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# OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

# OUR SELVES

Educating baby  
via TV screen

Media literacy and  
democratic media

Redefining  
journalism education

# Media Education and Educating the Media





# OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

# OUR SELVES



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## Reading between the lines and crossing borders: Critical media literacy, good citizenship and democratic media

BY KIRSTEN KOZOLANKA

It might be my heightened sensitivity from working on this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, but it seems to me that the dual concepts of ‘media education’ and ‘educating the media’ are becoming problematized together with greater frequency.

Would we have noticed that the CRTC gave the go-ahead to BabyFirstTV to launch its network in Canada if we hadn’t also heard — through the media — about the study that shows kids think food in McDonald’s wrappers tastes better than identical food in plain wrapping? Would we have thought twice about the delightful innocence of youth sharing copious amounts of personal information on Facebook if

we hadn’t also heard — again through the media — about how some of the suspect information posted by do-it-yourself editors on Wikipedia had been traced back to various organizations with their own interests and agendas?

But we have to wonder why the media didn’t spot the connections between those stories and tell us about their significance. Instead, for the most part, these stories were reported separately as interesting, but stand-alone pieces or trivia to be read on the bus or subway in those free daily newspapers and then discarded.

It’s not news that we live in a fast-paced and invasive media culture that, as Berry (2007) summarizes, is rife with “hyper-reali-



ty, hypermedia, multi-medias, hypertexts, multiple modalities, multiple literacies, contexts, [and] discourses” (Berry, p. 688). The relationship between citizens and the media is indeed complex, and it is ironic that we look — often unsuccessfully — to the media themselves for explanations about the media.

In this environment, critical media literacy (CML) stands as an essential tool for lifelong learning, a gift of citizenship that we can offer to our children and young people to engage proactively with a media-saturated culture. As Lewis & Jhally (1998) write, “media literacy is to help people become sophisticated citizens rather than sophisticated consumers” (p. 1). How we prepare students to do this has serious implications for how they live their lives and what kind of world they live in. CML is not a panacea to be uncorked and swallowed obediently, but a way of being that requires constant rejuvenation. Its biggest potential ally is an educational system that values critical literacy and, moreover, acknowledges the need for critical media literacy as an unassailable public good.

In its remarkably short institutional lifetime, CML has already passed through many pedagogical and theoretical milestones. CML is an umbrella concept (Hobbs, 2001, p. 9) that is hard to define, evaluate and assess (Aufderheide, 1992, p. 3). It has its roots in linguistics and aligns itself with cultural

studies, but other than that, it is usually seen as an assemblage of approaches that prioritize or feature different aspects on a text-context continuum. Luke (2000) suggests that many hands — those of sociologists, post-structuralists, feminists, systemic functional linguists, and cultural and media studies practitioners — are evident in the evolution of CML (p. 452). A key element in this evolution is the shift from text and self towards how they work together in contexts (p. 453). In addition, a major influence was the work of Freire. His 1970 book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, sparked a literacy movement that was collectivist, student-centred and based on joint negotiation. In Freire’s work, perception was incomplete if not turned into action. Freire’s work also openly imbued literacy studies with power and class analysis.

An institutional milestone came in 1986, when Ontario became the first jurisdiction in North America to make media literacy mandatory on the high school curriculum. Since then, media education has been a stand-alone course in jurisdictions where it is taught, but has also faced a movement to increase its potential for skills acquisition by integrating it into all subjects. In the context of Australia, a world leader in the field, Morgan (1997) suggests that a further imperative for successful media literacy studies is the autonomy of teachers within classrooms, alongside national educational

policies and commitment to multicultural and social justice agendas (p. 28). Currently in Canada, successful media education is seen to include: a grass-roots movement involving teachers, support from educational authorities, in-service training, the existence of appropriate expertise and teaching materials, an organization to facilitate information sharing and curriculum development, appropriate means of evaluation, and open collaboration of those involved (Duncan et al., 2002).

Over time and with accumulated experience in the field, globalization and the growth of information and communication technologies have necessitated examination of media structures and systems themselves as part of the media education process. At the same time, New Right economic policies have drastically altered the educational landscape that was just beginning to open up to the new demands of media education. School boards and educators find themselves struggling to maintain the basics.

Thus the definitions and imperatives of media education shifted over time, from Luke's (2000) two key summary (but still relevant) elements — who is absent, what is not said (p. 457) — to more fully articulated definitions that reflect a more politicized, more corporate media and educational policy environment.

Torres & Mercado (2007), for example, implicitly recognize the key role that mass corporate media

play in propelling ideas by situating the broader media and communications environment at the centre of their definition of CML. Echoing Lewis & Jhally, they base their definition on the premise that CML is founded on the “legitimate role of media to serve the public's right to be truly informed, and thereby serve democracy” (p. 261). Their three dimensions of CML thus emphasize:

- The development of a critical understanding of how corporate for-profit media work, driven by their political and economic vested interests;
- The search for and support of alternative, non-profit media;
- The characterization of the role of teachers in helping students and their parents become media literate users and supporters of alternative media (p. 261).

Through this broader conception of critical media literacy, we can make the crucial connection between actions and exercises for media education that take place within the classroom to the hegemonic role of media outside it. Questions of who owns information and who controls the news can then enter into classroom discussion. Logically, then, media education also needs to address the impacts of media merger activity and the growth of media structures into large, vertically-integrated conglomerates: How can the needs of citizens be

served when media practice is filtered through the profit-making and ideological imperatives of corporations?

Further, the prevalence of public relations as a tool of governments in fostering public consent for their policies is also problematic, as it increases the likelihood that citizens will receive 'interested information' through the media, rather than 'information in the public interest.' We have only to look to the Stephen Harper government's antagonistic relationship with journalists and his centralization and control of government communications to see how 'spin' and 'counter-spin' shape media messages and culture. This is at odds with both the stated democratic role of the media and the mandate of politicians in a democracy as serving the public. The trend of corporations to sponsor educational programs and enter into the domain of public education in other ways should also be seen as a manifestation of a close government-media relationship that influences educational policy, as well as a deliberate encroachment on public space and the public interest. In this media and policy environment, we must be aware for our students' sake of the ongoing risk that "corporate culture is taking over public education" (Torres & Mercado, 2007, p. 547). The job of CML must be to "question the values and social structures that lead media to serve private profit rather than

the public interest" (*Rethinking Schools*, 1999, p. 2).

Similarly, this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* starts with the understanding that since the media — the focus of critical media literacy — have a pervasive and persuasive opportunity to influence educational policy, curriculum and outcomes, teaching students to assess and analyze is only part of the deal.

The issue begins with a section on media education, which explores the challenges both in the classroom and beyond. Duncan's (2001) belief — or is it a warning? — that the classroom is "a site of struggle in which meanings are negotiated" (p. 1) is clear in Orlowski's article. In his classroom, Orlowski explicitly captures and utilizes the distinction posed by Morgan (n.d.) of social justice principles that can either be taught by explication or caught through action (p. 4). He actively engages his students in activities in which they themselves can reveal and expose the dominant ideology on its own merits. In her article, Stewart elaborates on how she fosters critical literacy in elementary school settings by having pupils become media creators, allowing them to reflect on how they somehow already know the conventions of media-making. Schmidt explores the 'pre-classroom,' in which corporatized media culture is now having an impact on our youngest citizens — babies in high chairs and toddlers — as targets for marketing

educational television products. As studies are already beginning to show, they aren't becoming brainy babies, but they are becoming mini-consumers — something that Jeffery's article on laws concerning advertising to children critiques.

Outside the formal classroom setting, the task of critical media literacy continues in myriad ways with outcomes that confirm that "different audiences 'read' media very differently" and that at times "ostensibly oppressive messages may be read in empowering ways" (Aufderheide, 1992, p. 3). The article in this issue by Off acknowledges this through the cultural play of youth theatre. By using popular culture references, actors "find ways to subvert the media's dominant images of youth in all their diversity and find a common vocabulary... with their audiences." Baute's article highlights the multiple ways in which young women can engage pleasurable with media and negotiate images and messages that otherwise could be damaging. The Miss G\_\_ Project, in Miller's article, illustrates how women attending university 'clicked' into recognizing a curricular absence and challenged it with a policy response — a proposed high-school gender studies course. King's article reminds us of the ubiquitous yet paradoxically absent force of racialization in both texts and social contexts. In so doing, he draws our attention

to other media absences, such as the politically and economically marginalized, and the 'othering' of non-North American cultures and experiences. This is a reminder that public discourse in media settings is not necessarily representative of the public, but instead speaks to selected consumer audiences.

Throughout this, educators manage to take the time to collaborate and undergo their own critical learning experience (Blake's article), reflect on the positive state of CML curricula across the country (Andersen) and even laugh at stereotypical and limiting media representations of teachers (Stephenson).

As with Torres & Mercado, this issue looks for alternatives to corporate media culture. Having examined the exclusions and enclosures under which CML must operate, the second section of the issue turns to educating the media.

Adam and Gasher in their respective articles upend a key aspect of how media culture is constructed by examining how we educate journalists. As a participant in UNESCO's model curriculum project for journalists, Adam focuses in his article on journalism education and training in developing countries and emerging democracies. His assessment leaves us with the dawning realization that the UNESCO project would also benefit journalism educators and students in developed democracies, such as Canada.

The deeply rooted journalism culture in North America continues to churn out technically sophisticated but critically innocent practitioners. Gasher describes a tense meeting of journalism professors in Montreal in 2005 which “reinforced a narrow definition of journalism research as empirical and applied, disparaging the academic turn in Canadian journalism schools as irrelevant to journalism as it is practiced and potentially harmful to students seeking a future in the news industry.” This slavish devotion to traditional ‘just-the-facts’ reporting emphasizes the complicity of journalism schools as serving not the public, but the news industry, and confirms the industry’s appropriation of journalism as a corporate domain.” Given the democratic role we ask of the media, journalism students — of all students! — should not be exempt from acquiring CML skills.

Yet we easily observe the limited and limiting results of corporate journalism in reporting on education policy and on educators themselves. Froese-Germain & Shaker examine media coverage of a recent joint report on commercialism in schools produced by the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Fédération des syndicats de l’enseignement. They find that even when reporting on a subject that demanded that journalists understand one of the central issues facing educational policy today, “the real story

of winners (corporations) and losers (schools and students) was unfortunately missed.” Journalists were simply unable to see additional funding for education as a possible option in limiting corporate commercialization in schools. Gutstein’s article, reprinted here from *The Tye*, exposes the limits of how corporate media in the form of CanWest covered a teachers’ walkout in BC in 2005. CanWest newspapers minimized support for the teachers, caricatured the union president, suggested that the teachers were crossing the picket lines and editorialized that the shrinking teachers were harming the public school system. In Manitoba, as Edmond’s article on activist teachers tells us, teachers took it upon themselves to challenge the school board by framing their own stories to the media during municipal elections — with considerable success.

Such emancipations against corporate media as the Manitoba teachers offer are hard-won and speak to considerable grass-roots organization and dedication. Another avenue is by providing alternative media options that already reflect critical thinking in media practice and structures. Alternatives to big media come in many forms and are part of the struggle to democratize media, which many have come to see as an essential part of CML. Sandberg reports on a recent conference in Windsor that brought together critical communications academics, alternative media

practitioners and community activists from across North America to discuss the continuing relevance of the Herman & Chomsky (1988) “propaganda model” critique of corporate media. His report highlights the broad-based recognition of the need for democratic media and the determination to achieve media reform.

One way to foster the cultural shift to more democratic media is by taking up Lewis & Jhally’s (1998) implicit challenge of becoming media producers while not becoming co-opted into existing educational inequities (p. 115). Lithgow writes on the importance of blogging in fostering literacy skills for cultural citizenship. He asserts that blogging and other alternative media have the “power to shape the cultural and political realities around us” and that its practitioners determine themselves what stories are to be told. In effect, we can act out our citizenship by ourselves becoming the media.

The campaign to find democratic media alternatives in the public interest is mirrored in the need to de-corporatize schools, lest they continue to resemble — in Giroux’s memorable phrase — “malls or jails” (2004, p. 1). Commercialized schools and educational policies are unlikely to foster critical understanding or action in pupil-consumers. Moreover, the current federal government mandated cuts to literacy programs earlier this year. This

lack of commitment to the ‘pre-basics’ for CML can only exacerbate exclusions from democratic citizenship.

In this fragile external policy environment, CML continues to make gains within pedagogical circles. One recent development is the publication of a 710-page book, simply titled *Media Literacy: A Reader* (Macedo & Steinberg, eds.), that acknowledges our emotional investments in the media and their aesthetic appeal at the same time as it recognizes how media constrain us and lead to Herman & Chomsky’s (1988) “manufacture of consent.” Another development is the thirst amongst educators for practical tools to use in the classroom, a thirst that takes them to such activities as the Summer Media Institute, a biennial hands-on conference in BC, described in Blake’s article. In recognition of how far CML has traveled, it has itself become the subject of critique. Luke (2000) writes of how, in his native Australia, CML is not a single project, or “a dominant approach to literacy, but teachers and students blending, shaping, and reshaping theories and practices in complex, clever, local and innovative ways” (p. 459). Morgan (n. d.) suggests that CML is “provisional, subject to supplementation and correction” (p. 6), and warns that context, too, must be interrogated just as text was or CML risks becoming a new pedagogical orthodoxy (p. 2).

These and other developments make the necessary Freirean transformative connections between theory and practice, understanding and action, and text and context, which “allows students to imagine ways of changing media systems and creates the possibility of a more

democratic media” (Lewis & Jhally, 1998, p. 2). In so doing, they not only help us to read between the lines of texts, but also to cross “borders of privilege and domination” (Giroux, 1991, p. x) in pursuit of more democratic citizenship and media.

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*For more articles on media education and educating the media, please go to CCPA’s new on-line edition of Our Schools/Our Selves at <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/index.cfm?act=main&call=A5671525>. Bonus articles include “What is critical literacy?” from Tasmania’s Department of Education and Barry Duncan’s “Media Studies: A Short List of Essential Resources.”*

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