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Media Education Worldwide: Objectives, Values and Superhighways

By Len Masterman

Abstract

The paper looks at the diversity of perception among the people working in media education in different countries and considers whether there is any common ground among them, or any consensus on basic objectives. This paper attempts to answer this question before moving on to consider two pressing issues which confront media educators both now and in the foreseeable future: the place of the value question in media education and how media educators should respond to the development of the Information Superhighway.

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L'Education des Médias au Niveau Mondial: Objectifs, Valeurs et la Super Voie de Communication

Par Len Masterman

Résumé

Cette communication soutient que malgré la diversité de perspectives, les spécialistes de l'éducation des média s'accordent sur les objectifs fondamentaux. L'auteur repose la question de valeurs. A son avis, la perrenité de celles-ci, dans le domaine de l'éducation des médias et des services communicationnels au public dépend de la sensibilité et des attitudes du public concerné. Masterman analyse aussi le développement de la Super Voie Médiatique et le comportement que les formateurs en communication des médias devraient adopter. Cet auteur affirme qu'avant l'adoption de la technologie ultra-moderne il faudrait d'abord épuiser les possibilités disponibles. Il serait également sensé de tenir compte de tous les aspects de la technologie médiatique avant de se lancer à son installation./

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Introduction

There exists a diversity of perspectives among people working in media education in different countries. But is there any common ground among them, or any consensus on basic objectives? The following article attempts to answer this question, before moving on to consider two pressing issues which confront media educators both now and in the foreseeable future: the place of the value question in media education, and how media educators should respond to the development of the information super-highway.

Is it useful to think about the common assumptions which might be shared by media educators across the world? At first sight, probably not. Media education is characterised by a plurality of specific national practices. Indeed there is generally a heterogeneous set of practices even within most national cultures. Certainly, the first lesson which everyone relearns at every international gathering of media teachers is the necessity of conceptualising not media education, but media educations, in plural. Existing as they do at the interface of any society's educational, broadcasting, political and cultural systems, media educations must inevitably derive their priorities from, and reflect the uniqueness and specificity of the cultures in which they find a place.

Nevertheless within the media education movement there has been a remarkable cross-fertilisation of ideas across cultures, particularly over the past decade. International net working within the movement is now efficient enough to ensure that ideas generated, for example, within Canadian classrooms can be made available across the world in both French and English in a matter of weeks. And certainly whenever I meet with colleagues from other cultures I am invariably struck, whatever the superficial differences, by how much we have in common in terms of our fundamental aims, objectives, and assumptions. Generally these areas of commonality remain unstated and unexplored. But it might be worthwhile having an initial stab at

suggesting what these core assumptions might be as a way of at least attempting to establish whether there is common ground between the diverse practices which constitute media education across the world.

First of all media educators probably share a cluster of beliefs about the importance of promoting, supporting and sustaining democratic structures and values wherever they exist. And we probably also share an increasing sense of urgency about the fragility of those structures in the contemporary world, and the consequent danger of a descent into authoritarianism and even barbarism wherever they disappear. We are also particularly sensitive to the role which both media and educational systems can play in either sustaining or threatening democratic values. These are powerful national systems which can either empower or domesticate us, which can address us either primarily as citizens or as consumers, which can provide the information and awareness necessary for the functioning of an effective democracy, or which can treat us principally as a 'mass', available for political and commercial manipulation.

Historically, it is no coincidence that the founding fathers of the media education movement were profoundly marked by their respective experiences of the break-up of humane and democratic values across Europe earlier this century. F.R. Leavis was an ambulance man on the battlefields of the Great War; members of the Frankfurt School carried across to America with them bitter memories of the role played by mass propaganda techniques in the rise of European fascism in the 1930s.

For media teachers today, the past decade has seen some worrying counter-democratic trends relating to the media:

- The attack upon and erosion of public service broadcasting systems;
- The influence of market philosophies which have masked increasingly centralising tendencies within educational systems, and increasing concentrations of power and influence around the ownerships of the broadcast media and the new technologies;

- The world-wide growth of the public relations industries doubling in size every four years since the early 1980s indicative of the growth in the management and manufacture of information and disinformation by national governments and vested interest groups;
- The convergence of politics and advertising, producing a situation in which many governments now have bigger advertising accounts than the major multinational conglomerates, the images of politicians, and the strategies of political parties are master-minded by advertising agencies;
- The convergence of political and media power, particularly, of course, in Italy. In former Yugoslavia, too, as a recent study has pointed out, the role of a politically partisan media environment in peddling distorted ethnic stereotypes and disinformation has been crucial to the deterioration of rationality and humanity which has disfigured that conflict.

Of course, many of these trends - for example, the increasing commercialisation of broadcasting - have themselves been justified in terms of a democratic rhetoric of consumer sovereignty, and increasing diversity and choice. Media educators, would want to suggest a rather different set of links.

Between the commercialisation of the media and the degeneration of political debate - audiences are encouraged to retreat into escapist images and fantasies audiences themselves (rather than programmes) become the chief media product; and society's major power-holders discover that it is considerably easier and cheaper to manicure their images, and massage public opinion than it is to confront the real and seemingly intractable problems that face all modern societies.

The analysis that we want to make here is not one of unrelieved gloom. There have, to be sure, over the past decade, been a significant number of revolutions against autocratic and totalitarian regimes. In almost all of them the struggle for control of the national media has been a matter of utmost significance. Indeed,

in both Romania and the Philippines the national television station formed, quite literally, the front-line of the battlefield. The literal pulling of the plugs, and the blacking out of the television screens on the old regimes was perhaps the single most resonant symbol that power was actually changing hands. The successful revolutions represented a triumph for the media literate, relatively sophisticated urban populations over the power of the state propaganda machines. By contrast, the Chinese revolution failed because the urban rising found little support in the country where the peasants remained largely in thrall to state propaganda.

The drift of these arguments will, I hope, carry some degree of assent among media teachers across different cultures. They go beyond an analysis of the close links which exist between control of the media and the possession of political influence and power. They go beyond the argument that the continued existence of healthy democratic media will be dependent upon the existence of a broadly-based media-literate public to sustain and support them. They point to the fact that in today's world, media literacy has become, to all intents and purposes, synonymous with political literacy itself.

As I have suggested, all of the recent developments in the media outlined above, have profound political implications. And let Berlusconi's Forza Italia stand as a monument to the fact that politics is now a media-centred activity: a party invented by an advertising agency, and boasting no mass membership, and no regional infrastructure, sweeping to power in two months on a wave of thirty television advertisements per day, and universal positive coverage on Berlusconi's television channels. This phenomenon is merely an extension of the fact that almost all of us now cast our votes on the basis of politicians' images and general media performance.

Just as the development of widespread literacy skills has always been seen as a necessary prerequisite of successful democracy (without it, democracy is positively dangerous), so it is clear that media literacy skills are essential to the democratic health of contemporary media-saturated societies. This is not to

posit a passive notion of media consumption - the audience as vulnerable victims. Scepticism about media images may be widespread, though not necessarily sharply focused, in many cultures. But it is to suggest that increasingly sophisticated techniques of information management demand a commensurate expansion in the critical consciousness of audiences. The danger to democratic values lies precisely in the gap which has opened up between the relative sophistication and power of media producers and media audiences. Media education is one of the few weapons any culture possesses for at least addressing - and hopefully beginning to close - that gap.

It is our function as media teachers to encourage the evolution and development of that media literate - that politically literate - public. It is a task which will seek to build upon already existing competencies, and which will itself demand convivial and democratic ways of working. But in today's world there are few more urgent political or educational tasks. It is one to which, through the diversity of our practices across the world, we can all connect.

What should our future priorities be as media educators?

Some are implicit in the analysis above: the extension and consolidation of existing approaches to media literacy; the development of critical approaches to the techniques of marketing, public relations, sponsorship and a host of other promotional techniques which now saturate the media, and have rendered the old distinctions between advertising and programmes virtually obsolete; the defence and production of those spaces where we, as democratic citizens, can speak to one another without commercial or government interference, the defence and transformation, of public service media systems.

Values and superhighways

I would like, however, to make some preliminary observations on two issues with which we are confronted now, and which will certainly occupy us in the foreseeable future: the place of the

value question within media education; and the response we should make as media teachers to what has become known as the information super-highway.

First, the value question. Historically, questions of aesthetic value have been at the very heart of the development of media studies. From the early 1930s to the mid-1970s, media education existed, primarily, in order to develop in students, the ability to discriminate between what was culturally valuable, and authentic, and what was merely derivative, exploitative, and third-rate. But, ironically, media education as we now understand, only became possible when the value question no longer dominated its agenda, when it became clear that it was simply inadequate to try and comprehend the range of functions, uses and purposes served by contemporary media by resorting to narrow based aesthetic criteria, derived principally from literature.

Media educators now accept as a matter of course that the media are self-evidently important creators of social symbolic meaning whose forms, practices and institutions are worthy of study in their own right. We accept, that the proper objective of media education is the development of student understanding rather than the refinement of student tastes. Indeed questions of value have, since the early 1980s, received less attention than they deserve, perhaps principally because of their historical baggage, though no doubt the genuine difficulties involved in establishing generally agreed criteria of value in a culturally fragmented world, and across the whole spectrum of media texts and practices have also been of significance.

Over the past two or three years, however, arguments about quality have again become central to any discussion about the media in general, and broadcasting in particular. This is because the dominance of marketing philosophies within broadcasting is widely seen as severely compromising the quality of its output. In Britain, for example, the keenest and most important public debates around the broadcasting Bill in 1991 concerned the late inclusion of a 'quality threshold' which applicants for the commercial television franchises had to pass, and without which

ownership of the television companies would simply have gone to those with the fattest wallets.

What the debate revealed was that a purely market-driven television service would be primarily motivated to maximise profits by producing large audiences for the lowest possible cost. Not only do questions of quality not enter the equation, but the cutting of programme costs becomes an imperative and this immediately puts into jeopardy the production of minority programming, particularly at peak viewing times and radically affects the kind of material produced for news, documentary and drama programmes.

This situation has produced considerable alarm, not least within the broadcasting industries themselves, as programme makers see their industry taken over by entrepreneurs who view the programme in much the same way as they would a can of beans. Academics, too, have produced a series of studies outlining various ways in which 'quality' and public service values in broadcasting might be protected. Most of the solutions offered by these studies are necessarily prescriptive. None canvasses the importance of a longer-term educational strategy. Yet as I have already suggested, the only satisfactory guarantee of the continuance of public service values is the existence of a public which is capable of recognising and articulating them. It is now clear, however that this will also have to take the public into cognisance, they are capable of recognising and supporting quality media wherever it exists, and however it is defined. Which begs (and brings us back to) the question of how, precisely, quality media are to be defined.

Defining quality media

The thing to say about this question is that there can be no return to a narrow, exclusive, class-based notion of quality. If our students are going to be active participants in the struggle to encourage and support quality media then we will all have to work

with a much more generous, pluralistic and inclusive notion of value and recognising the *transitive* nature of value terms. It just does not make sense any more to label media texts as 'good' or as 'bad' in themselves, without reference to the nature and background of the individual and groups who are making those judgements, the criteria they are using, and the assumptions and purposes which they are bringing to the text. In this sense, the making of value judgements by students is probably going to be less important than their engaging in meta-discourses around the value question. They will need to understand how and where responses to a text, including their own students, and ours as teachers, are produced. Why is it that not all responses are of equal value and status? And how is it that some responses-as Raymond Williams pointed out many years ago-can be elevated and generalised to the status of evident social facts? How can some personal impressions and tastes be represented as standards of judgement? As John Corner has recently emphasised, questions of *quality* need to be considered alongside questions of *equality*.

To complicate the matter still further, I would want to argue the pedagogic wisdom of deferring questions of evaluation until a late stage in the discussion of any text. The problem for the teachers is not that it is especially difficult to obtain evaluative responses from students, but that it is relatively easy. And once students have made an immediate response it becomes difficult for them to move beyond it as they take up personal positions and individual stands. In this situation it is difficult for students to move beyond already established tastes, and this raises rather severe problems when teachers wish to use material which may challenge student expectations and orthodoxy's. For this reason, my own preference has always been to encourage students to suspend value judgements for as long as possible, approaching the text with an open mind, until they have fully experienced it, investigated it and reached some understanding of how it works. Only then will they be in a position to make an informed judgement about it. The retiring of the value question within media education, then involves a paradox. For it is an

intellectual, but not a pedagogic re-centering. A recanting in terms of objectives, but not of classroom's processes. It will rather, be the end product of a rather lengthily process of investigation. And when evaluations are made, they will need to be contextualised within an increasingly sophisticated meta-discourse about the nature of values and quality.

Dealing with the superhighway

Finally, what strait positions might media teachers adopt in relation to the fast developing interactive technologies and the promise of the information superhighway? Will we need a quite new kind of media education to enable us to deal with the phenomenon? I cannot even begin to predict the kind of media future which awaits us in ten, let alone twenty or thirty years time. But for now and into the foreseeable future let me suggest a few guiding principles.

1. I think that we can safely ignore around 90% of all that is currently being written and spoken about the new interactive technologies, on the grounds that it constitutes part of the most concerted international PR campaign in recent marketing history. The campaign is necessary because the 'revolution' will be consumer - rather than technology-led. Indeed it will not take place unless we, the public, can be persuaded to participate in it and to take part with considerable amounts of money on a continuing basis in order to do so. To this end, the image of the computer-user has to be transformed, from that of the isolated, socially inept, almost exclusively male outsider to that of one who is part of a progressive majority, whom we must join, if we do not want to become outsiders ourselves, the casualties of historical progress. It is the hoariest trick in the advertisers' lexicon and there is a certain satisfaction in witnessing the advertising agencies divesting the supposedly sophisticated multimedia conglomerates of millions of pounds for the pleasure of performing it. Whether it will be successful

is still a very open question. Currently we are at the early stages of a long, hard promotional campaign and, as I have suggested, the flood of material on the topic which is now saturating all media should be read strictly within this context.

2. In viewing the claims made for the new technologies with a somewhat sceptical eye, however, it is important not to take up a technophobic or Loudness position which will readily be ascribed to any doubter. It is necessary to assert from the outset, then, that as many students - as many people - as possible should have as much access to as wide a range of technologies as possible. Systematic analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of their uses, however, is essential. There is compelling evidence that students of all ages can become empowered by the technologies and motivated to learn across a whole range of traditional and new skills. Media teachers, like the teachers of every other subject, will want to encourage these developments, and use the opportunities they provide to enrich student learning. There are, however, issues and problems associated with the new technologies which have not yet received the kind of discussion they deserve. Moreover, as I shall suggest, they are of particular relevance to teachers and students of the media (see 5 below).
3. Media teachers are particularly anxious to avoid a replay of an earlier confusion. The widespread popular belief that media teachers were concerned about promoting the effective use of the media as aids to learning within education was one which plagued the early history of the subject. Those days may seem long gone, but the belief that media teachers possess a primarily technological expertise seems to be undergoing something of a renaissance in relation to the new technologies. I have recently attended two conferences at which media teachers were bombarded with up-to-the-minute information about the technological capabilities and potentialities of the

new media. At neither conference was there any kind of critical perspective on offer. The agendas set and received at both conferences were purely technological ones. It would be the deepest possible irony, as well as an unholy waste of time, if progress within media education were to be unproblematically associated with progress within the new technologies. Maintaining a critical distance is essential, for without it we will return full circle to a confusion in the minds of colleagues, parents and the public, if not on our own between the technologies themselves, and the cultural, social and political forms they give rise to.

4. Some critical response is surely called for to what is universally deemed to be the defining quality of the new media-their interactivity. Here is a fairly typical set of claims from the America author of *Cyberia*, Doug Rushkoff:

I believe that a kid raised with a joy stick in his hand has a fundamentally different appreciation for the image on the screen than adults do. He knows that the image on the screen is up for grabs... People have mindlessly and numbly accepted the image on the screen as a reality... A kid who knows that he can change it, and make it, is a very empowered human being.

This promise of liberation- by-joystick from the stultifying confines of oneway media is one of cyber-literature's most persistent themes. It is a promise which is clearly impressing some media teachers. Again, at a recent international media conference it was asserted that 'we need a new media education, because for the first time we have a (media) with which we can interact.'

The hyperbole surrounding inter-activity should be read, as a PR response designed to mask the considerable technical *deficiencies* of computers in the sphere of interaction. The new media would be accurately described as highly *programmed*, for they offer us an impoverished push-button form of interactivity which compares very poorly with even the most limited form of

social interaction. Time and again, in the cyber-literature, this miserable stimulus-response type of interactions is justified as a great leap forward by recourse to a now wholly discredited model of mainstream media consumption as being entirely passive. In fact as readers of this journal will know very well, a formidable body of research has demonstrated the dazzling variety of interactions which audiences have with mainstream media, which are generally integrated into and part of a rich round of domestic rituals. Compared with this, the selection of items from a multiple-choice menu is primitive indeed.

It is, of course, the primary function of media education to promote an even wider and more sophisticated range of interactions with media than currently exist. Media literature students as we know, will answer back, shout at, interrupt and carry on a continuous dialogue with their media, generally with a social context which is itself highly interactive.

Given this analysis, the claim that we need a new form of media education in order to 'catch up' with new 'interactive' media looks somewhat thin.

5. But not only does media education as currently practised offer much more richly interactive and critical relationships with media than anything the new technology can offer, it actually poses all the important questions about the new technology.

Proponents of the educational merits of "interactive media" have not shown very much interest in the development of critical thinking skills around the new technologies. They tend, indeed, to preach salvation *through* technology and in particular through student accosted a wider range of information sources. They have said little about the skills which students will need to make sense of the information they access. They do not generally make even a basic distinction between information and knowledge. And they have not regarded the provision of educational software programmes by commercial sources as being in itself problematic.

So there will be a great deal of work to be done by media

teachers and their students around the new technologies. Media literature students will not be content to choose from a pre-set menu, however. They will want to scrutinise the menu itself. How is it constructed? To what agenda? *Who* is responsible for it, and whose interest does it serve? What values are implicit within it? What kind of knowledge does it attempt to construct and validate? And what is omitted from it? Who finally has access to it? And whom is such access denied?

These are, of course, old questions, the classic and traditional questions of media education. My hunch is that we will not need to rush, for some time yet, to a new agenda. Those old questions will reverberate well into the twenty first century. For the moment, they will do just fine.

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