in a process of ideological production. As Richard Johnson (1986—87) suggested in his classic introduction to British cultural studies: Although we may be able to distinguish between a series of analytical moments (i.e., production of text, the text itself, reception of text), we need to be able to understand the determinations and connections between them. Like Johnson, we urge those involved in media education to think of the circuit of cultural production.

In what follows, we first argue, as briefly as we can, for a contextual rather than a text-centered approach. Such a perspective allows students to imagine ways of changing media systems and creates the possibility of a more democratic media. We next propose an emphasis on political economy in the face of the current trend towards text-centered approaches. Having stressed the importance of the production end of the circuit, we then consider the role in media education of teaching production skills. We conclude with a more practical consideration of the politics of media literacy, arguing against the pragmatism of text-centered approaches.

Textual Versus Contextual Approaches

The notion of literacy, particularly in relation to forms like television, is a complex one. The call for media education is in response not to a functionally illiterate media public, but to a public who are already voracious readers, viewers, and listeners. Media literacy is more than a matter of basic comprehension. Few people, after all, need to be taught how to make sense of television or, in most cases, to appreciate its “preferred meanings” (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980, 1986). On the contrary, the fact that so many have the ability to make sense of a barrage of disconnected, split-second images amidst a sophisticated range of realist conventions implies that-- in one, restricted sense at least-- a high degree of literacy already exists.

Media literacy is, therefore, more than a question of comprehension: It is concerned with the form and scope of that comprehension. Media literacy is not a simple matter of reading media well, whether in the traditional Leavisite sense (of distinguishing between “good” and “bad” texts, see Leavis, 1950), or in the more deconstructive sense of understanding textual strategies, possibilities, or pleasures (Barthes, 1974, 1975, 1988). There is more to media education than a framework for appreciating the finer nuances of the *Seinfeld* narrative, the montage of the opening credits of *ER*, or ways in which the extreme close-up shot in *60 Minutes* situates the spectator.

The distinction we would like to make is between a text-focused form of media literacy and a contextual approach, in which the unraveling of media texts takes place in the context of their production and reception. This is not to downplay the importance of textual analysis. It is at the level of the text, after all, that vital issues of representation are played out, and a sophisticated textual analysis can tell us something about both encoding and decoding (Hall, 1993). However, a textual analysis that takes place without examining the institutional, cultural, and economic conditions in which texts are produced and understood is necessarily limited.

Media literacy, in short, is about more than the analysis of messages, it is about an awareness of why those messages are there. It is not enough to know that they are produced, or even how, in a technical sense, they are produced. To appreciate the significance of contemporary media, we need to know why they are produced, under what constraints and conditions, and by whom.

Raymond Williams (1977) has documented the way in which early struggles over literacy were bound up with questions of power and control. In the early years of industry, workers were trained to read, but not to write. This allowed them to follow orders or read the bible for moral instruction, but not to express their own needs or interests. Although contemporary television audiences are not so consciously deprived, their situation is in many ways analogous. They are expected to consume rather than produce – to pick from the display offered by commercial television rather than debate the terms and conditions in which broadcasting takes place.

We therefore need to differentiate between a text-centered approach that restricts itself to proficiency in reading and

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Williams's (1974, 1980) more general form of cultural criticism in which both the reading and the production of texts are understood within sets of social relations. So, for example, Janice Radway's (1994) work on romances and the Book of the Month Club engages with determinations at every stage in the circuit of production and reception. As both Williams's (1974, 1980) and Radway's (1994) work suggests, an analysis of political economy should not be restricted to a narrow set of economic relations. The media are determined by a set of social and economic conditions that involve the key dividing lines of our culture, whether they be race, class, gender, sexuality, age, or mobility. This may be a complex point, but we are concerned that media education in the United States will flounder if it cannot locate media texts in a broad set of social realities.

Roland Barthes's (1977) well-known announcement of the Death of the Author is illustrative here. His argument is, in many ways, a celebration of textual analysis in which a focus on production or reception becomes a constraint on the practice of reading. Barthes's argument works because he is engaged with a particular site (i.e., traditional literary criticism) in which the politics of production are less central. He is concerned with the way literary texts, many of which have been around for some time, are read and understood, not with the production, marketing, and distribution of contemporary fiction.

Media studies, on the other hand, is forced to deal with limits and constraints, to explain absences, such as, for example, the comparative absence of a Black working class on U.S. television (Jhally & Lewis, 1992), and the consequences of those absences. To do so, it is required to go beyond the text.

If this contextual approach makes media literacy less "safe," it also makes it more enticing. So, for example, asking high school students to critique an advertisement by the Campaign for a Drug Free America may or may not encourage a vague cynicism about how those in authority view (or attempt to situate) American youth. This kind of cynicism is, on its own, unhelpful to both high school students and their teachers. If the teacher is able to go beyond the text, to point out that the Campaign for a Drug Free America is a consortium funded by America's leading alcohol, tobacco, and pharmaceutical companies (Cotts, 1992), the students are confronted with a more concrete political reality. The conclusions they draw may still be cynical, but it is likely to be a more directed cynicism, one born of analysis rather than attitude. Students can do more than play textual games, they can question the rules.

Similarly, an analysis of the news should be concerned not only with the way stories are constructed, but also with who is and who is not allowed to speak (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). A purely textual critique of television news is more speculative. For students to evaluate a news story seriously, they need to be able to go beyond the text, to consider the various stories that surround it, and thereby place it within a context that enables them to see the choices ABC or CNN have made.

Political Economy and Citizenship

If the political economy of the media seems a rather dry subject for students to consider, it need not be so. In our experience, students often find this level of analysis easier to grasp than a text-focused analysis. There is, in this respect, a healthy literature on political economy from which to draw (Bagdikian, 1997; Herman & McChesney, 1997; Schiller, 1984, 1989, 1996), much of which is extremely useful in allowing students to appreciate issues raised by a textual analysis. Pedagogically, this is less complex or arduous than it sounds. When automobile ads invariably show cars driving along empty roads, often across pristine landscapes with cloudless skies, we might ask students not only what is being left out of these images (traffic, pollution, smog), but why? In whose interest is it to see the automobile as a symbol of freedom, exploring rather than despoiling the U.S. landscape? What role do these interests have in media production? What are the consequences of seeing the automobile in only these terms?

Our experience indicates that students find it difficult to make sense of media messages as part of a vast, complex, and contradictory panorama made up of authorless ideologies. The politics of media texts become more tangible if they are seen as produced by real people for specific purposes. If this seems a perilously political approach, it is no less so than allowing students to see the media only on their own terms. It is a little like teaching a literary canon without allowing students to question the limits or foci of that canon. This is all the more troubling, perhaps, when the media canon is a product of a purely commercial rationale.

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This approach undoubtedly has political consequences. Just as political education allows citizens to think more critically and constructively about politics, media literacy can provide people with the wherewithal for thinking about the limits and possibilities of media systems. This is, needless to say, no small task, particularly in the United States, where exposure to foreign media is as limited as it is anywhere in the world.

U.S. broadcasting is highly distinctive. Unlike the public service models that influence broadcasting in most other industrialized countries, the history of radio and television in the U.S. is one of rampant commercialism (McAllister, 1996). In the United States, media corporations have, since the 1930s, been unusually successful in promoting an idea of broadcasting in economic rather than cultural terms, that is, as a business rather than a public service (McChesney, 1993). Media regulation in the U.S., particularly since the Reagan era, is conspicuous by its absence, yet many Americans find it difficult to imagine how it could be any other way.

This conceptual limitation has little to do with preference. Surveys do not suggest that Americans are especially happy or uncritical about television (Times Mirror, 1993). It is more a matter of education than imagination. It is difficult to propose changes to a system that is regarded as both inevitable and ubiquitous, and when the only alternative ever presented is the dull, propagandist fare of totalitarian regimes. Indeed, it could be argued that one of the successes of commercial broadcasting in the U.S. has been persuading Americans that there is no alternative, and that the American system is the only conceivable model in a society that values free speech and free expression. The European concept of public service broadcasting, with its possibilities of public funding, cross subsidy, and regulations to promote education and diversity, remains a well-kept secret. If the British system is capable of offering a wide range of quality programs with a comparatively small number of channels, one can only imagine the breadth and range of a public service system in a country with a media market as large and bountiful as the United States.

As we have suggested, this implicates the notions of citizenship and cultural democracy. When the British government sanctioned a fourth network (Channel Four) at the beginning of the 1980s, it was at the center of a public debate about the funding, remit, regulation, and purpose of a new television network. Although some were critical of the scope of that discussion (Blanchard & Morley, 1982; Lambert, 1982), most recent changes in the North American broadcasting landscape have occurred with little or no public input. The lack of public debate surrounding the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 is a graphic example of how a major restructuring of the media environment disappeared from public view. For us, what is most worrisome about this absence is less the lack of consultation and discussion than an ideological climate in which the public is so accustomed to being interpolated as mere consumers in a corporate world that any notion of democratic input seems difficult to grasp.

A brief anecdote told to us by our colleague, Michael Morgan, suggests the extent of the problem. During an exam, students were asked to identify which type of media system was most common in countries worldwide: (a) a government-run or public service model or (b) a commercial model. Before the exam, students were told that when they came to this question, they should not even bother to read it, since the correct answer was "a." Despite this apparently unambiguous advice, half his students proceeded to get the answer wrong. This is not a question of dullness (the students performed well enough overall), it suggests that the correct answer ran so counter to their own preconceptions that many disregarded not only what they had learned, but an answer they had just been told was correct. They were simply unable to imagine a world in which the U.S. model was atypical.

The blinkered, ideological assumptions behind this premise are fairly deep-rooted, and it will undoubtedly take more than a few media literacy classes to open American minds to other possibilities. Nevertheless, a media literacy curriculum in which issues of representation and content are taught alongside questions of political economy presents a challenge to regulators who have, in recent years, offered little more than the further deregulation of an already lightly regulated system. Debates about the regulation and subsidy of broadcasting can become public debates, rather than esoteric, lopsided discussions among media corporations, legislators, and a few poorly funded pressure groups.

Those currently campaigning for media reform-- whether to regulate children's programming so that it is not simply a marketing vehicle for the toy industry, or for a viable public television service, or for restrictions to

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monopoly ownership – are stymied not because their ideas are unpopular, but because, at a fundamental level, their relevance is not appreciated. Americans have become used to a system of top-down control, where a citizen's input is restricted to being a blip in the Nielsen ratings and where commercial considerations are inexorably paramount. Media literacy is, therefore, a way of extending democracy to the very place where democracy is increasingly scripted and defined.

The Use and Abuse of Technology

If we have focused on political economy, it is because we see a danger of the circuit of cultural production and reception becoming excluded from the discussion. Our argument, nevertheless, is not about teaching one thing rather than another, but about the integration of these levels of analysis. A focus on media production that excluded textual analysis would, in our view, be as problematic and fragmented as a purely text-centered approach.

In our experience, the way in which high school teachers may, without guidance, interpret the idea of media literacy suggests that this is a particular risk when teachers are fortunate enough to have the technology for practical classes in media production. There are instances when the seductive and pseudo-empowering nature of the technology works to exclude both a broad political economy and a critical textual analysis (Frechette, 1997). For teachers with access to cameras and editing facilities, this technology can be an indispensable component of an educational practice that highlights the question of representation. As Stuart Ewen (1996) put it,

Media literacy cannot simply be seen as a vaccination against PR or other familiar strains of institutionalized guile. It must be understood as an education in techniques that can democratize the realm of public expression and will magnify the possibility of meaningful public interactions. (p. 414)

In this ideal form, teaching production skills can be a vibrant part of a media literacy project. However, we would caution against an unthinking embrace. Although media production offers several pedagogical opportunities, it may close down as many analytical paths as it opens.

It is sometimes assumed, for example, that a practical knowledge of video production will help demystify the world of television and promote a more analytical, critical perspective. There is, however, little evidence to support such an assumption. To the contrary, we have found that students are apt to be seduced by the form, to try to imitate commercial television, and, when their efforts fall short, regard the work of professionals purely in terms of their aesthetic or technical prowess. At best, teaching production as purely a set of technical skills leads to an analytical immersion rather than a critical distance.

Unless the educational limits of teaching production are stressed, well-resourced schools might answer the call for media literacy simply by offering classes in media production. This would, in our view, blunt the critical edge of media literacy and allow it to be co-opted into a system of existing educational inequities. If media education is seen as dependent upon the purchase of video cameras and editing equipment, only those schools with sufficient means will be able to participate. Once media literacy is tied to the size of a school's capital budget, it risks becoming yet another symbol of cultural capital.

This is not to say that teaching production cannot or should not be a component of a media literacy project. It certainly is possible – even desirable – to incorporate production classes into a media literacy context, particularly with groups who already feel marginalized by mainstream media. The Educational Video Center in New York is a good example of such an initiative. Students are encouraged to use video technology to tell stories that are rarely heard on commercial television. This both enhances and develops their sense of critical reflection because they are not so much copying the medium as exploring its potential. This is possible because, at the EVC, production has been integrated into an overall theoretical approach that highlights the question of power.

The Politics of Media Literacy

As we have suggested, this approach to media education inevitably raises challenging political questions that, in some respects, it would be safer to avoid. Yet, we would argue, the feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction that

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many parents, teachers, and citizens feel is an explicitly political form of discontent – one that gives media literacy its sense of urgency and relevance.

Educators, whether parents or teachers, are tired of competing with television. They are tired of dismissing it as a mere distraction or else resenting it as the “evil twin” of universal education, the proverbial devil with little substance and all the best tunes. They are also tired of being offered the rather smug retort to their complaints that if parents or citizens are unhappy with what’s offered, they can always turn it off. Most of us, after all, like watching what we consider to be worthwhile, informative, or entertaining. We don’t want it to go away. Most educators are aware that the bumper-sticker invocation to “kill your television” has an ostrich-like impracticality. We want to improve it.

In the current political climate, the political options generally presented to deal with television have been, at best, fairly limited reactions to television’s perceived excesses. Calls for censorship, boycotts, or parental control of television viewing via new technologies such as the V-chip all take a fairly negative stance, one in which the basic political economy of loosely regulated commercial television remains intact. If we are to have a television system whose goals have more to do with public service than commerce – whether that means a greater diversity of images and representations, less commercial interruption, more documentary programming, or more educational children’s programs – we need to develop a citizenry that appreciates the politics of regulation and funding, to thereby imagine what television might be, and how the system might be changed to make it so. The challenge for media literacy, we would argue, is to make this possibility seem less remote.

Conclusion

Whatever this desire for change involves, it will never be fully addressed by a text-centered approach to media education. The demands that give the campaign for media literacy a certain urgency require an approach that addresses questions about social context and social impact. Parents concerned about violence or gender stereotyping in children’s programs are unlikely to be mollified by the thought that the Power Rangers can be read on a number of different levels, or even that their children may eventually come to understand the limits of such stereotypes. They want to know what influence such programming may have and how media producers might be persuaded to offer something less pernicious. They are, in short, concerned not just with the nature of the visual environment, but the forces that shape it. A contextual approach to media literacy allows students to see the media within a framework of interests and power relations. If some see a danger here of making media literacy an overtly political project, we take the opposite view. A text-centered approach that fails to address current concerns and dissatisfaction with the media risks losing the political impetus that gives it its current purchase.

For the past four years we have been involved with the Five-College Media Literacy Institute, which introduces teachers to the field of media literacy from the contextual, cultural studies perspective we have briefly outlined. As many in the field are aware, when teachers return to their schools, there is little financial, pedagogical, or structural support for the integration of critical questions around media into the existing curriculum. Creating these supportive environments is a political task, one that, as Wally Bowen (1994) argues with unapologetic vigor, needs to

connect to the interests and concerns of a broad range of scholars, teachers, health educators, parents and citizens who are seeking ways to critically challenge a media system that exploits children, reduces citizens to consumers, rewards those who poison public discourse, and perpetuates a high-consumption lifestyle that is slowly strangling the planet’s life-support systems. (p. 2)

The implementation of media literacy as a component of the K-12 curriculum will require enthusiastic community support. If a text-centered approach seems the politically safer option, it is also one, in our view, that is less likely to enthuse teachers and parents.

We acknowledge, however, that a contextual approach with an emphasis on political economy is likely to be less acceptable to some elements within the media literacy coalition than a text-centered approach. Indeed, there is no doubt that advocates for a certain form of text-centered media literacy have been successful in broadening support

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for media education, and there is certainly an argument that such pragmatism may be more likely to lead to the widespread implementation of media literacy.

As we have stated, this risks diluting the enthusiasm created by the desire for a public voice in decisions about media programming. The rush to embrace media literacy may also lead to its suffocating under the weight of its own incoherence. Even the commercial media industry – perhaps sensing that, in a period of minimal political interference or regulation, the only real danger to its unrestricted growth and profit maximization is a critically informed public-- is moving to initiate its own version. Thus, in the inaugural issue of *Better Viewing* magazine, Continental Cablevision (now MediaOne) invokes media literacy and the general empowerment of its viewers. In this self-serving appropriation, informed citizenship means little more than a weekly perusal of *TV Guide*. It is safe to assume that Continental Cablevision's notion of empowerment does not extend to the regulation of media monopolies or subversive notions about public service broadcasting (Cowie, 1995).

If this attempted colonization is breathtaking in its audacity, it is possible because the phrase itself, with its irresistible invocation of the most basic of skills, is noncommittal on how it applies to the comprehension of mass media. Norman Cowie (1996) described how, in the United States,

there is an uneasy consensus among media literacy proponents around a definition that was formulated in Canada in 1989, as “the ability to access, analyze, communicate and produce media in a variety of forms.” While this definition appears to serve as a rallying point for coalition building, there is a decided lack of consensus around its terms and practices. (p. 1)

In the face of attempts to build up a critical mass for reform, it is not surprising that the media literacy movement has avoided hard questions and debate around its core concerns. This avoidance of principle, however, comes at a price. It risks sapping the movement's vitality and replacing it with a vapid ambiguity.

Our advocacy of a contextual approach to media education is influenced by our experience of teaching these issues at the college level, where media analysis thrives in several disciplines in the humanities and liberal arts. The bureaucratic and political contexts of the K-12 situation are very different, and it is easy to see why a more limited, text-based “visual literacy” worked so well in the confines of this environment. As Wally Bowen (1994) put it:

The inherent conservatism of U.S. public school bureaucracies discourages the broader examination of media culture inherent in a cultural studies approach, with its emphasis on questions of political economy, power relations, hegemonic influence...The conventional wisdom said that entry into the politically charged minefield of the public school curriculum is achieved by slipping media literacy into the language arts “critical skills” curriculum. (pp. 1-2)

This defensive posture is perfectly understandable in those places where there is little existing institutional support to create an entirely new field. It has also led to the uneasy consensus that Cowie (1996) described among a disparate group of interests. When your numbers are small, why separate over internal doctrinaire disputes? The sheer scale of the U.S. educational system has meant that the focus on diversity of approaches, which Hobbs (1996) argued is the strength of the media literacy, is also our greatest weakness. We would argue with Cowie that, “the pluralism that underwrites this diversity has had a depoliticising effect on the very issues that media literacy seeks to address” and that “when one surveys the work that has been accomplished on the basis of a meaningful consensus in countries such as Canada, Western Europe and Australia, it is difficult to feel that our enduring lack of a consensus is viable” (p. 1).

For us, the risk lies in depriving students of a political education that is essential if they are to be capable of making rational decisions amidst a deluge of media messages. To evaluate those messages, students must learn to see them not simply as true or false, realistic or misleading, stereotypical or positive, but as authored voices with certain interests or assumptions about the world, voices that could be influenced or replaced. As Noam Chomsky (1989) noted, “Citizens of the democratic societies should undertake a course of intellectual self-defense to protect themselves from manipulation and control, and to lay the basis for meaningful democracy” (p. viii). It is important

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to note that we are not advocating propagandizing in schools for a particular political perspective. We are advocating a view that recognizes that the world is always made by someone, and a decision to tolerate the status quo is as political as a more overtly radical act.

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