The Media Education Revolution

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Abstract: This paper outlines some of the major principles of media education as it is practised throughout the world today and discusses some of Its most Important implications. It attempts toshow how current practice has evolved out of earlier, less satisfactory paradigms of media education, and provides a brief critique of these paradigms. Finally the paper suggests some points for future growth In the subject.

Resume: Dans cet article, nous voulons soullgner quelques prlnclpes importants, appliques aujourd'hui partout dans le monde, dans le domaine de l'etude des medlas. Nous discuterons egalement de quelques unes deses implications les plus Importantes. Nous tenterons de demontrer comment les pratiques actuelles ont evolue a partlr des paradlgmes plus ou molns satisfalsants dont nous ferons une breve critique. Flnalement nous apportons quelques suggestions quant a1'evolutlon de l'etude des medlas.

This article has a simple agenda. It will attempt to describe the major principles of media education as it has developed across the world in the past decade, culminating in the publication of the invaluable Media Literacy Resource Guide in Ontario in 1989.1 will try to demonstrate how those principles developed out of earlier, less satisfactory, attempts to teach about the media. And I will try to suggest some ways forward for the 1990s. My simple agenda, then, has three parts: Where are we today? How did we get there? Where might we go from here?

In order to provide a specific focus to this synoptic account I shall try and outline the different answers that have been given in different historical periods to that most fundamental of questions, "Why should we bother to study or teach about the media at all? What is it, as teachers, that we are trying to achieve? Media teachers, have, in the past, given three different answers to that question and those different answers (and the practices that followed from them) form the three great historical paradigms of media education.

The earliest answer to the question: Why study the media? ran something like this: "The mass media are really likea kind of disease against which children need

to be protected. What the media infect is the culture as a whole. The common culture is contaminated by the media's commercial motivations, their manipulation and exploitation of their audiences, their corruption of language and their offering of easy, low-level appeals and satisfactions". What makes the media such a problem on this analysis is the fact that they produce a counterfeit culture which is a direct threat to genuine culture, and to authentic cultural values. Crucially, this is an audience problem. It is not simply that popular culture and high culture cannot somehow co-exist. Clearly, at one level, they can. The threat comes through the corruption of the audience. The future of serious literature, Queenie Leavis argued in 1932, in her *book Fiction and the Reading Public,* was absolutely dependent upon the continued existence of a serious literate readership to sustain it. And contemporary newspapers, magazines, and advertisements were actively destroying that serious reading public. The media demanded, and therefore produced, shorter attention spans and an appetite for the sensational expressed in slick, smart and superficial language. This constituted an attack upon *the* very foundations of serious reading and indeed serious engagement with any art form.

It is salutary to remember that these arguments were being fully articulated in the pre-television era. They were a response primarily to changes which had taken place in the economics of newspaper production in the late 19th century. When advertising revenue rather than readers' payments formed the basis of newspaper finance, there were corresponding changes in the content and form of newspapers. Stories became shorter and more fragmented. Headlines were used to attract attention, and there was less emphasis upon information within stories, and more upon the human interest element. In short, with the movement towards financing primarily by advertising, the modern press was born. Essentially now newspapers made their profits not through the production of news, but through the production of audiences, and all of the techniques I have described were designed precisely to hook and hold audience attention, to create the audience commodity.

If the media were a definite kind of cultural disease, then media education was designed to provide protection *against* it. Media education was an education against the media, and contrasted the manipulative nature of the media with the timeless values of real culture, as embodied supremely in literature. That earliest paradigm is sometimes known as the inoculative paradigm. You allow a little media material into the classroom only in order to inoculate the student more effectively against it. On the whole, media teachers today represent a powerful lobby against that way of thinking about the media. But it is still probably the way in which most other teachers continue to think about the media. And you will still see remnants of that old inoculative view within the most progressive media education practice. For example, teaching about advertising is still almost universally teaching against advertising, rather than an attempt to develop an understanding of the role and function of modern advertising agencies.

What effectively put an end to the dominance (though not the existence) of the inoculative paradigm was the arrival in schools in the early 1960s of a generation of young teachers whose intellectual formation owed every bit as much to the

influence of popular culture, and particularly films, as it did to print-based culture. Such teachers were apt to argue that the films of directors such as Bergman, Renoir, Bunuel, Fellini and in particular the French New Wave directors actually had as much intellectual energy and moral seriousness as anything that was being produced within European or American literature. They produced a new answer to the question: Why study the media? It was to enable students to discriminate not against the media but within them. To tell the difference, that is, between the good and the bad film, the authentic and the shoddy television programme, work within popular culture of some integrity and work which was merely commercial and exploitative.

This was the Popular Arts paradigm — the idea that popular culture was every bit as capable of producing authentic works of art as high culture. It gave Media Education a new agenda and a renewed energy in the 1960s, but by the mid-1970s almost all of that energy had been dissipated. There were three principal reasons, I think, why the Popular Arts paradigm failed to produce an adequate foundation for effective media teaching.

1) First of all, media education was still essentially protectionist. It was still a somewhat paternalistic exercise in improving students' tastes. It was still based on a very negative view of the media preferences of the vast majority of students, and was always likely to be resisted by them for this very reason.
2) Secondly it remained an evaluative paradigm, which was severely disabled by the fact that there were no widely agreed standards or criteria available for evaluating the media. Media teachers found themselves on very uncertain territory when they wanted to demonstrate precisely why this newspaper or television programme or piece of popular music was superior to that one. There was also a dangerous tendency for good to be equated with middle-class, and bad with working-class tastes. The kind of media material which teachers tended to like - European films shown in film societies, television documentaries, and serious newspapers - was self-evidently good. Hollywood movies, tabloid newspapers, and television game shows - the kind of material liked by students - were bad.
3) Thirdly, it was not simply a question of the practical difficulties of discriminating between the good and the bad in the media. There were major doubts about the very appropriateness of applying aesthetic criteria at all to a vast range of media output. Was there really any point in trying to discriminate, for example, between good and bad news bulletins, advertisements, sports programmes or weather forecasts? The Popular Arts movement was, essentially, a way of legitimising film studies. It privileged film, within the study of the media, as the one popular form with unchallengable claims to have produced works of authentic merit. But it provided a distinctly limited way of illuminating the media as a whole. And by the 1970s it was becoming crystal clear that any media education that was to have any relevance at all for students

had to give some pre-eminence not so much to film, which was actually somewhat marginal to the experience of most students, but to television which was much more central to their experience.

It was clear, then, by the mid-1970s that the Popular Arts paradigm, as a way of making sense of all of the media, was exhausted. No other coherent way of thinking about the media as a whole hadyet emerged, however. Mostof the 1970s are best characterised as a period of fragmentation of the subject. A typical media studies course of the time, for example, might have consisted of a term's work on film, a term on television, some work on advertising, a little time on popular music, and so on, with teachers and students bringing to bear upon each of these areas, approaches and questions which tended to be topic-specific and to have little in common with one another. The idea that there might be over-arching key concepts, or a particular mode of inquiry which could integrate and unite the different parts of the subject had not yet arrived. It was, as yet, difficult to think of media studies as a coherent and disciplined area of study at all.

Slowly, however, during the late 1970s media teachers began to make connections between their own down-to-earth classroom concerns and the drift of a number of structuralist ideas, particularly in the areas of semiotics and ideology. Very briefly, semiotics made two major contributions to media education:

1) It exploded the media's own view of themselves as windows on the world, or unproblematic mirrors or reflectors of external reality. The media, rather, were actively produced, their messages encoded. The media, in other words, mediated. They were sign-systems which needed to be critically read, rather than reflections of a reality which we, as the audience, had to accept.
   Semiotics, then, helped establish the first principle of media education, the principle of non-transparency. And it helped establish the dominant concept of media education as being that of *representation*. The media dealt with representations and not realities, and media meanings could not be pulled apart from the forms in which they were expressed.
2) Semiotics' second great contribution to media education was scarcely less momentous. As we have seen, the objective of media education up until this point had been to encourage discrimination. The value question - precisely how good is this newspaper, film or television programme - was central to the whole project. Semiotics overturned all of this. To take just one example: when Roland Barthes in his key work, Mythologies, analysed a striptease act, a plate of steak and chips, a tourist guide, or a wrestling-match, he was challenging, by his very choice of subjects, established cultural categories, tastes and values. For if a plate of steak and chips or a striptease act were to be as worthy of serious attention and analysis as, say, a poem, then a daring equation had been made between these cultural objects. Semiotics undermined, at a stroke, those appar-

ently immutable distinctions between the culturally valuable and the meretricious upon which media studies, and literary studies before it, had been based.

Both of these aspects of semiotics—its emphasis upon questions of representation, and its by-passing of the value question — were of inestimable value in marking a distinct break with literary-based ways of analysing the media. And they particularly illuminated the nature of television, whilst having a surprising degree of potency across all of the media. They provided media studies with precisely the kind of cross-media coherence the subject had so far been lacking, and they firmly grounded media studies in the dominant visual (i.e., televisual) experiences of students.

The way in which theories of ideology moved during the 1970s curiously dovetailed with these developments. At the risk of grotesquely over-simplifying a rather complex set of arguments, I think we can say that there was certainly a marked movement away from that traditional notion of ideology as a body of dominant ideas and practices imposed from above upon subordinate groups and which resulted in false consciousness. Rather, following the rediscovery of the work of Antonio Gramsci in the early 1970s, ideology came to be equated with common-sense, with what was most natural and taken-for-granted about our ideas and practices. Dominance was achieved, that is, as much by consent as by imposition.

These developments in semiology and ideology pointed in precisely the same direction. It was a direction that had profound implications for all media teachers. They pointed to the fact that the ideological power of the media was very much tied up with the naturalness of the image, and with the tendency of the media to pass off encoded, constructed messages as natural ones. They demonstrated, too, that questions of power were central to discussions about the production, circulation and consumption of images and representations. They raised questions about which groups had the power to define, and which groups were only ever defined. They established, in other words, the importance of a politics of representation, and thrust media studies into the heart of some of the most important political and social questions of our time.

I have emphasised the shift from a Popular Arts paradigm which was principally concerned with questions of aesthetic value to a representational paradigm, the third paradigm, which placed questions of politics and power at its centre because I think that that shift lay at the heart of most of the debates and discussions which were taking place within the media education movement during the 1980s. What was being achieved, I think, was a fairly massive movement out of one paradigm and into the other, and what was being worked out were some of the more radical implications of that shift. For what soon became apparent was that we were talking about something more than a change in subject content. What was being proposed were radical changes in teaching objectives, in classroom methodology, and indeed in epistemology, in teachers' and students' understanding of what constituted knowledge.

I can do no more than very briefly indicate some of the more important implications of the new media studies. First of all, and perhaps most remarkably, it de-centred the teacher in a number of ways which many found unsettling. Teachers were no longer the experts - the licensed arbiters of truth or taste - in quite the way that they had been and indeed still were in more traditional subjects. In the media class any group of students was always likely to have a far wider range of popular cultural references at its disposal than any single teacher could have. The expertise which existed in the classroom was much more widely dispersed.

Secondly, teachers no longer possessed an approved body of knowledge or corpus of information to which they alone held the key, and which they were expected to pass down to students. What Paulo Freire condemned as the banking concept of education, in which knowledgeable teachers deposited information upon ignorant students, did not seem to apply to media studies. Indeed media teachers did not control information at all. The information which was around in the media studies classroom was being provided by the media themselves. They were communicating it laterally rather than hierarchically, speaking across rather than down to their audiences. And they addressed teachers and students alike. The media equalised teachers and students. Both were equally and equal objects of the media's address. This produced a quite new situation in the classroom. Teachers and their students became co-investigators of media images and texts. They could reflect critically upon information, side by side, in a way which had been difficult when the teacher was more closely identified with the subject content.

Media education de-centred the teacher in other ways too. Teaching methodologies became much more student-centred. Simulations, practical work, sequencing exercises, prediction exercises, code-breaking games and a whole battery of techniques to encourage active learning were developed since it was essential to give students the confidence to begin to take control of their own learning and to make their own independent judgments.

Why was this important? Well, one reason was that if media education was to be of any value at all, it had to be thought of as a lifelong process. Media education was not going to be of much value unless students were willing and able to apply what they learned at school to their consumption of media outside of school. Indeed, it was not going to be of much use unless students had the ability, commitment and interest to carry their critical thinking about the media into adult life.

When teachers took a lifelong perspective on their work, their classroom practices began to change in a number of ways:

1) High student motivation became an end in itself, rather than a form of pill-sugaring. Simply, if students did not find the subject enjoyable and fulfilling, then the teacher had failed. Students would not wish to go on learning about and engaging with the media after they had passed beyond the gates of the school.

2) Having a lifelong perspective meant that it was essential to teach for transfer. It was never enough for a media teacher to help students gain an insight into that specific newspaper article or television documentary. It is always necessary for students and teachers to move beyond an understanding of specific texts towards an understanding of the general principles which would have relevance to the analysis of similar texts. What was important about media education was not so much what students knew, but whether they could use and apply what they knew to new situations and new texts. The objective here was to develop students' critical autonomy: their ability to stand upon their own two critical feet and apply informed critical judgements to media texts which they would encounter in the future.
3) The desire to encourage critical autonomy, increase student motivation, and develop lifelong abilities pushed teachers into using teaching methodologies which encouraged independent learning. Media education became, too, primarily an investigative process which encouraged understanding rather than an initiatory process designed to develop appreciation or to impose specific cultural values. It was organised around key ideas (selection, construction, mediation, representation, coding, etc.) which were taught via a spiral rather than a linear curriculum, and which were taught as analytical tools rather than as a kind of alternative content.

Media education also involved a quite new integration of analytical work and practical activity. Critical analysis had to be informed by some sense of the constraints of production. Practical work, for its part, had to involve more than a set of merely technical competencies. It had to be critical and reflective, and feed back into analysis. What media education aimed to achieve at its best was a fusion of practical criticism and critical practice.

Finally, what all of this added up to was a distinctive epistemology. It involved a revaluation of what knowledge was and how it was produced. Knowledge was not simply something which existed in the world-out-there, and which was relayed to students via textbooks and teachers. It was not something which others possessed and students lacked. It was not something that students had only to accommodate to, or which oppressed them with its weight and certainty. Knowledge and ideas, on the contrary could be actively produced and created by students through a process of investigation and reflection. The world-out-there wasn't the proper end of education, but its starting point.

What all of this amounted to in the 1980s was a really quite remarkable educational revolution which was being carried out at a time of general educational conservatism. To return to my original focussing question. The answer which this third paradigm - the representational paradigm - gave to the question 'Why Study the Media?', went something like this: 'In contemporary societies the media are self-evidently important creators and mediators of social knowledge. An understanding of the ways in which the media represent reality, the tech-

niques they employ, and the ideologies embedded within their representations ought to be an entitlement for all citizens and future citizens in a democratic society".

As I have suggested, in working through the implications of this paradigm, teachers found themselves working in new ways in the classroom. In fact, they were beginning to answer what is probably the most important question faced by educational systems in the late 20th century and beyond: What constitutes an effective democratic education for majorities of future citizens? Media teachers should be saluted for producing some innovative and exciting answers to that question. And this at a time when educational systems have tended to move in the opposite direction, towards greater differentiation and elitism, and when even such ideals as equality of opportunity have been subjected to widespread denigration.

So much for the past and the present. What of the future? In what ways will media education have to change and develop through the 1990s? Let me suggest two related points for future growth:

1) I think we will need to wake up to the full implications of the marketing revolution which has been taking place since theearly 1980s. The growth and expansion of commercially-based media during that time has produced a situation in which advertising can no longer be seen as something which takes place between programmes on television, or in the spaces around the editorial material in the press. Rather, the whole of the media has now been opened up, not simply to advertising but to a whole range of marketing techniques such as product placement, public relations, sponsorship, plugs for films and records, advertisements, news management, and the creation of disinformation in a way which makes the old distinctions between advertising and editorial material almost obsolete. Similarly it is simply not possible for anyone to be media literate today if he or she does not understand that the primary function'of commercial media is the segmentation and packaging of audiences for sale to advertisers. Up until now media education has been based upon a premise of the most astonishing naivety: that the primary function of the media has been the production of information or entertainment. What we have principally studied in media education have been texts: television programmes, newspaper stories, and magazine articles for example. But these are not the chief products of the media. They are what Dallas Smythe has called the free lunch: the means by which the real product of the media, from which its profits are derived - the audience product - is summoned into existence.

   What I am suggesting here is not simply that we beef up our teaching about advertising and marketing as a topic. Rather, a critical understanding of the basic techniques and tenets of marketing will need to be brought to bear upon the study of all media texts and institutions and will have as central a place in the analysis of today's media as such concepts

as authorship had within films studies in the 1960s, and representation and ideology had in the 1980s.

2) The second area of concern is really the obverse of the first. For the growth of commercial media has been accompanied by the increasing impoverishment of public service and pluralistic media. The spaces in which we, as members of society, can communicate with one another without governmental or commercial interference are being closed down dramatically. In Britain, for example the great media debate of the 1990s will concern the future of the BBC, and whether indeed it has a future as a cheaply and universally available high quality public service paid for by an annual licence-fee.

As media teachers I think that we are going to have to develop an explicit commitment to the principles of open and universal access to information, and to preserving the independence, from undue commercial influence or government interference, of at least some information producers. As teachers working within public educational systems I believe that we do have a de facto commitment to the maintenance and defence of public information systems, and that we have to find ways of expressing this not in terms of an uncritical partisanship or on the basis of a narrow anti-commercialism, but rather as an open and generous allegiance to democratic values. And that entails, as always, putting all of the arguments to our students but leaving them with the responsibility for making their own choices.

Make no mistake, very large issues are at stake in struggles over the future configuration of the media industries. Should information be regarded only as a commodity or does it have a social value? Is it preferable to produce information which meets general social needs or information which makes a profit? Is access to information a right, or should it be restricted to those who can pay? Is information only an extension of property rights or does it lie in the public domain? It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the future shape of all cultures lies in the ways in which they answer these questions.

The existence of an informed and articulate public opinion on these issues will be an important — perhaps the importan — influence on how these issues are settled. It is our important task as media teachers in the 1990s and beyond to help create that informed public. For that is one of the slender threads upon which the future of media freedom, and ultimately democratic freedom, hangs.

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