Empowering Literacy: Media Education as a Democratic Imperative

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Introduction

There is almost universal consensus that the cultural environment within which we think about our identities and our places in the world has been radically transformed by the widespread diffusion of new media technologies based primarily on visual modes of representation. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall remarks of this shift, “The image, whether moving or still, has become the predominant sign of late-modern culture.” Consequently there is now widespread discussion among a broad variety of groups about the impact of the media. From classrooms to corporate boardrooms, from media arts centers to the halls of Congress, and from the American Medical Association to living rooms across the country, the subject of media influence (particularly on young people) has assumed great urgency in the public mind.

The explosion of the image is simultaneously a moment of great challenge and opportunity. As Italian novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco notes, “A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection – not an invitation for hypnosis.” And indeed it is around the notion of critical reflection, “the ability to access, analyze, interpret and produce media in a variety of forms,” that that field of media literacy has largely defined itself. British media scholar Len Masterman adds that the goal of such efforts within a democratic society should be to enable young people (and citizens) to achieve a level of critical autonomy in relation to any media text they may encounter.

Young people, who have grown up in homes where television is turned on an average of seven hours per day, vary between fascination and dismissal in their view of the media onslaught of which they are the prime targets. They are eager, even desperate at times, for new and intellectually rigorous ways to think about and interact with the media environment that has shaped their lives. They are cynical about much of the mass media but, like most citizens, have no language, and no analytical frameworks, to deploy to turn their anger into a reasoned and effective understanding of the media’s impact on American society. When they acquire these tools, through education, they feel not only more sophisticated, but also more empowered and better defended.

These new media conditions have thrust a concern with “media literacy” onto the forefront of discussion and debate in a variety of venues. The aim of this current report is to enter this discussion, to assess the state of the field of media literacy efforts in the United States and offer guidelines and recommendations to grant-making agencies as they think about how best to respond to the changing media environment from their own particular perspectives and interest areas.

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1 The preferred and widely circulated definition of media literacy within academe. See, for example, the AMLA literature at www.amlainfo.org.
From Consumers to Citizens

Given the sheer speed, spread and influence of contemporary mass media forms, their undeniable power within the public and political spheres, one might logically assume that media education has already made its way into the mainstream of American education. But such an assumption would be wrong. While media-oriented curricula have, indeed, been implemented in schools and community organizations around the country, there remains little consensus about the underlying meaning and purpose of media literacy and education. What one school or organization considers media education and literacy often differs in fundamental ways from the conceptions of others. The result is that media literacy in this country remains a fragmented field, a series of splinter groups united by a common belief that media are a worthy subject of analysis, but divided by fundamental differences at the level of basic definition. The history of media literacy in the United States is in many ways a history of competing ideas and assumptions about the very nature, value and purpose of media, education, and literacy itself.

While this report considers some of the debates within the media education and literacy field, its intention is not merely to reproduce these debates. Too often, surveys and evaluations of the field that are designed to define the field by defining its inherent historical and political tensions end up offering solutions that require and reproduce caricatures of competing views and approaches. Such efforts have in many ways done more to obscure the vital issues at stake, and the nuances inherent in specific movements, than to clarify how media literacy and education might help people inside and outside of our schools become better citizens rather than simply better consumers or technicians.

Recurring and ongoing debates and divisions within media literacy circles have typically obscured – often by simply failing to emphasize in the midst of the sheer complexity of these debates – what in many respects is a very simple argument: the need, at every turn, to link media education to the commercial mediation of information, and to link the commercial mediation of information to the core democratic principles of informed public deliberation and participation. This report therefore attempts to move beyond academic debates altogether to consider the more fundamental issues at stake here: specifically, the relationships between media and democracy, democracy and public education, and public education and media. Such consideration demands that we think about media education outside of traditional educational settings.

Our own assumptions, in the simplest terms, are these: that media education and literacy are, above all, democratic imperatives and necessities; that trends in media policy and ownership – especially their relation to how, why and what kind of content gets produced – have become increasingly alienated from basic democratic ideas and ideals; and that the abiding goal of media education should be to link critical viewing and thinking skills, aesthetic considerations, and production skills explicitly to a democratic understanding, critique and transformation of media institutions, information, educational institutions, and the very notion of literacy.
A central assumption of this report, then, is the perhaps self-evident observation that the commercial interests and motives that inform both the content and institutional structure of mass media forms are by no means synonymous with democratic interests and motives: that the commercialization of media represents, by definition, the commercialization of public space, public discourse, public deliberation and, increasingly, public education – the very life forces of a functioning democracy. This means that media education, if it is to attempt to educate people about media, must emphasize the commercial nature of mass media, specifically the commercial imperatives that shape both the form and content of media texts.2

With this central assumption as a starting point, some very distinctive working definitions of media literacy begin to emerge, definitions that move outside the potentially limited and limiting meanings traditionally associated with “literacy” to take fuller account of the goals of democratic education more generally conceived. In this way, for Robert McChesney, media literacy “would be education in not only what the content of media is, and how you can interpret it, but how and why it was produced, how and why the institutions that produce it produce it.” Framed as such, the explicit goal of media education becomes “not simply to be a better consumer of pre-existing choices and a critic of choices that are given you, but rather a citizen who understands why those are the choices you’re given, how those choices came to be, and what you can do to change them” (Personal Interview). In similar fashion, Henry Giroux argues against reductive definitions of media literacy that fail to place at the forefront the meanings and demands of democratic citizenship:

I’m very concerned about not reducing literacy to questions of competency and understanding, but also in a sense to link literacy and media education, per se, to the possibility of interpretation as intervention in the world. In other words, what might it mean to link questions of literacy not just to understanding, but to questions of agency? So that when we talk about media education and literacy being fundamental to [agency], we talk about understanding, we talk about modes of engagement, and we talk about strategies for actual intervention. That’s a very different way to theorize the relationship between theory and practice around any notion of media education. And it’s certainly at odds with those forms of media education that would be defined in a much more literal way, i.e. by [educational theorist] Diane Ravitch and that group that sees it as simply studying high culture, and learning how to dismiss anything that might be considered popular culture while at the same time removing any activist element from the notion of pedagogy. (Personal Interview)

This framing of media education as necessary to engaged citizenship does not equate with saying that “all media are bad,” that kids and the public more generally need be “protected” from the “evil” influences of media images and messages. It does not say that media do not offer pleasure and substance. It also does not suggest that media education should work as a sophisticated form of censorship. In our view, the incessant labeling of the kind of critical media education Giroux has in mind as media bashing, or

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protectionist, or anti-pleasure, or as advancing censorship misses the point. In this way, we would argue, it has had the pernicious effect, whether by design or not, of deflecting attention from the most fundamental and important issue at stake here: that the hold of commercial media on public space and information limits access to the diversity and flow of ideas and images necessary to a functional, free and open democratic society.

Reframing Media Education

By moving outside the frame of traditional academic debates around these issues we hope to put renewed focus where it belongs (and thereby, perhaps, to take some of the pressure off of academics): a focus on the relationship between mass media and democracy, and the role education might play in understanding this relationship.

It is important to clarify up front that we are arguing neither for media education as a form of paternalistic “inoculation,” or “protection,” from the “immoralities” of mass media content, nor for media education as a means to push for censorship of existing content. These arguments, while sometimes interesting, operate within the very media frame we feel media education needs to question; they remain fixated on media content and its reception to the exclusion of any real consideration of how and why content does and does not get produced in the first place. What we recommend, instead, is that we find better and more effective ways to help develop media literacy and education approaches that move beyond the safe limitations of what is considered pragmatically possible – approaches, that is, that shift the focus beyond the pragmatic limitations of what given educational institutions are thought capable of handling, and beyond what is presently given in media.

For media education to be meaningful, for it to meet the needs of the public, it must therefore:

• Conceptualize the educational needs of the public outside the institutional parameters of what we traditionally define as “public education;”

• Pay close attention to what is not given in media, to information, perspectives and ideas that get excluded;

• Pay particular attention to how and why this narrowing of the information flow occurs, and what the implications are, given that our media are supposed to be a function of democracy, not the other way around.

John Dewey, who in the early 20th century initiated an educational reform movement to democratize what he saw as undemocratic trends in American education, pointed to just this distinction. Dewey’s overall approach to educational reform derived from this basic idea: that differences in the very ways schools go about educating young people emanate from a fundamental distinction between the idea of “education as a function of society” and “society as a function of education” (Lentricchia 1). This distinction is particularly
relevant today. It signals a crucial difference between a philosophy that sees education as a way of helping people adapt to things as they are, and a philosophy that sees education as a means of inspiring and equipping students to transform and change society where it needs to be changed, especially to challenge threats to democracy and to help create a more substantial and vibrant democracy. As McChesney puts it,

The fundamental point that has to be raised is understanding that the media system that is being discussed in media literacy and education is nothing natural. It’s not even the result of the so-called free market. It’s the direct result of a series of explosive policies that have been made in the public’s name, but usually without the public’s informed consent. And these are policies that are being drafted all the time – they weren’t made 180 years ago. So the core of media literacy or education has to be to bathe these policies and the debates that generate them, in public participation – the core democratic value – on the assumption that the more democratic the understanding of the system and the participation in the policy-making is, the better the results will be. (Personal Interview)

Given the explosion of mass media into virtually every sphere of public and political life, we might do well to understand Dewey’s fundamental distinction between democracy as a function of education and education as a function of democracy in our own time this way: as the distinction between media education as a function of democratic society, and democratic society as a function of media education. Understood this way, we must choose whether we believe that media are adequately democratic institutions, and therefore that media education should help students become literate in media discourse, should help them navigate and understand the information given them, help them develop and refine their ability to consume what is given. Or whether we believe, fundamentally, that is necessary to question the too easy assumption that mass media are democratic institutions given their commercial constitution and their basic need to buy and sell audiences, to appeal to the public as consumers.

The point is this: If the former view stresses competency within existing media culture as a way of helping individuals function within a democracy, the latter view stresses the need to examine the potentially undemocratic or anti-democratic dynamics at work in media culture itself. This latter view in turn informs a view of media education as an essential means of understanding what is given in media as a specific kind of information and entertainment, with a specific purpose, and leads always to a sustained focus on the relationship between the exclusiveness of what our current media system gives us and the needs of citizens in a democracy. As Mark Crispin Miller puts it,

It’s a given that media literacy is important because people are beset by all kinds of propaganda images, images that attempt to move people to some kind of action or set of assumptions, without their knowledge, and more often than not against their best interest … Media literacy therefore also requires an attempt to clarify how the visual media have changed over time, both by the ever-growing sophistication of an ever-more benumbed audience and also by the fact of media concentration. (Personal Interview)

Starting, then, with the assumption that media education is a function of democratic society lends itself to an emphasis on media texts and the sophisticated consumption of those texts as they are given and received. The assumption that democratic society is
largely a function of media education lends itself to examining the conditions under and through which texts and information are produced and received, because it assumes that the workings of media are now absolutely inseparable from the way democracy does or does not work. The former assumption takes democracy for granted; the latter does not.

Taking democracy seriously, especially as the starting point of any examination of the value of American education, therefore requires not only that we refuse to take democracy for granted, but also that we not mystify the powers of literacy. There is nothing intrinsic in literacy that lends itself to democracy. Literacy doesn’t insure democracy – it simply gives it a chance to function. Media literacy likewise insures nothing if its base rationale is simply to develop and refine the competency of people who use media, to make them better consumers and perhaps technical producers of the media that everywhere shape their lives. In Giroux’s words,

I don’t understand at all what it would mean to separate questions of meaning from questions of power … I just don’t understand why we would want to talk about Hollywood without talking about concentrations of power. It can’t be done in any way that would do justice to questions of the circuit of movement and registers that would actually give a kind of breadth and depth to any definition of power.

Meaning is always connected to power – the issue here is not presuppose that meaning and power come together simply around questions of interpretation and text. That actually undermines a way to analyze literacy by suggesting that the opportunity for people to interpret what they see out there is simply a matter of individual choice and agency, and not something that’s already in many respects been staged by apparatuses of power that have the ability to limit the range of choices that people actually have.

(Personal Interview)

Along these lines, precisely, our argument is that media education can and must do more than what traditional notions of “literacy” might argue for. Media education must give context to literacy. Being media literate may help us to read and produce media texts with sophistication, but this alone means nothing in the context of democracy and the traditional value we place on citizenship in a hyper-mediated political and social environment. For media literacy to mean something in the context of democracy, we need to take it a step further than competency and proficiency. At the same time that we place value on being media literate, we need to take seriously the importance of getting educated about the origin and nature of the mass media system we have today, about where the system came from, the decisions that formed it, why these decisions prevailed, and how and why alternative visions failed. We need, in other words, not only to take media content and technology seriously, but also to take seriously the historical and institutional contexts in and through which media and technology have become what they have become. While media literacy can provide tools for functioning in and adapting to a mass-mediated world, media education can provide tools for understanding where that world came from and why.

Our baseline assumptions are therefore these:

- A functioning democracy requires an informed citizenry.
• Americans rely on mass media, especially television, for the vast majority of their information.
• Mass media are the primary educational forces of our time.
• Media education is a democratic and educational imperative.
• A functioning democracy therefore requires that diverse forms of information – including information about the business of media and media policy – are available to the public.

With these assumptions in mind, we want to suggest that media education must therefore work, simultaneously and with equal stress:

• To empower citizens, students and non-students alike, to develop and refine their pragmatic and critical ability to access and assess the range of information given them in a variety of media forms;
• To empower citizens, students and non-students alike, to develop and refine their critical understanding of why and to what end they have been given the media forms and content they have been given.

The Need for Media Education: Differing Premises

There can be little consensus about the definition and value of media education when there is so little consensus about why it is necessary in the first place. Any discussion of the issues involved must therefore begin with a discussion of need. The determination of need will determine the very rationale and shape of media education: its purpose, its place, its focus, and its priorities.

• If you begin with the premise that new technologies have created an explosion of information that is too fluid and too complicated to be accessed, navigated, processed and understood with the traditional skills of print-based literacy, then you are likely to make the pragmatic argument that media education is needed to help people to understand and function in a mediated world; media education then becomes a means of helping us adapt to a new world.

• If you begin with the premise that the transition from print to visual culture demands more developed and refined aesthetic sensibilities, then you are likely to argue that media education is needed as a necessary complement to traditional forms of literary and artistic education. Media education then becomes a means of adapting the traditional language arts curriculum to contemporary concerns, of making it more relevant to the lives of kids.

• If you begin with the premise that there is too much sex and violence in mainstream media, then you are likely to argue that media education is needed to protect kids from media’s potentially corrosive and harmful effects. Media education then becomes a means of empowering kids, developing their values and self-esteem in ways that diminish the power of media’s hold on them.
• If you begin with the premise that technology has provided an ever-increasing array of media content, of wildly varying quality, then you are likely to argue that media education is needed to help people discern the good from the bad, to cultivate tastes and a more refined appreciation of quality content. Media education then becomes a means of taste making, of enhancing sophistication.

• If you begin with the premise that media institutions, for all their faults, are first and foremost outlets for and of free expression, then you are likely to argue that media education is needed as an alternative to government censorship. Media education then becomes a means of developing individuals’ free and critical choices, an essential antidote to any abridgement of free expression in media by those who speak through media.

• If you begin with the premise that new forms of interactive technology like the Internet and digital technology have given media users unprecedented power and choice, then you are likely to argue that media education is needed to help people recognize and realize this power. Media education then becomes a means of increasing competency in media use.

• If you begin with the premise that commercial media content, especially advertising, operates via sophisticated forms of manipulation, then you are likely to argue that media education is needed to understand and defend against such techniques. Media education then becomes a means of developing the ability to read and interpret individual media texts critically.

• If you begin with the premise that critical thinking in the most general sense is the aim of all good education, then you are likely to argue that media education is needed as another way to achieve this goal. Media education then becomes a mode for developing critical thinking as an end in itself by other means.

• If you begin with the premise that we must always be on guard against taking a sustained critical look at how media operate because it can run perilously close to bashing the media, then you are likely argue that media education is needed to foster a more nuanced understanding of the potential benefits offered by media. Media education then becomes a means of developing a critical eye and therefore renewed appreciation for the potential of mass media.

• And finally, if you begin with the premise that mass media are overwhelmingly purveyors of unthinking, lowbrow trivia, then you are likely to argue that media education is not needed at all, that its presence in schools diminishes from more traditional and substantial intellectual pursuits. Media education becomes a code word for the “dumbing-down” of our kids and schools.

Each of these premises, sometimes in combination with one another, has led to distinctly different conceptions about the necessity, shape and future of media education. Fine and
sophisticated arguments for and against such conceptions of media literacy and education have recurred throughout the relatively brief history of the media literacy movement, often in the name of positioning one form or another of media education as viable or unviable, as workable or unrealistic, as being uniquely in touch or out of touch with the subject or the times. But a larger issue has been and continues to be concealed in and by such debates. Despite the real divergences in opinion and philosophy that these positions and this ongoing debate would seem to reveal, two common assumptions ground all of them:

1. That media literacy and education, no matter what form they take, should focus on individual responsiveness to media culture.
2. That media literacy and education must, by definition, be considered within the institutional frame of schools, with their attendant curricular and disciplinary demands.

Whether these assumptions translate into media literacy and education as a means of managing information flows or rejecting the specific content of these flows outright; as a means of appreciating quality programming or developing the ability to understand and critique its limitations; or as a means of using media content and technology to further traditional educational ends or to revise traditional forms of education – the common assumption is that media education should take media culture as it is given. In this way, media education functions either to help us cope better with media forms as they are, or to defend ourselves against them. What goes largely, if not completely, unquestioned is why media education should take for granted the media we have been given at all – why this should be the necessary starting point from which all else derives. Forgotten is McChesney’s most crucial and persistent insight: that there is nothing natural about the media system and the content it generates, and that it is unnatural in a democracy not to be educated about the decisions that make the system what it is.

A different set of assumptions, based on a different set of realities, therefore leads to a dramatically different set of questions. And this in turn leads to a very different approach to media education – one founded on the uncontroversial notion that education is fundamental to democracy, and that democracy depends fundamentally on an informed and responsible citizenry with enough power and voice to participate and deliberate meaningfully in the democratic process. There are two beginning assumptions here: that education is the lifeblood of democracy, and that media education, by definition and despite all of its cool and seemingly alternative surface appeal, must be conceptualized from the outset along traditional, even traditionalist, democratic lines of thinking. Simply put: If we take democracy seriously, and if we take education seriously as fundamental to democracy, then we need to understand clearly what media education can do to enhance democracy and democratic citizenship.

Of course, even at this seemingly benign stage of the discussion, fault lines are likely to emerge. For example, if your view of education in a democracy is that it should first and foremost prepare the young for work, then you might well be willing to pay only lip service to the claims of those who believe education should do more than give people
professional or vocational training and skills, especially for kids at the primary and secondary level. If there is disagreement over whether education should be in the business of empowering kids to empower themselves enough to have an informed say in the decisions that will affect their lives as adults, then there will be fundamental disagreement about the purpose of media literacy and education. Likewise, if the democratic imperatives of education are acknowledged, but placed in line with or behind a list of allegedly equal or greater concerns, then there will be fundamental disagreement with those who see the democratic mission of schools, and education generally, as fundamental to media education itself.

For media education to be meaningful, it needs to engage an entirely different set of realities, specifically and explicitly the ways in which commercial media have come to dominate public space and discourse. Media education needs to take seriously and draw from a wide and growing body of work that has examined the nature and consequences of corporate ownership of media. David Bollier’s book Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of Our Common Wealth is characteristic of a spate of political economic work concerned with just this threat to democracy: the corporate colonization of public discourse and previously public domains, a full-scale market takeover of “that vast range of resources that the American people collectively own, but which are rapidly being enclosed: privatized, traded in the market, and abused” (4). Bollier, consistent with the work of others concerned about the disappearance of public space and the commercialization of public discourse, examines the corporate takeover of media and commercialization of the broadcast airwaves, the Internet and childhood experience, pointing to what Robert McChesney has described as the “media’s fundamental significance for the operations of modern societies [and] how the content and social function of media systems are determined by their economic structures” (“The Place of Politics” 12). Media education must of course teach students to critically engage media texts, but it must also teach them to engage media institutions as institutions.

That said, for media education to move beyond text-driven approaches, it needs to do so against three key barriers:

1. The perception that challenging ownership is somehow too “left-wing” or anti-capitalist to take hold in essentially conservative institutional settings like the public schools;
2. That challenging ownership somehow represents a brand of a priori thinking that renders students passive to the anti-corporate radical agenda of teachers;
3. That challenging corporate ownership threatens to alienate the increasing availability of corporate funding for media education and literacy programs.

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These three barriers themselves speak to the need for supporting the development of media education approaches outside the narrow frame of the public schools. Schools do not exist in a vacuum. They themselves exist within the very media culture that media literacy and education are ostensibly designed to understand and challenge. As public institutions, their policies, curriculum design, funding, etc., are never free of the commercial imperatives and corporate logic that increasingly drive mainstream American politics, and therefore mainstream political and popular views of education. One of the key goals of media education, then, needs to be to change the politics of public education by changing the way the public understands media. With so much of what we know of media delivered by commercial media outlets themselves, media education becomes a necessary means of doing what media, by definition, cannot: taking a step back from its baseline commercial motives to account for the larger social and political impact of media on democracy.

When we persist in thinking that this kind of education is something solely for kids in school, we perpetuate a longstanding, historic confusion about the point of media education. It becomes a subject in school, rather than a basic requirement for informed citizenship; in the process, it loses to institutional concerns and demands its most important justification: understanding who and what drive media policy, and how it affects our lives. When the politicians who make educational policy are the same politicians who make media policy, and when those same politicians are financed by the very corporate interests that fund and profit from media, then media education needs to be more than a way to prepare kids for life in the digital age. As McChesney puts it, “Every day the federal government generates communication policies, regulations, and subsidies that determine the nature of our media system, our journalism, and our culture. The politicians on the relevant congressional committees are swimming in contributions from these corporate lobbies … That is why the airwaves were handed over to commercial interests, why copyright has been transformed into protective legislation for powerful media firms, why advertising and commercial ballyhoo permeate our lives” (“The Place of Politics” 12).

The need for media education grows out of precisely this: the threat to media education posed by the way media themselves work to exclude real discussion of just these issues. In McChesney’s words, “These policies have not been the topic of much public debate. They get little press attention, except for the occasional ‘business’ story, of interest to investors and managers, not citizens in a democracy. And the overwhelming majority of Americans, not to mention most members of Congress, are largely oblivious to them” (“The Place of Politics” 13). Media education, framed this way, is what needs to happen outside of school, in the wider public domain, to change the very political culture that shapes the way schools view media education. If media education is to take hold in the schools, it needs to make sense outside of schools first.
A Brief History of Media Literacy in the United States: From Cooperation to Opposition and Back Again

A review of the history of media education and literacy in the U.S. is a review of its life and death in American schools. The history of media education in the United States is cyclical, and in many ways, we find ourselves today where we began. Initial calls in the 1930s and through the 1960s for media education to provide students with the ability to adapt better, and consume with more sophistication, the media content targeted at them, gave way to the critical viewing movements of the 70s, which challenged the very essence of what it was kids were being asked to adapt to and consume. Industry-friendly approaches were replaced by approaches hostile to what the industry was producing. This critical turn gave way to mid-century-style, industry-friendly approaches in the 1980s, when the momentum of the critical viewing movement was de-funded and ridiculed outright for its belief that television was a worthy object of study, and for its allegedly reductive take on media content and its presumed effects. The critical media literacy and education movement therefore withered under the combined pressure of conservative political opposition to the validity of media education and criticism from within the ranks of the media literacy movement itself that consumers of media were more than passive recipients of unhealthy messages in need of protection from educators who knew less about the pleasures and complexities of mass media than their students. The circle is now complete. In the 1990s and up to the present, the most influential and pervasive media education initiatives in the country now fit well enough within the demands and logic of the commercial media industry to win its approval and funding.

Calls for media literacy began with the rise of commercial radio in the early 1930s, when “a group of English teachers who were part of the local chapter of the American Association of University Women (AAU) in Madison, Wisconsin, became concerned about the new medium and decided to form a study committee on radio evaluation” (www.Telemediacouncil.org). The group’s mission was to “develop awareness, critical evaluation, and appreciation of quality programming,” and has remained so through several incarnations to the present. With the arrival of television, the original council renamed itself the American Council for Better Broadcasting (ACBB) in 1953, and in 1983 changed its name again in response to “new technologies” that “further expanded” its “choices and horizons,” becoming the National Telemedia Council (NTC). Since 1950, the organization’s work has included polling audiences about radio and TV programs, creating a syllabus for TV content analysis, and the development of media literacy curricula.

Despite name changes, changes in focus, changes in technology, and changes in the media industry, NTC remains to this day committed to its original evaluative mission, a mission it continues to frame in opposition to what it perceives as misguided criticism of the media industry. In its view, media literacy is a form of “critical” awareness that provides the means for greater appreciation of “excellent” media content. As the NTC home page declares, “While the scope has expanded over the years, our purpose, which was already well defined in those early years, has become further strengthened – to develop an aware, critical audience, and to take a positive attitude toward achievements
in excellence rather than a negative attitude toward mass media. This philosophy, more difficult to pursue effectively than the more common negative approaches, made the organization unique among grass-roots citizens groups of its time.” Stressing its “more difficult” desire to “help our young people to turn the television experience into an active, constructive part of their lives,” its overall mission remains grounded in a definition of media literacy and education as a means of adapting to the status quo – its primary aim to inspire kids to “cooperate” with the media industry as it is: “From the beginning we have taken a positive, non-judgmental attitude and embraced a philosophy that values reflective education and cooperation rather than confrontation with the media industry.”

The example of the National Telemedia Council is important not because of any excessive influence it wields as an organization, but because its informing principles so clearly reflect one side of an ongoing debate within the media literacy movement between those who emphasize, whether on pragmatic, philosophical or political grounds, the need for media education to fit with or within the basic commercial and corporate logic of the media industry, and those who see media education as a necessary way to protect young people from that logic, whether in the name of morals, values or basic concern for kids’ health and well-being. Our concern, here, is not with whether the former perspective – what we might call the pragmatist group – has sold its soul to the very corporate media industry it claims to be critically examining; nor is it with whether the latter perspective – representing what some might call the “protectionists” – suffer from moral panic that blinds them to the aesthetic complexities of media content and the complicated dynamics in which media texts are interpreted differently from person to person. These kinds of characterizations on both sides are so common in the media literacy literature that they warrant little attention here. Our argument, again, is that these arguments have tended to distract attention from a broader conception of media education as a democratic imperative.

The cooperative stance was countered at the end of the sixties and through the 1970s with the rise of the critical viewing movement and the development of “critical viewing skills (CVS) curricula” (Tyner 134). In 1969, responding to concerns about television violence, the National Education Association (NEA) recommended the development and inclusion of critical viewing curricula. At the same time, independent researchers James Anderson and Milton Ploghoft joined with Ohio University to develop the Critical Receivership Skills Project, producing media literacy curricula for a number of U.S. school districts. These first attempts to organize a critical approach to media gained momentum at the start of the 70s, when two widely publicized reports, one from the Surgeon General’s Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior in 1972, the other from the National Institute of Mental Health, trained a critical light on the potentially destructive effects of commercial television and mass media content on viewers. As Tyner notes, media literacy was coming into its own, driven by public concern, a political mandate, and significant financial backing from both public and private sources: “Buoyed by ample funding and a sense of optimism, media education in the 1970s was at its peak” (134).
Some of the key moments of this early and in some ways formative period include:

- **1964**: UNESCO issues a report from Norway recommending that critical viewing skills be added to traditional educational curricula (Tyner 134).
- **1969**: Anderson and Ploghoft launch the Critical Receivership Skills Project in conjunction with Ohio University (Tyner 134).
- **1970**: New York City’s public television station, WNET, works with local schools to help bring television into the classroom, a project later backed by the U.S. Office of Education (Heins and Cho 7).
- **1970**: Anderson and Ploghoft launch the Television Viewer Skills Project in Eugene, Oregon, focusing on techniques of media persuasion (Heins and Cho 7).
- **1970**: The National Council of Teachers of English formerly recommends the use and study of "non-print texts" (i.e., film and television) in the classroom (Heins and Cho 7).
- **1973**: The Ford Foundation issues a report on television’s influence on young people, challenging schools to make mass media literacy, like language literacy, an integral part of a child’s education (Tyner 134).
- **1974**: The Media Action Research Center (MARC) is launched in New York City, funded by government and non-profit groups, with an emphasis on the disconnection between Christian values and mass media content (Heins and Cho 7).
- **1976**: Ford Foundation, Markle Foundation, and the National Science Foundation fund the Television and Children Conference, which produces recommendations for a media education curriculum that includes emphasis on textual analysis of content, persuasive techniques, the economics of television, values, and student production (Tyner 134-135).
- **1978**: U.S. Library of Congress and the U.S. Office of Education hold a conference on “Television, the Book and the Classroom” (Tyner 135), calling for the development of critical viewing projects for primary and secondary schools, and adult education programs.
- **1979**: The U.S. Office of Education funds the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development’s proposal for secondary education; the Southwest Educational Laboratories’ proposal for elementary education; WNET, New York’s proposal for middle school; and Boston University’s proposal for adult education (Tyner 135).

For all of this activity and promise, the momentum of the media literacy movement in the 1970s was reversed in the 1980s. The Federal funding of CVS projects by President Jimmy Carter’s Office of Education dried up almost as quickly as it materialized during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. In Tyner’s view, “The media literacy projects of the 1970s were amply funded, the materials were professional and creative, and the curricula received high evaluations from teachers who used them. In spite of this, as soon as funding ran out for these projects, around 1981, media education activities “ground to a halt in the United States” (138).
The small amount of activity in the 1980s reflects both sides of this cyclical dynamic. From the so-called protectionist front, the U.S. Catholic Conference in 1982 released a new curriculum called *The Media Mirror: A Study Guide on Christian Values on Television*. And in the same year, from the “don’t-bash-media” front, the National Telemedia Council launched "Project Look-Listen-Think-Respond."

In 1982, despite the relative regression and stagnation of the movement in the U.S., an International Symposium on Media Education was held by UNESCO in Grünwald, Germany. The result was a "Declaration on Media Education" that called for the international development of media education at all grade levels. The purpose: “To develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes which will encourage the growth of critical awareness and, consequently, of greater competence among the users of electronic and print media” (www.unesco.org).

In the late 1980s, back in the U.S., Kathleen Tyner and Liz Thoman emerged as key figures in the movement. In 1987, Tyner founded Strategies for Media Literacy in San Francisco, and set about developing media education materials and training workshops. And in 1989, Thoman founded the Los Angeles-based Center for Media and Values, which in 1994 became the Center for Media Literacy.

The 1990s saw the publication of a number of new media education curricula and a number of conferences on media literacy and education, the most influential sponsored by the Aspen Institute in 1992. The focus of the conference was to define and stabilize a field that to that point was perceived as being what Patricia Aufderheide characterized as “a blizzard of idiosyncratic projects, typically driven by the passion of individual teachers and organizers” and lacking “a central mission or mandate” and basic “infrastructure” (Heins and Cho 13-14).

While the impetus behind and recommendations of the Aspen conference led to an increased focus on teacher training and development, it also pointed to a difficulty that persists today: *how to fit media education not only within the existing curricula of public schools, but to do so successfully within the structural dynamics, pressures and limitations of public educational institutions that are themselves subject to the very political dynamics that shape media institutions*. The point, again, is that while it may be true that attempts to develop and implement meaningful media education programs in the U.S. have been short-circuited by cyclical debates, it may also be true that the very nature of the debate has reproduced itself by systematically excluding a key point of consensus.

The reason this perennial debate – between the so-called “protectionists” and those who feel they offer a more sophisticated take on the nature of media and media experience -- is worth considering, is precisely because it underscores the need for an entirely new way of looking at media education.

Consider that while Tyner lays blame for the shift in policy in the 1980s to new concerns with drugs and crime and conservative calls for a return to traditional basics in education, she also places blame on the CVS movement itself – specifically what she sees as its
limited and limiting focus on television, more specifically, the pernicious effects of content. This dual emphasis, she argues, continues today to inform a misguided media literacy approach in the U.S. that blames mass media and seeks to protect children from their negative effects. In her most recent work, speaking in the present, she is therefore led to the conclusion that “media literacy movements in the United States tend to be cyclical … never venturing far from top-down, protectionist rhetoric” (140). The question that needs to be posed and seriously considered is whether the very way this “debate” continues to get framed may itself be at least partly responsible for the tentativeness of the movement to date.

Tyner cites as one of the failures of the critical viewing movement in the 70s its reductionist focus on television, arguing that “media education was narrowly confined to a television universe devoid of troublesome cultural context” and because the idea “that television should be isolated as a medium of study because of its ‘power’ was simply assumed” (136). In this way, she advances two lines of argument that continue to shape media literacy debates today: The belief that “protectionist” approaches to media literacy and education are culturally unsophisticated and have tin ears when it comes to culture. And the belief that the power of television cannot be assumed, that “the public’s response to television is one of ambivalence” (137). Tyner’s critique of these assumptions, while perhaps insightful about the limits of media approaches that aim only to protect kids from media content, itself reproduces an assumption that limits the potential scope of media education.

While it is important that television be understood in the context of other cultural factors, as Tyner argues, it is also important to understand that culture can no longer be so easily bracketed off from something called “television,” a move she makes that in a sense reproduces the very technicist mentality she critiques. Television is culture, and media are culture. And as such, to talk about the power of television or mass media is to talk about the power of culture to shape impressions of the world cumulatively, not in terms only of the isolated or isolable messages or content within it, but of what TV does to recycle and repeat certain ideas, commercial motives, cultural forms and phenomena. The point must be to examine and understand the power of TV, given its sheer presence in American culture, to promote certain points of view and to crowd out others. The content issue therefore comes down to nothing more complicated than a question of the diversity of content, or the lack thereof; it is not a matter of believing that certain kinds of content should be censored, but of believing that democracy requires that some space be cleared in the public airwaves – and in our public schools – for a greater diversity of content and ideas.

Tyner herself sees a way out of this cyclical history via “critical democratic approaches to media education,” which, she observes, “show promise in moving the field” away from protectionist approaches that seek to blame media, rather than to critically understand and more efficiently use and experience them. Hailing such a democratic-minded approach for its dedication to “strengthening democratic institutions,” she explains its rationale as follows:
If an informed electorate is the cornerstone of a democratic society, and, if the polls that report that most North Americans get their news and information from electronic media are correct, then it is imperative that students must learn to read and write electronic media, as well as print, in order to fully participate in a democratic society. (162)

Without providing anything further about what this kind of democratic media education might consist of or do, in the remaining ten paragraphs of her discussion she focuses on how teaching democratic principles in U.S. classrooms presents a “problem” because “most schools do not operate as democratic institutions;” because of school safety concerns; because school architecture is out of synch; because of class size. While her point seems to be that all of these things present barriers to “democratic pedagogy,” it is never quite clear why she makes this shift to structure and pedagogy at all – why, for example, the same concerns would not be relevant to a discussion about the teaching of American history and democracy.

For our purposes, Tyner’s comments are instructive because they are characteristic of some of the basic misunderstandings that have deflected serious consideration of the democratic necessity and value of media education. What is crucial here is that the argument that “critical democratic approaches to media education” need to focus on helping students “read and write electronic media, as well as print,” fails to make explicit what such “reading” would entail. Given the democratic rationale for this kind of media education, would it mean reading the way media policy gets made? Would it mean reading those views and texts that technically cannot be read by virtue of the fact that they are systematically excluded from mainstream media? Regardless of the answers to such questions, the larger point is this: The stakes are simply too high to settle for such ambiguity in serious discussions about media, education, and democracy. The effect of such ambiguity is to complicate what otherwise might be a very clear, straightforward and consensus-building picture of the need for media education at a time when, as Tyner herself notes, democratic participation and deliberation are so dependent on media.

The Debates: A Closer Look

These contested framings of the very meaning of media education lie at the heart of ongoing debates within the field. By looking at how these debates have been framed, we might begin to understand not only why there seems to be widespread consensus that media education has foundered in the United States, but also whether and to what extent the way the debate itself has been framed may be partly responsible for reproducing this lack of consensus. Once again, the point here is not simply to recycle debates that have already been extensively recycled. It is to determine how media education might 1) begin to achieve cohesion in focus and meaning as a movement in our schools, and 2) might begin to be understood as something that needs to develop and take hold outside of schools in order to change the way we think about the social and political role of education in light of the social and political role played by media.
Arguably the most influential and widely quoted account of these debates comes from media literacy expert Renee Hobbs. In “The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement,” she argues that there are seven key debates that are “foundational, that is, that these seven questions define the field of inquiry for practitioners at the present time,” that they are “essentially framing questions that explicitly or implicitly guide the classroom practice of those educators who teach with and about the media” (18).

According to Hobbs, these debates involve questions about the following: (1) whether or not media literacy should “aim to protect children and young people from negative media influences”; (2) whether production should be “an essential feature” of media education; (3) whether pop culture texts are a valid focus of media education; (4) whether media literacy should have “a more explicit political and ideological agenda”; (5) whether media education belongs in the K-12 curricula; (6) whether media literacy is best taught as a discrete subject or integrated throughout the existing curriculum; and (7) whether media literacy efforts should be financed by media organizations.

Hobbs’s account of the framing of these issues is essentially descriptive, but her description allows her to frame the issues herself, especially with regard to questions about the “protectionist” impulse and the “political agenda” she sees at work in some approaches. Hobbs critiques approaches that seek to protect young people from the negative influence of media on the grounds that there is no clear evidence that such negative influence exists, and that to proceed as if it does not only reducing the complexity and potential of media to its most pathological content, but also the complexity of students’ experience of media to mere passivity (19). A larger concern for Hobbs is that such a view places the teacher in a position of superiority over the student, short-circuiting both the sophistication of students’ experience with media, and student power in the classroom. As she puts it, “When media literacy skills are positioned in opposition to media culture, the quality of instruction is compromised,” leading to a “rescue” fantasy with teachers who see students as “helpless victims” rather than engaging “the genuine pleasures” students may receive from media. The result of such reductions, Hobbs argues, may be an instructor-focused classroom” that “may cause students to parrot the correct interpretations – the one the teacher has sanctioned” – in ways that may undermine the “authenticity” and “relevance” of media literacy education to students’ lives (19).

This line of reasoning carries over into Hobbs’s discussion and critique of what she sees as the explicitly political agenda of approaches that “serve as a means to achieve a range of progressive political ends” and “social change” (22). Citing Buckingham, she warns that the belief that media literacy education should call attention to the institutional and political economic constitution of the media industry risks being “propagandistic;” in keeping with her critique of the “protectionist” stance, this in turn may encourage students to “either play the game” of teachers and “learn to reproduce ‘politically correct’ responses without necessarily investigating their own position,” or to “refuse to do so, in

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order to annoy the teacher and thereby amuse themselves” (22). Hobbs makes clear the underlying assumptions that inform her characterization: that “knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with media literacy education should be understood as independent goals, not simply as means to other ends” (23).

What’s important here is not so much Hobbs’s contention that the kind of “explicitly political” tenor of librating media literacy strategies advanced by educators such as Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux “may be unlikely to be accepted in the de-centralized, and community-centered context of mainstream public education.” What’s important is that she moves well beyond this understandably pragmatic consideration into the theoretical credibility of such transformative, democratic approaches. Media literacy education that focuses on ownership, political economy, media policy and the institutional realities of commercial media are set in opposition to approaches “that maximize the students potential for discovery and the realization of personal, social, or political action without pushing a specific agenda on students” (29). Likewise, for Hobbs, “teaching students to question textual authority and to use reasoning to reach autonomous decisions” is a “radical enough” agenda, “without adding additional baggage associated with explicitly formulated political or social objectives” (29). Giroux takes issue with precisely this kind of common academic and political suspicion whenever media education attempts to focus explicitly on questions of democracy:

It seems to me that any pedagogical intervention is precisely directive. I mean, as Paolo Friere said many times, when we talk about pedagogy, we’re talking about an act not just of interpretation. We’re talking about a directive intervention that recognizes that pedagogy is both a political and moral practice, and not simply a neutral practice, and not simply a technical practice. Now, knowing that, what does that mean? It seems to me we have to theorize what it might mean to make a distinction between molding students and providing the conditions for them to, in a sense, not only engage in a culture of questioning, but also to learn those knowledges and skills that would expand the possibility for them to be political and social agents.

In that sense I’m guilty – yes. I believe that pedagogy is interventionist; I believe that at the same time it does suggest a project. Yes I believe that it is directive. But at the same time I do not believe in the notion that’s being advanced everywhere, all of a sudden, in mass media, that any project associated with pedagogy is by default an act of indoctrination. I mean we need to make a distinction between what it means to set the conditions for students to become critical and, at the same time, empowered social agents, and what it means to not be able to engage in a pedagogy of terrorism. (Personal Interview)

Hobbs’s characterization and assessment of the kind of media education we recommend in this report is nevertheless instructive. The inherent institutional and political conservatism of many public school systems may indeed present a barrier to implementing media literacy education curricula that challenge the undemocratic structures of media control and production. But this is not at all the same thing as saying that such curricula are inherently “propagandistic.” The easy association of media education approaches that take seriously the nature and history of the media industry as necessary objects of study with “political correctness” and the degradation of students’ individuality deflects attention, by way of caricature, away from the essentially
democratic value of such approaches. Ironically, in the name of complexity, ambiguity and pluralism, Hobbs advances the argument that these approaches are reductive only by reducing their actual complexity and potential. As McChesney observes,

I don’t think the idea of looking at the way the industry is structured, and the way government policies create a type of industry, presupposes the nature of the critique, any more than a critique of the content presupposes the nature of the critique. It’s really a question of what’s going to be part of the legitimate terrain, and what isn’t, and it should be considered that way. It shouldn’t be rhetorically dismissed as being propagandistic, because that’s not relevant whatsoever. You know, if Renee Hobbs or others believe that media literacy should just deal with what exists and doesn’t even ask why it exists, that’s fair enough for her belief. I think that is a very short-sighted and one-dimensional view of media and culture, and one that sort of gets you into a sort of vicious circle of getting on a treadmill and never really understanding the system you’re in, rather than of trying to defend yourself from it. (Personal Interview)

Even granting Hobbs her argument that such approaches are unlikely to fit neatly within the highly contested and politically charged arena of our public schools, then, we would nevertheless draw a sharply different conclusion: that embracing media education as a form of democratic critique and social change does not mean “adding additional baggage” to existing media education curricula, so much as it means seeing value in developing additional content to supplement what she herself feels should be included.

There are, then, two separate issues at stake here: The need to reconsider the way media education debates have been framed within the limits of traditional educational spheres in ways that reproduce misrepresentations of what a truly democratic form of media education might look like and do; and the need to think outside of these limitations about the nature and value of media education more generally conceived – not as a means to develop critical thinking skills as an end in themselves; but as a means of assuring that we all, students and non-students alike, are truly educated about the nature of media and their relationship to democracy.

This way of conceptualizing the issue points to the fundamental need to focus our attention on places other than the public schools, to open up our definition of media literacy and education so that it focuses on the needs of adults as well. Once again, debates about and definitions of media education that stay within the narrow limits of curriculum development, educational policy and politics, and the pragmatic institutional pressures faced by educators in our public schools reproduce the basic misconception that media education is something for kids. This in turn lends itself to timidity with regard to larger questions of power and democracy, which limits thinking about how media education might function as a basic and necessary means of educating the general public about the political and public implications of media.

This more general focus points us in a number of directions, all informed by the basic assumption that it is crucial to reinvigorate the public debate about the role of media as currently structured in relation to larger democratic ideals and concerns. In this way, it becomes essential that we focus our energies on opening up and enlivening the way we understand and talk about media. And given that the very objects of such an analysis,
media institutions themselves, are the chief guardians of public discourse, this means investing in alternative forms of public information. Only by extending our notion of media education so that it takes into consideration the pedagogical power of places like community organizations, the full range of non-academic institutions, books, and media content itself, can we begin to see the value of investing in the development and public distribution of information that is currently all but invisible to the general public.

The bottom line is that changing how media education might work to connect a critical examination of the commercial and corporate logic of media to the demands of a democratic society must happen outside, as well as inside, traditional educational spheres. Educational policy is always the product of educational politics, and politics derives always from those – institutions and individuals – who have the power to tell the stories that shape and justify policy. Until we challenge and change this larger cultural and political dynamic, until we demand space for the kinds of stories that have no place, motive or stock in a commercial media system governed by other motives entirely, it is unlikely that the state of media education in our schools will overcome these crippling academic debates and achieve its truly democratic potential. In this sense, a media educated public may be a prerequisite for media education to work in our schools.
Recommendations

Based on our previous discussion of what is at stake in the ongoing debates around media literacy and media education, and the necessity to reinvigorate a societal-wide debate about the structures and organization of the commercial media, we make the following recommendations to funders.

1) Support media education approaches and organizations that frame media explicitly as a public space, and that work explicitly to inspire a critical awareness of mass media’s relationship to the public interest as a democratic imperative. The central goal of media education must be to enhance critical citizenship and social agency, and to foreground – rather than making it part of a list of potential approaches – the virtual impossibility of core democratic principles to flourish in a society so saturated by media that are themselves not democratized.

2) Support media education approaches and organizations that take into account how our schools are in direct competition with media, and therefore can no longer be taken for granted as the primary places where students learn; that take into account how literacy itself – whether we want to recognize it or not – is increasingly shaped outside the traditional educational sphere.

3) Support the development and delivery of educational content that foregrounds issues of media ownership and political economy in relation to questions of democracy and democratic participation.

4) Support the development of innovative and inter-disciplinary graduate programs in media literacy, bringing together scholars from disciplines such as education, communication and film to provide teachers-in-training the skills they need to wed aesthetic and formal concerns to issues of political economy and democracy.

5) Support efforts to do outreach to educators, school boards, and academics about the importance of media education in the public sphere -- as well as to politicians and others involved with setting budgets and goals for education.

6) Support independent work that examines the relationship between media policy, technology and democracy with the express purpose of educating the public about media.
Conclusion: Media Literacy Education and the Triumph of Conservatism

Media literacy on the one hand fights a battle for credibility, forever trying to justify itself as a worthy field of study as guardians of high culture attack what they perceive to be the dumbing down of curricula that have opened themselves to pop culture. “Traditionalists” like William Bennet, Diane Ravitch and others who would purge pop culture from the curriculum for a return to the Great Books succeed in this regard: they fan the flames and define the terms of debate within the media literacy movement itself. Media literacy education becomes reactive to conservative political attacks rather than responsive to the incursion of commercial media into an ever-widening sphere of public life and discourse. It loses its potential to offer a sustained consideration of the corporate and commercial threat to traditional democratic values as it responds to criticism that is actually part of a larger liberal educational trend that has contributed to the erosion of traditional values. The end result in such an environment – an environment that itself points to the absence of and need for a countervailing public voice in the so-called culture wars – is that media literacy professionals spend a lot of time justifying themselves.

One effect of this is that the focus of media education on pop culture itself comes to demand justification. As discussed above, this in turn leads to media literacy approaches which favor the inherent complexities of media’s “higher forms,” the ambiguities of content, and feed the constant need to justify the study of media content by forever pointing out that, at their best, media and their “readers” often engage traditional literary and aesthetic forms. This line of thinking in turn reproduces the very high-low cultural distinction that forces media literacy education to justify itself in the first place, even as it attempts to justify the place of pop culture in the curriculum.

One way this literary justification for media studies plays out involves the question of pleasure, which raises questions about the very nature and meaning of media content. While the concept of kitsch has worked as a description of media content that is designed, at base, to appeal as widely as possible to mass sentiment and sensation, and to shut down critical thought and deep experience, pleasure models of media literacy attempt to disrupt the inherent bias they see in this formulation – a separation, again, between high and low that negates, they say, the actual lived experience of media by young people, the sophisticated pleasures they take in media. This leads to the repeated suspicion or condemnation of “protectionist” media literacy approaches that seem to ignore the individual experience and potential pleasures that come from a deep engagement with media content. To bracket pleasure, the argument goes, is dangerous pedagogically because it refuses to meet students on their own ground, refuses to take their experiences seriously and reduces these experiences to the deluded products of a false consciousness that can be cured by an apparently pleasure-phobic teacher who knows better.
Of course, this repeated characterization derives much of its force by working from a highly restrictive notion of pleasure. Another conception of pleasure unaccounted for in such characterizations is what Henry Giroux calls “the learned pleasure of analysis” (Personal Interview)—the kind of pleasure one derives from stepping back from immediate impressions to understand them more fully. Far from a radical proposition, this is the very rationale of education generally.

The point here is that the essentially conservative framing of educational and cultural concerns, generally, has had the effect of deflecting serious consideration from media literacy education approaches that are committed to understanding the relationship between the corporate and commercial control of media and the demands of democracy. In such a context, literary justifications emerge to answer “traditionalist” charges that studying media is frivolous, and ambiguity becomes the order of the day: ambiguity as an aesthetic as opposed to a political value, all in a way that feeds the tendency of liberal educators to prefer a plurality of media education approaches capable of matching the plurality of media experience. The goal of media education in such a context becomes to encourage critical thinking as an end in itself.

What ends up being pushed to the margins in such a political and theoretical environment is the crucial question of access. And how questions of access get framed are themselves intimately linked to these recurring debates about the place of pleasure and the agency of media consumers. For the question is whether the hyper-commercial media system and content we have, at least to some extent, is simply a reflection, the end product, of what people want, and whether the ideas that dominate media—from the scripts of sitcoms to the plots of big budget Hollywood thrillers to themes and flash of advertising to the sensationalism in local news—have achieved this hegemony simply because of good market research and the responsiveness of media producers to the desires of the public. In this view, focusing on pleasure itself becomes a democratic act. If we fail to pay attention to people’s desires, to the pleasurable aspects of consumption as they relate to media content, the thinking is that we risk missing how media institutions, while commercial, nevertheless must always account for the desires of the public in a democracy. We risk making the incredible claim that we can somehow stand outside the very system we believe is a key shaping force in our overall sense of reality, forever wagging our fingers, railing against the evils of pleasure, always looking behind the cool and often ironic surface of media content for some a priori meaning that reduces pleasure and the way people watch to economic determinants. The question, then, is this: should we read the limited range and commercial mediation of ideas we find in mass media as expressions of public sentiment for those ideas?

Coming to terms with this kind of argument requires coming to terms with questions about access. When Americans gave away the broadcast system to advertisers in 1934, the fact is that media content became dependent on advertising revenues rather than public service. Content therefore became a way to deliver audiences to advertisers. This logic alone at least raises basic questions about the ability of media to serve explicitly

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public and democratic interests. The blanket commercialization of the airwaves means that most of what goes on there places its highest premium on appealing to audiences as consumers, not as public citizens in a democratic society who require access to as great a diversity of information as possible – not least, access to extensive information about the very nature and source of those forms of “public” information that are readily and pervasively available.

Questions of access, then, lead back to questions of audience, and they raise larger questions about whether there actually exists an audience at all for the kind of alternative, public-service oriented, critical media content that we see as the essence of any form of media education. One line of thinking seems to be that this kind of material is only likely to have an audience in schools, because in schools, by definition, the audience is captive. The view that there are no real choices being made in such a situation seems to inform the beliefs of those, like Hobbs⁶, who see this kind of approach as contradicting its very democratic pretensions by forcing views on others rather than cultivating their ability to make their own choices. But what this view misses is the question of diversity, and whether we believe that education, the ability to access information necessary to the public interest, and democracy itself, require as great and wide a range of expression as possible. Such views may be unpopular, but the expression of minority views – if this is indeed what they are, when properly understood – is a fundamental pillar of democracy.

These competing perceptions about the kind of work our schools should be doing expose another fundamental inconsistency at the heart of conservative claims about the value of “traditional” literacy, and liberal media educators acclimation to these claims. The arguments of conservative “high-culture” defenders such as William Bennett, Diane Ravitch, Allan Bloom and E.D. Hirsch have argued precisely for a return to “traditional” education and curricula, for a return to what Harold Bloom calls the “more difficult pleasures” offered by something like “canonical” literature⁷. It is just this line of thinking that made its way into the Bush Administration’s Education Plan, the No Child Left Behind Act, which includes a specific provision that federal funding be allocated to history departments that teach “traditional history.” (www.whitehouse.gov/nclb). Key here is that advocates of this position argue for a return to basics and fundamentals and the great books of literature precisely and explicitly against what they perceive to be the popularization of education, the dumbing down of curricula to meet the needs of the over-stimulated and numbed masses of kids who have consumed too much media, too much TV, and now equate learning precisely with the “easier pleasures” of pop culture.

Our earlier contention was that media education approaches that carry with them a desire to understand media in relation to democracy, and to democratically transform media, are viewed by many in the field as essentially undemocratic, because averse to peoples’ actual enjoyment of and emotional investment in media. This argument against the kind of critical and democratic pedagogy advanced by Paulo Freire rests on the notion that media content reflects the desires and tastes of the people, the free market ideal that the

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best idea will sell better than the worst idea, and that this itself is a reflection of popularity.

We would argue, simply, that one cannot make the case on the one hand that unpopular or minority views simply have no audience, and that to advance them is therefore necessarily to engage in propaganda, then on the other hand claim that education should precisely be about slowing things down, slowing the media-saturated world of kids down long enough for them to catch their breath and do some critical thinking. This latter view depends precisely on what the former rejects: that there is value in countering the limitations of media culture with less popular alternatives. This is what schools do and have always done. In this way, the logic of traditionalists with regard to literacy might actually be more in line with media education approaches that stress democratic issues.

The question, then, is whether and to what extent we believe media education should address the way power operates in the public sphere – whether we believe, and take seriously, the basic idea that some people have more power than others, and that not everyone gets their voice heard. These are of course fundamental democratic questions, despite the advanced ambiguity of debates within academe about the nature of aesthetics and aesthetic experience. The nature of aesthetic experience is of course crucial to any kind of comprehensive understanding of how media content works, but it cannot be separated from the nature of the very media through which such experience is produced and delivered. If we agree that the free flow of information is the very ground of informed democratic consent, then when we look at media we are looking at an already fundamentally political arena. Media literacy education cannot, then, shrink under the pretentiously apolitical claims of those who style themselves guardians of tradition without at least making the case for media education as a democratic imperative. Most every school in the country, and parents of all political stripes, would agree that the overriding mission of schools is to prepare kids to think and to participate as informed citizens in a democracy that demands informed participation. Media education at its best has the potential to advance this traditional mission.

In sum, the focus of media education needs to move away from an exclusive consideration of content and pleasure as separate or separable fields of inquiry, to the very environment within which people make decisions. When we do that, we need to ask whether or not this environment, the very field of play from within which we come to know the world and understand the issues that matter most to us, whether this environment is in any sense undemocratically dominated by one very narrow segment of the population.

There’s meaning-making, how people make meaning individually, collectively, as active agents acting on their world in distinctive ways -- which is absolutely crucial to come to terms with and to take seriously in any form media education takes. But there’s also the conditions, the context, in which meaning gets made. It is absolutely essential to look at both of these together, in reciprocal relation with one another. To separate them is itself a political act, even if done in the name of avoiding political reductions. If you look only at the institutional conditions or contexts that are inherited, then you end up with a sense
only of power and manipulation. If you look only at how people make their own meanings (as in some versions of reception theory or reader-response theory), then all you end up with an emphasis on individual freedom and choice. Considering one without the other distorts the picture and undermines the possibility of meaningful media education in a democracy.

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