

Media Literacy: From Activism to Exploration

Background Paper for the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy

Media literacy is emerging as an important focus of education as well as an influential social movement during the 1990s. This paper sketches its growth, particularly in the United States, suggesting important sources for future direction.

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Since the days of radio, the American public has been at once mesmerized by electronic media and fearful of their influence. In April, 1939, an editorial in *Ladies Home Journal* reprints a letter from an incensed parent who claims that children's radio programs "glorify crime and violence, teach a vocabulary which is strong, to say the least," and allow children to "hear stories of disobedience to parents, disregard of law, indifference to school, the condoning of illicit love affairs and the acceptance of divorce." The writer concludes by saying that the only way to deal with these problems is to "let the advertiser know what we want."¹

Though strident by most standards today, reports like this suggest that efforts by the public to influence electronic media have a long history in the United States—a history at least as long as the history of electronic media. Historical concern about the influence of media has led to at least three distinct strategies for protecting or empowering the public: 1) Regulation, 2) Pressure on advertisers and those responsible for creation of mass media, and 3) Media education.

All three strategies are unified by their common assumption that something about the mass media environment is problematic. The public must either be protected against media or empowered so that the negative effects of the mass media are lessened and the positive enhanced.

This paper sketches the growth of the latter *empowerment* model for media education, which itself has moved from a protectionist model to its current empowerment status. The protectionist view—which says that the public must be *protected* against the media—assumes that the public is not able to fend off the negative effects of media. Citizens are seen as empty vessels waiting to be filled with whatever flows through the square box. Early media educators, as well as those fighting for regulation and pressuring media creators, tend toward this view of citizens as empty vessels.

The empowerment model, in contrast, sees citizens as continuously *negotiating* meaning as they watch, listen or read. This view sees citizens with media sharing the power to determine the influence of media. As this new empowered viewer perspective takes hold, a major change of focus from media *activism* to media *exploration* is occurring in the United States.

Media Activism

David Buckingham has identified three distinct strands of reasoning used to encapsulate widespread concern about the effects of media: 1) "Moral panics," 2) "the plug-in drug," and 3) "consciousness industries."² Each of these perspectives, propounded by widely divergent groups, sees audiences as primarily powerless in the face of media messages, and therefore in need of enlightened activist protection.

“Moral panics” refers to perspectives which view the media as contributing to the erosion of moral values. Primary concerns in this approach are violence and promiscuous sexuality, but research as to whether television or other popular media actually contribute to degradation of moral values has proved inconclusive—even contradictory.³ Still, there is widespread public feeling that popular media negatively affect values.

“The plug-in drug” refers to Marie Winn’s book of the same name, in which she is concerned not so much with the content of television, but the ways television-watching affects family dynamics and keeps children from doing more edifying things. The book provides a barrage of anecdotes which illustrate ways that television promotes laziness, lowers mental ability and numbs emotions.

Finally, “consciousness industries” refers to British media educator Len Masterman’s assertion that television prepares us to be consumers through its constant repetition of commercials and fancy bedroom suites. Buckingham broadens the concept to include ideas such as the promotion of male-dominant gender roles and racist attitudes. Thus, media are seen as contributing to the perpetuation of a number of objectionable ideologies.

The argument can be concluded with the following:

Most arguments for Media Studies begin with two significant assertions. The first concerns the *amount of time* children spend with the media. Statistics on television viewing, for example, suggest that children today spend more time watching television than they spend in school. The second assertion appears to follow inexorably from the first. If the media are such a major element in children’s lives, it seems self-evident that they must exert a very powerful *influence* on their ways of thinking about the world—and as such, [we] simply cannot afford to ignore them.⁴

Indeed, these assertions are convincing. But most attractive for the situation in the United States is their persuasiveness across the political spectrum. Those on the Right, with their “moral panic” ideologies, as well as those on the Left, who see the media perpetuating problematic “consciousnesses:” consumerism, sexism, etc., are nonetheless united in a view of the media as a powerful and predominantly negative influence.

This has been used to great advantage in establishing the need for media education in Britain and other countries, and will likely need to be used in the U.S. as well. However, Buckingham points out that a distinction must be made between “simpler, more rhetorical arguments which may be of use in promoting Media Studies, and the more complex understanding which should inform classroom [and community educational] practice.”⁵

In other words, the *media influence* argument is perfectly adequate—and necessary—in *selling* the idea of media education, but in practice it results in an *activist* stance in which certain ideologies about the media are pushed as a way of protecting students from “bad” ideologies, rather than an *exploratory* stance in which participants probe their relationship with media, trusted to raise issues and questions in response to media “texts.” The latter must be the focus of practical media education efforts in the U.S.—it must encourage *creative exploration* rather than *activist protection*. Thus, media education efforts in the U.S. must move from *activism to exploration*.

The Protectionist Model

Though there is a history of media activism in the United States, media education has failed to secure a strong standing. The reasons for this are related to the public perception of *media influence* already mentioned. Americans have assumed that media exert a profound *long-term* influence which is predominantly negative. As a result, media education efforts in the U.S. have been *protectionist* efforts affording protection against the harmful effects of media.⁶ There are two principle variations on the *protectionist* model.

On one hand, some say that media education must instill in students a love for classical, authentic “culture”—love of the classics of literature, art and music. The argument goes that there is a vast gulf between the tastes and intellectual rigor needed to understand true art as compared with the virtual lack of prerequisite demands called for by popular media. So, in this view, the purpose of media education is to teach students to appreciate and demand true art rather than media art. This bias against popular media is one important reason media education has not been seen as legitimate.

For example, David R. Sirota, a consultant to one of four U.S. Office of Education-funded media education projects in the late 1970s,⁷ and a professor at New York University’s School of the Arts, states that “from the vantage point of those who are most concerned with television as corrupter of culture, i.e. the arts, [television’s] introduction into mainstream school life would be a disaster.”⁸ Though he admits that “developing a critical viewer, a more prudent and vigilant viewer is a noble ambition, for by better understanding television and its structure, its influence might be mitigated.”⁹

Another variation of this view is propounded by Neil Postman in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman argues that reading is a logical process requiring concentration and judgment. To read, we consume ideas left to right, making continual judgments of truth and falsehood. Watching television, however, is completely different. By nature it is discontinuous: Heart-wrenching stories of flood and famine are followed by happy people wearing deodorant. Through this process of disconnected stories and emotions, habits of logic and thinking are numbed.

Postman also admits, however, that there is merit in the idea of media education—though he questions its practicality. Says Postman: “Bertrand Russell used to utter a lovely phrase. He said that the purpose of education was to teach each of us to defend ourselves against the ‘seductions of eloquence.’ In the realm of the word, we learn the specific techniques used to resist these seductions: logic, rhetoric, and literary criticism. What worries me is that we have not yet figured out how to build defenses against the seductions of imagery.”¹⁰

Again we see a *protectionist* approach for dealing with the essentially negative impact of popular media. As a result, media education has often been seen as irreconcilable with effective mainstream education.

The Discriminating Viewer

There is a second variation of the protectionist model, however, which has offered much more promise. This model is more sympathetic toward media, arguing that mass media can and often do create worthy art. The goal of media education, in this view, is to accentuate the positive in media. Thus media educators have been able to teach *discrimination* among media, looking for the best and avoiding the worst.

Early on, this was usually attempted by means other than education, for example, by encouraging regulation or by pressuring advertisers through the threat of boycotts. The goal

was to get the worst programs off the air. However, one organization, as far back as 1935, took a different approach.

This organization was the *American Council for Better Broadcasts (ACBB)*,¹¹ which focused on raising “the level of thinking and taste”¹² of the public so that it would, in turn, demand higher quality programs. FCC Commissioner Abbott Washburn summed this up well at the annual ACBB Conference in 1979: “TV literacy is the road to excellence. The solution is long-range. It will take years to develop a literate, critical-demanding audience. But the process, happily has begun... The end result will be more programs of lasting value. The increased number of discriminating viewers will mandate this. If fluff isn’t watched, it won’t be on.”¹³

This ideal of *discrimination* was an important element of every media education project in the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s—a time of particular interest to those interested in U.S. media education efforts because a flurry of activity resulted from several development grants. Examples of the discrimination ideal include a project funded by the Idaho Department of Education in 1978 (Milton Ploghoft and James Anderson), which identified critical “receivership skills,” necessary, in part, so that viewers would be able to “identify and understand motives and purposes for attending to TV programs,” in order to “be more receptive to some content and less open to other ideas and images.”¹⁴ Another project, a primary school curriculum developed by the *Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL)* beginning also in 1978, listed as one of its goals that students be able to “make judicious use of viewing time.”¹⁵ And a related project designed for high school students sought to enable youth to become “discriminating television viewers,” making choices—“in viewing and among content.”¹⁶

These excerpts illustrate well the centrality of the discrimination model in U.S. media education. It is important to note, however, that the ideal of discrimination still suggests a basically passive role for the viewer in the process of *making meaning* with media. That’s why, in the discrimination model, it is so important to watch only the best shows: because media are so powerful (and viewers so weak in comparison) that their influence is irresistible.

Examples of this passive viewer model are most obvious in research and curriculum involving younger children. Probably the most famous of these are Dorothy and Jerome Singer’s research, which showed connections between television watching and aggressiveness, as well as between television watching and positive behaviors such as cooperation, creativity and language development.¹⁷ However, the most important finding was that children’s attitudes and behaviors related most closely to “the presence and behavior of parents when the television was turned on.”¹⁸

The implications of this for media education with children are illustrated well in a study done by SEDL, which found that when watching an educational television show, mediation by a teacher significantly increased children’s learning.¹⁹ Thus, in the first of four projects funded by the United States Office of Education (USOE) in 1978, SEDL emphasized adult mediation of television as central to effective media education for primary school children. Adult interaction with television—not just adult presence while children watch—was seen as necessary for significant learning. Children were seen as basically *passive* viewers without adults present. But it was this very idea—that media-users are basically passive—that was challenged by bringing television and other mass media into the classroom.

This is seen first in two of the other projects funded by the USOE in 1978, as well as in other projects begun at about the same time. Some of these were: the project developed by WNET/13 in New York (junior high), the project developed by Far West Laboratory in San Francisco (high school), the Idaho Department of Education project, and a project called *Television Awareness Training (T-A-T)*, developed by the *Media Action Research Center*.

Several organizations including the National PTA used these materials in local media education efforts.

Uses & Gratifications

Each of these projects were organized around what has been called *uses and gratifications theory*.²⁰ While all the projects include viewer discrimination as an important element of their desired outcomes, uses and gratifications theory represents an important step toward an understanding of a more active viewer, in effect saying that “television does not ‘do things’ to people, but rather, people ‘do things’ with television.” The content of a show—up to this point often the central concern of media education—is only important if it helps attain some gratification for the viewer.²¹ James Anderson describes these approaches:

[They] first direct students toward their motives for viewing television. Next, they help students develop standards by which television use can be evaluated as a gratification for those motives. Finally, they provide practice in the process of making decisions about media use.²²

The middle step, that of helping students develop standards, involves the development of critical thinking skills, applying these to media. For example, the WNET project (grades 6-8), includes activities designed to recognize main ideas, classify details, recognize and interpret literary elements (characterization, plot, conflict, setting, mood, tone, theme, point of view), identify symbolism, distinguish fact and opinion, identify stereotypes, recognize dialects, determine effects of media, and develop criteria for evaluation.²³ These skill-building exercises are designed to “provide students with the inner resources for making their own decisions about the television programs they watch,”²⁴ rather than imposing the teacher’s standards.

In fact, the written materials for these projects make a point to caution teachers against imposing their values on students. The curriculum guide concerning commercials developed by the Idaho Department of Education for elementary children reminds teachers: “Children are capable of making market decisions to meet their needs. Their criteria may not agree with ours but are usually justified.”²⁵

Another example of the increasing acceptance of *uses and gratifications theory* was a change made in 1983 by the *National Telemedia Council* (formerly the *American Council for Better Broadcasts*) in their listener-viewer opinion poll. Before 1983, the project was called the *Look-Listen Opinion Poll*, and it was just that—a compilation of viewer and listener opinions about programs. In 1983, however, a new project replaced it, called *Project Look-Listen-Think-Respond*. Instead of a straightforward opinion poll, it now became a tool for critical and reflective thought about media. As in the other projects mentioned, the purpose of the new format was to help children develop *their own* criteria for viewing and listening.

It was around this same time also (1975-1982) that critical thinking applied to media began to show up occasionally in college mass media courses. Since there were few appropriate textbooks, however, the onus for developing coursework was usually on the shoulders of college professors, many of whom combined critical thinking with their already-existing media production classes (Broadcasting, Television Production, etc.). For the most part, however, one could still manage to graduate from a college communications department in the United States in 1992 with little or no training in critical thinking about media.

This was because when funding for the four USOE seed grants ended in 1982, progress in media education in the United States virtually stopped. One of the USOE projects, the Boston University project designed for post-secondary education, even won the dubious distinction of Senator William Proxmire’s *Golden Fleece Award*, which criticizes wasteful

government spending, for what critics claimed was simply “teaching college students how to watch television.” (Though it was much more than that!)

Cultural Studies

However, in other countries, particularly Britain, Canada and Australia, media education developed at least two additional strands. The first of these, *cultural studies*, is related to the concept of media as “consciousness industries” mentioned earlier in this paper, where it was suggested that the view is primarily *protectionist* because it implies citizens must be *protected* against objectionable ideologies like consumerism or sexism. The cultural studies approach developed quickly in Britain, where the educational climate made it easier to implement. There media education drew heavily on a view which saw media decisions related primarily to economics. Thus, British educator Len Masterman, in a presentation made in Canada in 1990,²⁶ felt justified in saying that the single most important area of study for media education is *advertising*—in all its dimensions—especially those we don’t usually think of as advertising like t-shirts, public relations stories and planned news events.

One group of U.S. organizations that similarly questioned the economic underpinnings of media, though more indirectly, were alternative media—or *media arts*—organizations. These groups emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s across the country.²⁷ The apparent impetus for their growth was the monopoly on filmmaking held by the major networks and major film production companies,²⁸ as well a desire to give disparate cultural voices a platform to speak out. Appalshop, for example, a media arts organization in Eastern Kentucky, was originally created to counter the stereotypes seen in numerous media renditions of “hillbillies.”²⁹

One of the continuing strengths of these organizations today is their ability to provide a critique of American culture by presenting something other than mainstream perspectives in media products. And media arts organizations have routinely combined the showing and producing of alternative films with community education efforts, teaching political and social analysis of media as well as media production skills.³⁰

The political side of this suggests one of its most important elements: It positions media education as necessary for political awareness and, therefore, *democracy*. As Len Masterman says: “It is no exaggeration to say that party leaders are now packaged and presented to us as though they were packets of soap or cornflakes.”³¹ So, according to Masterman, media education is needed in order to *deconstruct* packaged politicians and insure an informed citizenry.

But the cultural studies approach is not limited only to political or even economic questions. George Gerbner suggests that media study is in fact “tantamount to reinstating liberal education, for it liberates the individual from an unquestioning dependence on the immediate cultural environment by looking forward and backward to science, arts, the classics, and the achievements of humankind.”³² Cultural studies, his idea suggests, broadens the meaning of the word “culture” to include the entire social environment.

Thus, a shopping mall, for example, becomes a *text* through which students are encouraged to compare assumptions about public space in a mall to the ancient Greek public square. Or the same shopping mall can be compared to a series of television commercials to determine how each reinforces the other. Or a physics textbook becomes an object for analysis, using other texts, public understanding of science, and a Carl Sagan PBS special to judge its accuracy or usefulness.

These kinds of connections became routine in the cultural studies model of media education efforts in Canada, Britain and Australia during the 1980s.

The Active Viewer

The other strand of media education that developed outside the United States was *audience theory*. In places like Ontario, Canada, where teachers were practicing media education regularly, it became apparent that the protectionist model just didn't work. Among other things, students weren't interested in "good" TV—they wanted to talk about *Fresh Prince* and *Beverly Hills 90210*. And the critical thinking ideals, with constructs such as "receivership skills," though useful, sometimes seemed irrelevant. Students could identify stereotypes and production techniques such as *dissolves*, but these skills had little impact on their eventual use of media. Even the cultural studies model seemed forced at times, as teachers chose media "texts" that were obviously racist or sexist so that students had little choice but to mimic the teacher's viewpoint.³³

At the same time, a new theory of *active viewership* was gaining acceptance among media educators. One of the theorists who heralded this movement was Australian John Fiske. About television, Fiske says: "A convenient place to start is with the simple notion that television broadcasts programs that are replete with *potential meanings*"³⁴ [italics added]. The producer of the show may *prefer* that the viewer adopt a particular meaning, Fiske said, but viewers are not predictable. In fact, the meaning of a show can be interpreted in completely different ways by different viewers. The viewer can even choose interpretations that are *not* intended by the producers.

By inference this also means that students may be more sophisticated in their understandings of media than previously imagined. Buckingham says:

Teaching about teenage magazines, for example, has rarely advanced beyond the routine condemnation of 'sexism' to investigate the complex and contradictory ways in which they are actually read, particularly by girls. The possibility that the magazines may serve positive functions for girls, or that they might already be read in a relatively distanced or critical way, is effectively discounted. Underlying the seemingly open invitation to analyze and discuss is the implicit assumption that the magazines are responsible for imposing false ideologies on their readers, and that readers simply swallow them whole.³⁵

One of the more successful strategies used to counteract this charge and take seriously the active viewer theory is the *inquiry model*. In this approach, the teacher tries to explore a media "text" without any pre-conceived agenda. A 30-second commercial is shown, for example, after which the teacher asks "What issues does this raise?"³⁶ Students are then responsible for asking their own questions of the media *text*. Then students make educated guesses as to correct answers, finally taking on assignments aimed at proving or disproving their hypotheses. Reports on use of this model in Canada are encouraging.

Where We Are Now

Unfortunately, The inquiry model—and other student-centered teaching strategies like it—demand a teaching paradigm markedly different from that practiced in most U.S. schools today. The typical U.S. model is pragmatic and skill-based, relying on rote learning and lecture.³⁷ One explanation for this is the emphasis on *job skills* in many U.S. schools, which results in the exclusive perpetuation of job-related mass media classes like Journalism and Broadcasting.

Similarly, much recent emphasis has been placed on the use of computers in schools, partly because computers also represent a pragmatic, job-related skill. Most schools now incorporate computers in learning, though the ratio of computers to students (30:1), and low computer competence among teachers (many of whom seldom use them) make their use infrequent and unimaginative. Sadly, computers are often only used to drill students in basic spelling or math.

In addition, media use in the classroom is often limited to teaching *with* media rather than *about* media. Videotapes, for example, are often used in a way very analogous to textbooks: Students are shown a videotape, then expected to regurgitate its content in a quiz or test. There is little exploration of how the videotape or the video format itself might color the content. Fortunately, the more frequent use of video in the classroom means that many U.S. teachers are now comfortable teaching *with* media, but teaching *about* media—as media educators do in other countries—is still rare.

Furthermore, the issue of *change* in U.S. schools—badly needed to implement media education—has itself become a contentious issue. The back-to-the-basics movement, in vogue for the past decade, is one example: The public is unfriendly to the idea of student-centered learning because educators, parents and politicians alike are more comfortable returning to older ways—which often means lecture and “drill sergeant” learning.

The challenge to media education is perhaps best illustrated in the divisive issue of *textbooks*.³⁸ Some activists are focused on assuring that fair representation is provided in textbooks for all races, nationalities and ethnic groups. Others are equally insistent that “history should not be changed.” These attitudes present clear evidence that the public assigns great power to media (textbooks are media too). But the actions of those involved make it further clear that *protection* is the first line of defense. Thus, parents and others continue to want strict, controlled, *protectionist* learning environments for their children.

Signs of change, however, are discernible in the less traditional arenas of religious and corporate education. Building on the work of Brazilian educator Paolo Freire, more liberal elements of the church—both Protestant and Catholic—have been enacting student-centered learning for more than a decade.³⁹ Says Freire: “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.”⁴⁰

The result is a large group of educators who, if not in fact using a more democratic style of teaching, at least are struggling to do so. In fact, many public school teachers share their concern because of exposure to Freire while students themselves—or through exposure to related models such as *experiential learning*.

In addition, corporate trainers have embraced strategies such as *adult learning theory*, which recognizes that different people have different learning styles. Thus, one person may learn better through rote repetition, while another learns best through discussion with co-learners. And since these trainers must often concern themselves with results—even quantifying learning in dollar terms—the most effective learning strategies win out. These have inevitably been *individual* and *experiential*—exactly what is needed to expand the definition of media education beyond job-based, rote learning.

These trends have been followed carefully by several national organizations which have emerged as signposts in the U.S. media education movement. The *National Telemedia Council (NTC)*, the oldest of these, is currently building a national database of media educators, organizations and resources.⁴¹ This is one of the most important projects underway for the future of media education. In addition, *NTC* continues its *Project Look - Listen - Think - Respond*, mentioned earlier.

Two newer organizations have also taken on leadership roles: the *Center for Media and Values* in Los Angeles and *Strategies for Media Literacy* in San Francisco. These organizations have been responsible for practically all new curricula in media education since 1990.

The *Center for Media and Values*, created in 1989, grew out of perhaps the strongest advocate of the cultural studies approach in the United States during the 1980s, *Media&Values* magazine. *Media&Values*, founded in 1977 by Elizabeth Thoman, earned a reputation in the 1980s for consistently providing key analysis of media from a cultural

studies perspective—at a time when most of this work was happening outside the United States. Topics of analysis included the media's connection to violence, racism, militarism, elections and a host of other social issues.

Starting in 1990, the Center began publishing Media Literacy Workshop Kits™ along with each issue of *Media&Values*. These kits include lesson plans, handout masters and occasional videotapes and are designed for use in adult education.

One of the Center's most ambitious projects, however, is a recently-published media literacy primer for high schools called *Living in the Image Culture*. This kit has been adapted for use in Catholic schools and parishes in a project funded by the Catholic Communication Campaign of the U.S. Catholic Conference in collaboration with the influential *National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA)*. It is expected to reach a large number of the 18,000 Catholic parishes and 8,000 Catholic schools in the U.S.

The other new organization, *Strategies for Media Literacy*, created in 1988, focuses exclusively on classroom education. Activities include teacher workshops and sharing of ideas and resources for teaching through its newsletter. Strategies' most important contribution was the 1991 publication of *Media & You*, a curriculum to teach media literacy skills for elementary grades. Written by Strategies' executive director Kathleen Tyner and Donna Lloyd-Kolkin of *Far West Laboratory*. *Media & You* is the only current, comprehensive teaching guide available from a U.S. publisher for lower grades. Strategies recently released another major contribution, a videodisk-based exploration of media and advertising, which uses a Macintosh computer to access video examples and play them back on a television.

In addition, 1992 has been a year of particular activity in U.S. media education, with three major conferences taking place, one co-sponsored by the *National Alliance of Media Arts Centers (NAMAC)*, another co-sponsored by the *National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)*, and another series of conferences co-sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. These were in addition to the second conference of Ontario's *Association for Media Literacy*, which had more than 500 participants—80 from the United States (compared to less than 20 at the first *AML* conference two years previous).

The NCTE conference was significant not only because the NCTE is the largest professional teachers organization in the United States. The conference also represented an important step: By sponsoring a conference on media education, two NCTE sub-organizations, the *Commission on Media* and the *Assembly on Media Arts* took seriously a position they have offered for many years: that various media—not print only—ought to be part of the accepted English curriculum. And because the conference was co-sponsored by *Educational Video*, an alternative media organization in New York, it combined practical lessons in media production with media education theory. This was the first time these groups in the NCTE went beyond the publishing of position papers on the need for media education to taking action, in this case sponsoring a teacher-centered, practical conference on how to teach about media.

The purpose of the Annenberg conferences is to summarize current knowledge about the effects of media and to chronicle current work in media research and education. The second of these conference, held in April, brought together media educators, media producers and media effects researchers, organizing them into four task groups related to concerns about television content for children: information/education, violence, advertising, and stereotypes. Participants drew on their expertise to make several recommendations, including the creation of a resource directory for media education and a push to elevate the sense of urgency for media literacy in the national agenda.

The latest Annenberg conference, involving media effects researchers only, was held in November, and at least one additional conference is planned before a report on findings is

published in 1993. This report should prove important as the United States moves toward a more coherent vision of needs, goals, and definitions for media education.

The other U.S. conference was perhaps the most important in terms of the practical, day-to-day future of media education in the United States. This conference was actually sponsored by three organizations: *NAMAC, Strategies for Media Literacy* and a media arts center in Houston, *Southwest Alternate Media Project*. The conference was organized to address a perceived lack of communication between educators, artists and policy-makers in their work on media education. It resulted in the formation of *NAME, the National Alliance for Media Education*, a "coalition of artists and educators to promote media education in the U.S."⁴²

NAME immediately secured a \$50,000 seed grant from the NEA Media Arts Division to establish a coordinator and begin work on development of a network of media educators, artists and organizations. In addition, NAME is now working on a public education project aimed at putting media education on the national agenda. Their feeling is that media education will remain difficult to implement locally until it is part of the national educational agenda.

In addition, NAME is working to create a directory of resources for media education. Rather than create its own database, however, NAME is negotiating with the *National Telemedia Council (NTC)* to merge its list of names, organizations and resources with the NTC database. Other organizations, including the *Center for Media and Values*, have endorsed this idea also.

As all this makes clear, the present is an exciting moment for media education in the United States. However, one non-U.S. organization deserves mention also because of its contribution to U.S. efforts: Ontario's *Association for Media Literacy (AML)* is now recognized as a world leader in media education. *AML* leaders have published several major secondary media education textbooks since 1988. The *AML* is responsible for much of the growing U.S. knowledge in the field, either through direct imitation or through having introduced U.S. leaders to British and Australian educators. The fledgling U.S. media education effort owes much to the pioneering efforts of the *AML*.

Summary and Recommendations

The above organizations and trends show that a media education movement is indeed emerging in the United States. While there are still many questions as to the shape and content of the movement, several developments are clear:

- v At least two major advances have taken place in media education over the past ten years (largely without input from the U.S.): *Audiences* are now seen as much more *active* than before, and the *cultural studies* approach has become an important focus of media education.
- v The concept of an active audience demands a democratic, individualized learning environment more similar to the experiential learning taking place in some American churches and businesses than to the rote, lecture-centered learning taking place in many American classrooms. Thus, effective media education may require major reform in American schools.
- v Significant work has been done lately in the U.S. and in Canada. This work is nurturing the field of media education, pushing it beyond its current precarious position in the United States onto a more stable footing.

However, the most important issue still facing media education in the United States is *convincing others of the importance of media education*. The media influence theory, though problematic because of its tendency to result in *activist-protectionist* media

education, offers the most promise in convincing the American public about the need for media education. It also offers the opportunity to recapture the education agenda from more conservative thinkers opposed to change by acknowledging their concern about the influence of media. However, several other arguments for the importance of media education are compelling and need to be mentioned:⁴³

- v Media education is important because it encourages reflection on personal values.

The underlying concern implied in the media influence theory is a concern for values—parents are afraid that media are teaching immorality, sexism, etc. In media education, children are encouraged to challenge and question the values and messages with which they are confronted. No media “text”—even a textbook—is left unchallenged.⁴⁴

- v Media education is important because it involves emerging technologies—including computers—in learning.

The merging of digital technology and media make it appropriate and essential to include computer training as well as media production training in schooling. Personal computers are now a platform for media production, allowing sophisticated manipulation of images—even the creation of movies—with a computer.

Significant also, however, is the centrality of these technologies in the future workplace. Media education, by including as part of its goal the effective use of these technologies, can thus make its case even stronger.

- v Media education is important because it offers a needed program of educational *reform* that encourages critical thinking, problem solving and creativity.

Media literacy education is more than just a discrete topic to be added to the curriculum of U.S. schools. It is, as well, an entire philosophy of teaching that encourages questioning and *exploration* as an integral part of the learning process *all across the curriculum*: Teachers not only teach *with* media, they teach *about* media: They encourage skepticism about all media “texts.” Thus media education has the potential to reform education, making it more open to creative and critical thinking, and more open to a democratic teaching style.

- v Media education strengthens democracy.

Media education strengthens democracy by providing tools for political analysis. In addition, because media education is more student-centered and therefore more *democratic* itself, it encourages democratic attitudes that will carry forward to adulthood. Democracy in the classroom encourages democracy in public life.

A Definition of Media Literacy

Though this paper has dealt primarily with the need for new classroom educational strategies for children, its conclusions are equally applicable to adult education. However, adult media education needs a somewhat different emphasis: It must question the common assumption that the influence of media is mostly negative. This is not to say that energy should be spent trying to convince adults that media are not bad (frankly, that would be a waste of time), rather North American adults need to experience their own as well as their childrens’ active reading of media. In this way, they will become convinced that people can enhance their ability to engage and filter media to their own ends.

Beginning with this understanding of more active media “readers,” then, a tentative definition of media literacy for the U.S. context can be proposed:

Media literacy is the ability to analyze, augment and influence active reading (i.e., viewing) of media in order to be a more effective citizen.

The three verbs in this definition are important and correspond roughly to: *consumer* skills, *user* skills and *producer* skills:

Analyze (*consumer skill*): The media literate person recognizes that she is actively negotiating meaning with media “texts.” In addition, she is aware of factors which affect that negotiation, including personal factors like gender, race, skills, and how she is wanting to use the “text.” She is also aware of text-related factors like the medium through which it is presented, its ideology and the underlying motivations of the producers of the text. Finally, she is aware of cultural factors which influence reading of the text, such as the economic and political climate (see attached diagram, fig. 1).

Augment (*user skill*): The media literate person is able to locate appropriate additional resources to further study any topic of interest—for example, a political story in the newspaper. This ability includes being able to effectively use appropriate technology such as computers, VCRs and videotape recorders (for the capturing of firsthand knowledge).

Influence (*producer skill*): The media literate person is able to deliberately change the impact or meaning of messages—for example, a television news report that suggests *all students at Clairmont High School are vandals*. Thus, the media literate student, armed with appropriate hardware, can create a narrative that supports her viewpoint that most Clairmont students are not vandals.

As this definition makes clear, the central concept behind it is the desire to create effective citizens—that is, citizens who are able to analyze and use media messages as well as create their own messages. The definition also takes seriously the *active viewer* concept, while at the same time securing a place for all flavors of media education presently practiced in the United States, including computer and technology education as well as production-oriented high school and college classes such as Journalism and Broadcasting.

Other Recommendations and Future Issues

The following additional recommendations are also suggested:

- v The United States needs a national network of media educators to share important developments in media education. The work of the *National Telemedia Council* is a good start and needs to be supported and strengthened, perhaps with additional seed funding to expand or include a supplement to *NTC’s* newsletter—even combining it with newsletters of other organizations (NAMAC and the NCTE’s Assembly on Media Arts come to mind). The *NTC* should also be encouraged to include adult education as well as classroom education as a priority.
- v Similarly, an *international* network of media educators is also needed. A good start has been made in this regard by the *Jesuit Communication Project* in Toronto, but it also needs considerable support.
- v For now, the U.S. should draw heavily on the work of the *Association for Media Literacy* (secondary media education), and the *British Film Institute* (primary media education) for teaching strategies and conceptual structure.

The following issues need to be addressed for the growth of media education in the United States:

- v **Entry point.** Most current media education models see media education infused throughout the school curriculum and throughout all grades (including preschool), but this level of implementation is not likely in the foreseeable future. Therefore, *where is the best place for beginning implementation of media education in U.S. schools?* In the Canadian model, secondary English has been the entry point. Where should we focus our energies in the U.S.? Should we also begin with secondary English?

Possible resources: The experimental media education program started in 1991 at the Oyster River Elementary School in Durham, New Hampshire. Also, the program now being implemented at K-12 Athens Academy in Athens, Georgia.⁴⁵

- v **Leadership training.** Who will provide training for teachers? There is a serious need for degree programs in media education to train professors who will then train teachers. Several high profile universities need to establish this as a priority. For now, Ph.D. candidates in media education must go to other countries.

In addition, there is a need for *in-service* training for current teachers. Several individuals and organizations, including *Strategies for Media Literacy* and some media arts organizations have been providing this so far.

Finally, a training program needs to be established to train adult leaders in churches and community organizations for *adult* media education. The *Center for Media and Values* and organizations like *Citizens for Media Literacy* (Asheville, NC) may be resources here.

- v **Role of professional media.** What role will reporters, producers, major networks (including CNN), and major cable providers play in encouraging media education? Promotion of the concept of the *active viewer* as well as financial support—at least until states take over—are needs.
- v **Classroom resources.** A minimum set of appropriate classroom research resources for media education needs to be devised. Teachers cannot “release” students to study media in individual ways without these resources. A media education reference CD-ROM is one suggestion. Who will develop this and who will fund it?

An important resource in this effort is the *Center for Media and Values*, which has collected a substantial resource library and has developed a detailed classification index for media and related social issues. This index could be very useful for media research—particularly for the cultural studies approach—if a plan and funding for its implementation can be established.

- v **State curriculum guidelines.** Media educators must work to get media education included in statewide curriculum guidelines. This was an important turning point in the media education efforts in Ontario for the *Association for Media Literacy*.

Special thanks for assistance and input to: Charles Firestone and Katharina Kopp, *Aspen Institute*; Elizabeth Thoman, *Center for Media and Values*; Barry Duncan, *Association for Media Literacy*; Marieli Rowe, *National Telemedia Council*; Julian Low, *National Alliance of Media Arts Centers*; James Brown, *University of Alabama*; Kathleen Tyner, *Strategies for Media Literacy*; Deborah Leveranz, *Southwest Alternate Media Project*, and Elizabeth Zappa, my wife.

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Analysis:

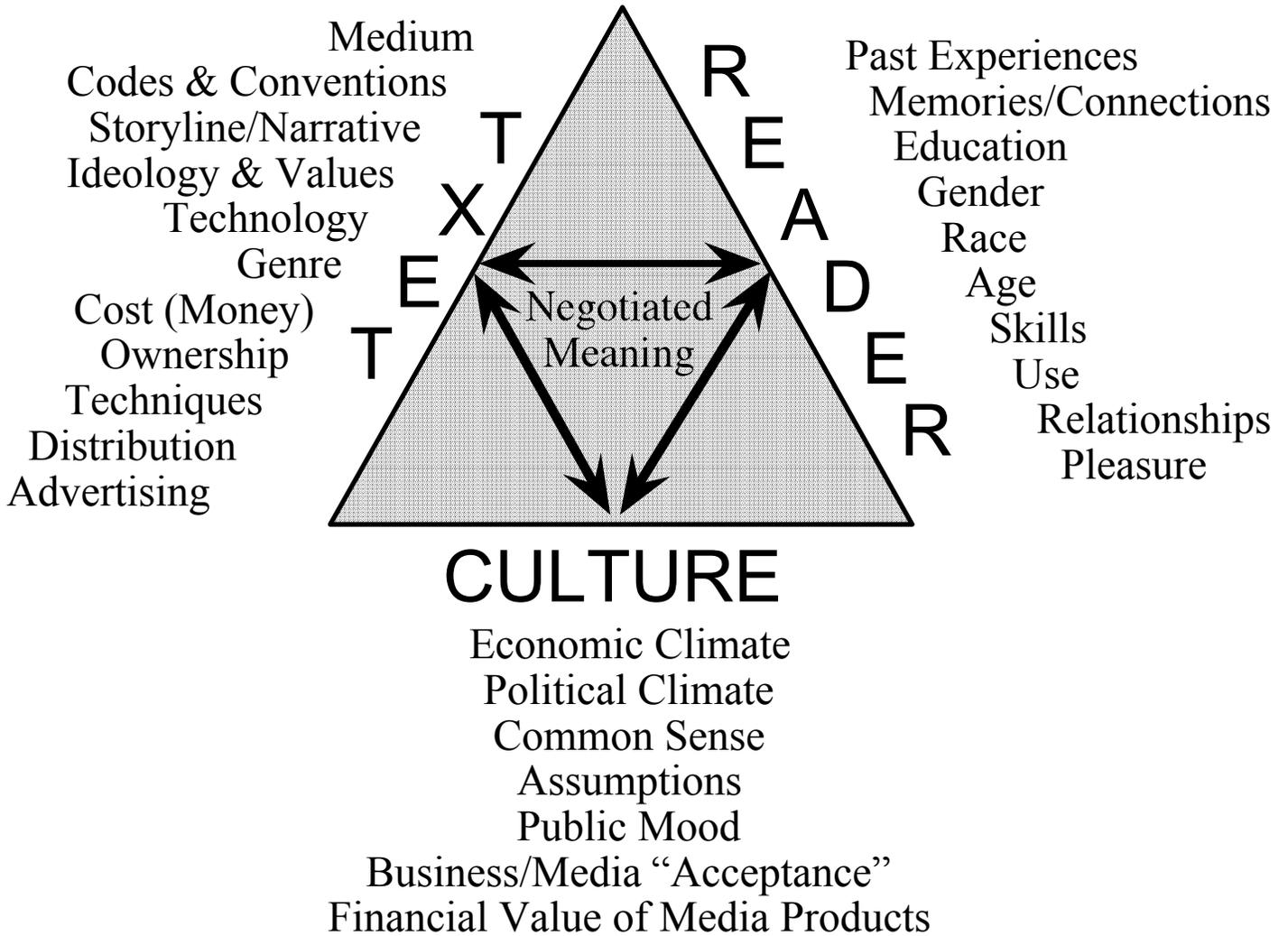


Figure 1

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- ¹Gould, Bruce and Gould, Beatrice Blackmar, "Harmful Children's Radio Programs" (editorial). *Ladies Home Journal*, vol. 56, April, 1939, p. 4.
- ²Buckingham, David, "Teaching About the Media," chapter one in *The Media Studies Book*, edited by David Lusted (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 12-35.
- ³See Cooke, Patrick, "TV or Not TV?" *In Health*, Dec./Jan., 1992, pp. 33-43, for a discussion of the contradictions found in research about the effects of television.
- ⁴Buckingham, *ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ⁶This has also been a common assumption in Britain, Canada and Australia, as well as in many other countries.
- ⁷Sirota was a consultant to the project of public television station WNET/Thirteen, New York City. All four projects will be discussed later in this paper.
- ⁸Sirota, David R., "The Development of Television Viewing Skills in Students: Proceed with Caution," New York: New York University, School of the Arts, ca. 1979 (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 175 417), p. 5. Syntax and punctuation have been corrected in the quotes used here.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ¹⁰Postman, Neil and Paglia, Camille, "She Wants Her TV! He Wants His Book!" *Harpers*, March, 1991, p. 47.
- ¹¹The ACBB was created in 1953, but its predecessor organization, the Madison, Wisconsin, chapter of the *American Association of University Women* began a listing of best radio programs in 1935.
- ¹²From "An Historical Perspective: ACBB's 30 Years, 1953-1983" in the archives of the *National Telemedia Council*.
- ¹³*Ibid.*
- ¹⁴Ploghoft, M. E., & Anderson, J. A., *Teaching Critical Television Viewing Skills: An Integrated Approach* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1982), p. 5. Quoted from Brown, James A., *Television "Critical Viewing Skills" Education: Major Media literacy Projects in the United States and Selected Countries*, p. 70 (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991).
- ¹⁵Brown, *ibid.* (see preceding footnote), p. 96.
- ¹⁶From the introduction to *A Critical Television Viewing Skills Curriculum for High School Students*, Far West Laboratory, 1980. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 215 667, p. 223).
- ¹⁷Brown, *ibid.*, p. 155.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*
- ¹⁹Corder-Bolz, Charles, "Mediation: The Role of Significant Others." *Journal of Communication*, vol. 30, no. 3, Summer, 1980, p. 107. The educational television show used in this study was *Electric Company*.
- ²⁰Much of the categorization suggested here is based on a chart developed by Jacques Priette, "The Theoretical Lineage of Media Education Programs," which he is developing as part of his Ph.D. thesis at the University of Montreal.
- ²¹Anderson, James A., "The Theoretical Lineage of Critical Viewing Curricula." *Journal of Communication*, vol. 30, no. 3, Summer, 1980, p. 66.
- ²²*Ibid.*
- ²³Brown, *ibid.*, p. 104.
- ²⁴WNET/Thirteen Education Department, *The Television Criti-Kit: Teacher's Guide* (New York: 1979), p. ii.
- ²⁵Anderson, *ibid.*, p. 68.
- ²⁶At the Association for Media Literacy's first major conference in 1990. Masterman gave a keynote address.
- ²⁷The Foundation of Independent Video and Film, "Report: the 1979 National Conference of Media Arts Centers," p. 1. Copy obtained from the National Alliance of Media Arts Centers, Oakland, CA.
- ²⁸Feinstein, Peter, ed., "The Independent Film Community: A Report on the Status of Independent Film in the United States," 1977. Copy obtained from the National Alliance of Media Arts Centers, Oakland, CA.
- ²⁹Tyner, Kathleen, "The Appalshop School Initiative." *Strategies: A Quarterly Publication of Strategies for Media Literacy*, vol. 5, nos. 2/3, Spring/Summer 1992, p. 1 (San Francisco: Strategies for Media Literacy). This example was suggested by Deborah Leveranz of the *Southwest Alternate Media Project*.
- ³⁰Independent filmmakers and media arts organizations have also worked on simply expanding the definition of media art, by offering new avenues of artistic expression to the public.
- ³¹Masterman, Len, *Teaching the Media*, p. 12 (New York: Routledge, 1985).
- ³²Brown, *ibid.*, p. 17.
- ³³Ideas in this paragraph are based on a conversation with Barry Duncan, President of Ontario's *Association for Media Literacy*, in November, 1992.
- ³⁴Fiske, John, *Television Culture*, p. 1 (New York: Routledge, 1987).
- ³⁵Buckingham, David, ed., *Watching Media Learning: Making Sense of Media Education*, p. 8 (Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press, 1990).
- ³⁶This example was suggested by Barry Duncan of Ontario's *Association for Media Literacy* at a workshop for teachers at Athens Academy, Athens, Georgia, November 2, 1992. He explains the inquiry model in more detail in his text *Mass Media and Popular Culture*, pp. 211-212 (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Canada, Inc., 1988).
- ³⁷See Tyner, Kathleen, "Treading Water: Media Education in the United States," in Aparici, Roberto, ed., *Projecto Didactico Queria Madrid* (Madrid, Spain: Ediciones de la Torre, 1993). English draft copy of soon-to-be-published manuscript obtained from Strategies for Media Literacy, San Francisco, CA.
- ³⁸Kathleen Tyner has an especially good discussion of this issue in her article cited above.
- ³⁹Many are using a model called *social analysis*, which is based on experiential learning grounded in participant experience.
- ⁴⁰Freire, Paolo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Further bibliographical information unavailable at time of writing.
- ⁴¹See *Telemidium*, the Newsletter of the National Telemedia Council, Inc., vol. 38, nos. 1-2, First Quarter, 1992, p. 1. Another helpful networking organization is KidsNet (Washington, DC), which lists resources for media education for children in its monthly Bulletin & Calendar.
- ⁴²A NAME for the Media Literacy Game." *Strategies*, *ibid.* (footnote 29, above), p. 16.
- ⁴³The four points below were strongly influenced by Kathleen Tyner's article cited earlier (footnote 37).
- ⁴⁴This may in fact make it possible to *decentralize* the textbook approval process (which usually happens at a state level), allowing more choice (and more democracy) at the local level. Imagine parents and teachers choosing textbooks school-by-school! Thanks again to Kathleen Tyner's article for this note.
- ⁴⁵The Athens Academy project is being funded by a grant from the Bertlesmann Foundation (Germany).