WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION?

MEDIA LITERACY, SOCIAL STUDIES & CITIZENSHIP

BY

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"We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people…"

President John F. Kennedy

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When more than 100,000 anti-war protestors assembled in the nation's capital on October 26, 2002, the protest, as CBS NEWS later admitted, was "largely ignored by mainstream press." One of the major offenders was *The New York Times*. When they were subsequently flooded with emails and calls of complaint from across the country, the publication which claims to cover "all the news that's fit to print," re-worked their story under the heading, "Rally in Washington is Said to Invigorate Anti War Movement." The paper originally said that turnout for the protest was "below expectations." National Public Radio was also forced to revise their coverage, stating that "we erroneously reported on "All Things Considered" that the size of the crowd was fewer than 100,000." The following February, with more than 6 million people joining anti war protests on 5 continents, the media finally had to notice. *The Washington Post* declared it, "an extraordinary display of global coordination." In London, *The Daily Mirror* actively sponsored the protest.

December 2002, also saw the mainstream media failing to recognize the significance of the Trent Lott story. Republican, and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, had made unfortunate remarks at a birthday celebration for Senator Strom Thurmond, that suggested the nation would have been better off if segregationist Thurmond had been elected president. As Howard Kurtz put it in his "Media Notes" column of *The Washington Post* (12/10/02), "most major newspapers...hadn't done squat on the story." This, he said, was particularly hard to understand given the fact that "there were cameras rolling. It's on tape; it was on C-SPAN, for crying out loud. If a Democrat had made this kind of inflammatory comment, it would be the buzz of talk radio and the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page would be calling for tarring and feathering."

In the United Kingdom, *The Economist* not only recognized that the media failed to grasp the significance of the story, but also recognized and identified the forces that compelled the media to take a closer look. "The mainstream media," they wrote, "were initially blind to his (Lott's) remarks...but the *Blogosphere*—websites of opinion and news, first known as web logs—denounced the remarks vigorously and would not let up, finally forcing others to take notice" (December 21, 25).

The previous year, most U.S. and international media coverage of the demonstrations at the global trade conference in Italy, uniformly condemned the protestors and their tactics, as they had done in their coverage of previous trade meetings and demonstrations in Melbourne, Australia and in Washington State (e.g., 'The Battle of Seattle'). One needed to be very patient and very vigilant to see the press re-visit their initial construction of the event and the issues that generated such activism.

In August 2001 for example, *The Times* in London reported that the Italian government's inquiry into the handling of the Genoa summit riots concluded that "the police had made tactical errors and used excessive force" (August 1).
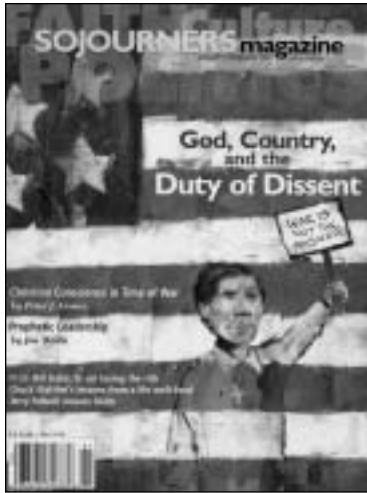
WINDOW ON THE WORLD?

The way the news media function, the stories they select, the ones they reject, their spin, point of view and bias, whether blatant or subtle, are crucial to the functioning of a healthy democracy. When young people feel sufficiently concerned about a social or political issue that they wish to take to the streets in peaceful protest, they are exercising one of their most basic rights.

Not only are they exercising their rights, such citizens are exercising their responsibility and expressing what *Sojourners* magazine called "the duty of dissent." What motivates them, their cause, philosophy and principles however, are often kept from public understanding. While the news media nightly parade a panel of experts who favor military action for example, (e.g., politicians, generals, consultants) little attention is given to those who oppose war but also believe they are patriots who love their country.

Nowhere is this perhaps more obvious than in media

disregard for religious opposition to the proposed war in Iraq. Reverend Peter Gomes, Professor of Christian Morals, argues compellingly that these dissenters are following their conscience. He also recognizes the challenge they face in a democracy: "How can we have an intelligent conversation on the most dangerous policy topic of the day, without being branded traitors, south-loathing Americans, anti-patriotic or soft on democracy? ... Must the first casualty of patriotism be dissent, debate and discussion? … We hear much talk of 'moral clarity' but it sounds more to me like moral arrogance and it must not be met with moral silence" (2003, 20).

Negative media coverage, news stories that trivialize, or marginalize their concerns and cause, are anti-democratic in nature and may well ultimately discourage youth engagement with both the news media and citizenship. Statistical evidence already points to a declining number of young voters as well as to shrinking viewers for TV news and newspaper readers.

Pat Mitchell, CEO of The Public Broadcasting Service has said that the media pander to youth, giving them what they want rather than what they need. The result is a generation, more concerned about their role as consumers than their role as citizens. 'They'd rather be entertained than informed ... most in this age group (18- 34) don't care much about government, politics, foreign countries or serious journalism" (Mitchell, June 12, 2002, 13A).

Reporters and publishers alike are not unaware of these concerns. When pressed however, they can be extraordinarily disingenuous. Take for example the appearance of NBC news anchor, Tom Brokaw on MSNBC's Donahue in January of this year. Asked by Donahue if network news was "getting softer" the anchor replied that they were not and argued that they were in fact "spending more time on fewer subjects." The incidentals, he suggested could be obtained from other news sources. I found myself wondering just exactly how he defined "incidental."

When an audience member asked if the public distrust of the news media was based on the fact that reporters were less objective, Brokaw replied, "We bring you news that's unsettling. Almost anything I report is going to make someone unhappy and they're going to think we've got some vested interest. Or, why are we doing it? They're only doing it to sell newspapers or get ratings" (January 3, 03).

Oh come now Mr. Brokaw! Fellow anchor Dan Rather (of CBS) told CNN's Larry King that "fear runs rampant in the newsroom," in what he characterized as "the volcanic age" of journalism. Rather said ratings and economics drive coverage along with a fear, that if they don't cover the story, their competition will. The associate editor and executive editor at the *Washington Post* put it this way: "Too much of what has been offered as news in recent years has been untrustworthy, irresponsible, misleading and incomplete … Too many of those who own and lead the nation's news media

> *"They'd rather be entertained than informed ... most in this age group (18-34) don't care much about government, politics, foreign countries or serious journalism"*
> PAT MITCHELL
> CEO, PUBLIC BROADCASTING SERVICE

have cynically underestimated or ignored America's need for good journalism, and evaded their responsibility to provide it" (Downie and Kaiser, 2002, 9).

Columbia Journalism Review told readers that the Project for Excellence in Journalism had concluded that "local television news is driving Americans away from what was long the most popular and trusted source of information in the country" (Rosenstiel, Gottleb, Brady, 2000, 84). The following year, CJR reported that more than half of the local news directors admit that "advertisers try to tell them what to air and not to air-and they say the problem is getting worse"(Nov./Dec 2001).

THE PRESS, POLITICS AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Although the press generally received good grades from the public for their coverage of the events and aftermath of 9/11, it didn't last long. Within a year, media critic Howard Kurtz would report that the solemnity and somber tone had been replaced by "familiar fluff." *Time* magazine, he noted, had done cover stories on Tom Cruise, Star Wars, Spider Man and Bruce Springsteen.

The Pew Research Center expressed the shifting attitudes in numbers. In November of 2001, 73% of the public regarded the media as "highly professional." By summer 2002, it had dropped to 49%. Those regarding the media as "moral" had declined from 53% to 39%. At the same time, The Brookings Institution's Center for Public Service reported that 40% of Americans trusted the federal government, a 17% decline since October of 2001.

The brilliant and darkly satirical "Network" heralded the excesses of tabloid news media that we have witnessed in the last decade.

While Tom Brokaw wants us to believe that bias only exists in the eyes and ears of the television audience, that the news media simply report facts from a neutral perspective, not all of his colleagues agree. Former CBS insider Bernard Golberg put it this way: "Dan and Peter and Tom and a lot of their foot soldiers don't deliver the news straight...they have a liberal bias...and no matter how often the networks deny it, it is true" (2002, 12). That perspective is dismissed in Eric Alterman's, *What Liberal Media?: The Truth about Bias and the News* (2002).

Media mogul and modern-day Citizen Kane, Rupert Murdoch, has never been shy about expressing his own opinions or using his international media outlets to reflect them. Recently for example he praised Prime Minister Blair's Iraq policy as "full of guts" and "extraordinarily courageous," while slamming Blair's Labour Party as "knee jerk anti-Americanism and sort of pacifist" (Day, 2/11/03). Even more tellingly perhaps, Murdoch's economic interests surfaced front and center when he stated that "the greatest thing to come out of this (Iraq conflict) for the world economy … would be $20 barrel for oil ...We're keeping our heads down, managing the businesses, keeping our profits up."

Another important bias operative in many news organizations is neither liberal nor conservative but a bias for sales, which in a television era means a preference for pictures, sensationalism and the elevation of emotional coverage over logic and reason. *The Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* documented "a marked increase in embedded sensationalism/human interest" in TV news, noting that "a sizeable proportion of public affairs stories ... incorporated elements of crime, violence, disasters, sexual impropriety and other emotionally arousing content"(Slattery, Doremus & Marcus, 2001, 298).

The routine and everyday are often ignored while the sensational is over-hyped. Occasionally what is ignored one day, comes back to haunt us another. When the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated upon re-entry in February of this year, we received the type of saturation coverage that accompanies crisis *du jour*. In April of the previous year, the outgoing chair of NASA's advisory board told Congress, "I have never been as concerned for space shuttle safety as I am right now. The current approach is planting the seeds for future danger." His testimony was reported only by *The Orlando Sentinel*, A.P Wire Service and Gannett News Service.

The framing of the stories, the sequence in which they are told, and the words used all contribute to public perception. The Bush administration like most political organizations was aware of this when in an Orwellian move they began to refer to Palestinian suicide bombers as "homicide bombers." Was it mere coincidence that this phrase, while ignored by most

newsrooms, was picked up by Fox, where former Nixon, Reagan and Bush operative Roger Ailes was at the helm? Ironically Fox News packages itself as above bias, calling itself "fair and balanced" and proclaiming 'We report. You decide"—as if the nature of the coverage in no way contributed to that decision making.

The Press Effect written by the director and associate director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, studied press coverage of the disputed presidential election of 2000. It concluded that Al Gore and his spokespeople were twice as likely to be challenged as was George Bush or his representatives in the wake of the Florida recount. "The presumption that Mr. Bush was the president-elect and not simply one of two parties in a lawsuit", they say, "created the atmosphere that emboldened the Supreme Court to take the election in hand and rule in Mr. Bush's favor" (Stille, 1/8/03).

Perhaps the most pervasive and destructive relationship between the media and the political process however is the sheer cost; the amount of money necessary to both launch and sustain a campaign, whether successfully or

unsuccessfully. Two decades ago historian Theodore White observed that "American television and politics are now so completely locked together, that it is impossible to tell the story of one without the other" (1982, 165). At the most basic level the political process has become an advertising process. The cost of air time particularly in those large markets that also carry the biggest bonanza in the Electoral College (e.g., Texas, Florida, California and New York) is so prohibitive that for the most part only millionaires or those in debt to special interests can even consider running.

As the 108th Congress was about to be sworn in January of 2003, a study of the previous year's election concluded "many qualified, credible candidates for federal office lose elections, drop out of races, or decide never to run ... because of the role of big money in our political system" (PIRG).What this means statistically is that 93.4% of candidates who spent the most money, were elected. Beyond that, advertising reduces the political dialogue and discourse to sound bites and emotional pictures rather than reasoned debate and logical decision making.

CITIZENS, NETIZENS OR COUCH POTATOES?

Of course, advertising, as we have already seen, is only part of the picture. Whether addressing presidential elections, global tensions, the nation's economy, crime and punishment, business and ethics, the state of our schools, foreign policy, or the environment, the mass media including the news media, play a pivotal role in the way we see ourselves and our relationship with others, both domestically and internationally.

While quality television news may be going the way of the dinosaur perhaps it is being replaced in an evolutionary cycle by the emergence of alternate news sources that will better serve democracy. Despite concerns about the digital divide and digital disconnect, *Wired* magazine reported a study that revealed high levels of engagement among internet users. These users, they said, are "startlingly close to the Jeffersonian ideal-they are informed, outspoken, participatory, passionate about freedom, proud of their culture and committed to the free nation in which it has evolved"(Katz, 1997, 2).

"Our Founding Fathers …understood that a democratic republic could not survive without an informed and participatory citizenry…it is essential in our citizenship role to view critically, analyze, ask powerful questions and draw our own conclusions…Media Literacy then, is essential to the citizenship role."

DENEE MATTIOLI, PRESIDENT, NCSS

But access to media and technology does not in and of itself guarantee that it will serve us well. The process by which we encounter the media will be just as crucial as the programs they present. Denee Mattioli, president-elect of The National Council for the Social Studies is well aware of this. In a statement of support for The 2003 National Media Education Conference in

Baltimore, she wrote; "Our Founding Fathers …understood that a democratic republic could not survive without an informed and participatory citizenry…it is essential in our citizenship role to view critically, analyze, ask powerful questions and draw our own conclusions…Media Literacy then, is essential to the citizenship role."

The media in World War II.
Patriotism or Propaganda?

Social Studies teachers should also note that this view is shared by the White House. In a paper released for comment at the National Media Education Conference (Austin, 2001), the Office of National Drug Control Policy stated that: "media literacy may …offer young people positive, 'preparatory' skills for responsible citizenship. For example, media literacy can empower youth to be positive contributors to society, to challenge cynicism and apathy and to serve as agents of social change' (ONDCP, 8) .

During the last decade, media literacy has shown substantial growth in several areas of the curriculum including health, English and Language Arts. Recently the draft document for English Language Arts Standards developed by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2002) included a detailed section on viewing and producing media texts.

One major area however, where media literacy has failed to make significant inroads, has been Social Studies. While some states like Wisconsin now include media literacy in their social studies standards, the national standards make scant reference to television, computers, the Internet, music, radio or the movies, despite the fact that they represent one of the most profitable and visible American products and exports.

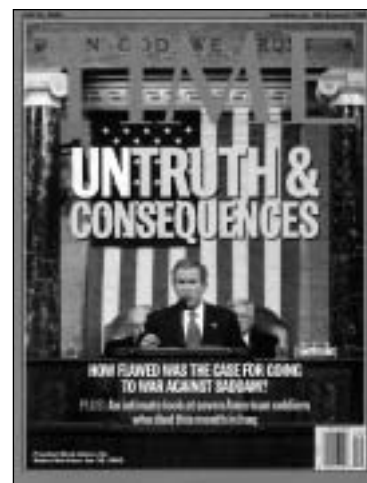Intended to foster "civic competence" and the "development of intellectual and ethical student-citizens," the National Social Studies Standards in the United States argues that it is "our responsibility to respect and support the dignity of the individual, the health of the community, and the common good for all"(1994, 6).

The media clearly have the capacity to hurt or help, support or subvert adolescent engagement in the democratic process. MTV's, 'Rock the Vote" campaign designed to register and engage young voters in the 1992 campaign was certainly one example of the media being used positively.

16 controversial words in the State of the
Union Address provoke a press feeding frenzy
last summer. A matter of U.S. credibility or
a case of over zealous media?

Despite the benefits of such coverage, far too often the news media seem to lurch from one crisis or perspective to another. Describing reporting of the war in Iraq, syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer wrote in the Washington Post that "the media could use some lithum." Press reports, he suggested, provided evidence of dramatic mood swings like those experienced in bipolar disease.

In July of the same year, the feeding frenzy among the press pundits seemed to be gaining momentum. With American soldiers dying each week in Iraq, events spinning out of contol in Liberia and questions continuing to be raised about the veracity of President Bush's State of the Union Address, public perception of the president, as measured by a number of polls, began to reflect the changing attitudes of the electorate.

In a manner that reminded this author of the 1991 coverage of the nation's economic woes (coverage that would ultimately affect the fortune of that President Bush), ABC World News tonight, commenced a new feature in July 2003. The feature was called 'Jobless in America.' 19 months into the so-called economic

recovery, the network commented the nation is still losing jobs, not creating them. Heavily promoted during the broadcast, a cornucopia of chemicals from the drug industry, including Ambien, Celebrex and Procrit. **In what way might the aging audience for network news shape not only the products sold, but the stories told? How might the psychology of relief and security evident in so many of the commercials, prime the pump for selecting stories that promote anxiety and fear? How might these stories construct the way elderly Americans see their nation and the rest of the world?**

The National Social Studies Standards refer to "a world of baffling comlexity" and the need for students to comprehend and command that world and their place in it. Learning to access and evaluate news and information from a variety of sources, along with detecting and rejecting bias in these reports, is a crucial role for students and citizens.

SOCIAL STUDIES STRANDS AND STANDARDS

Rather than attempting to push media literacy into Social Studies, it is perhaps more useful to examine the national standards to ascertain how media literacy is compatible with their 10 thematic strands. What will then become necessary for those who validate these connections, is the design, development and delivery of credible pre-service and in-service workshops that model this relationship and available resources, so teachers can begin to incorporate it in their classrooms.

One of the first steps towards that will occur at the NCSS national conference, scheduled for Chicago in November 2003. An all-day, pre-conference session will provide a systematic approach to integrating media literacy and social studies, with emphasis upon 10 strands:
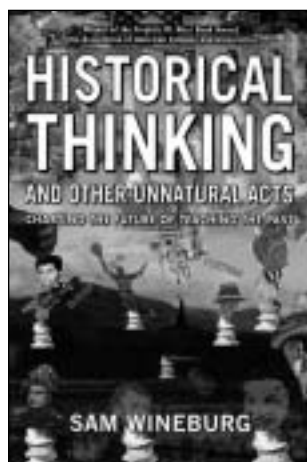
1. CULTURE. "In a democratic and multicultural society, students need to understand multiple perspectives" (p 21). Critical analysis of media, particularly news media provides an opportunity to recognize stereotyping, the dominant discourse, and to evaluate how accurately and fairly race, class and gender are depicted both in the stories covered, and in the faces and races of those presenting the stories. Numerous studies have demonstrated bias when covering issues of minorities, youth and crime. (Males 1999), (Dorman et al., 2001). (Header, 2000) Given adolescent idealism, here's a real opportunity to get our students to think critically about how the media depict and represent youth.

Inviting local news media to our schools and arranging site visits to newspaper offices and television stations, can become an important way to facilitate dialogue between young people and the media in a mutually beneficial way. Whether the media hurt or help the way we see ourselves as individuals and as members of communities is well worth considering. In some circles these days, one no longer talks about broadcasting but refers instead to narrowcasting. In *Breaking Up America*, Joseph Turow describes the shift in advertising from "society making media that have acted out concerns and connections that people ought to share in a larger community" (3) to segment making media in which people focus on themselves. A similar trend has been identified in the news media, where it has been noted that 'the real hallmark of our age is the fragmentation of the American public" (Downie and Kaiser, 2002, 249).

2. TIME CONTINUITY AND CHANGE. This theme seeks to help students "understand their historical roots...locate themselves in time...develop a historical perspective" and realize how they are connected to "those in the past." While this can be achieved by talking with their parents and grandparents, exploring family photograph albums or looking at old letters and newspapers, it is important that we understand just how powerful the media is, in shaping the way our students see the past.

Writing in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, Sam Wineburg describes this influence as his interviews with students and their families revealed: 'John turned neither to something learned in school nor to formal knowledge of economics. His proof text came from Steven Spielberg's, *Schindler's List*, a movie based not on a piece of history but on a piece of historical fiction ... John calls upon the past but it is a filmic past that he remembers ... a past that blurs fact and fiction and that ultimately in John's reasoning , provides warrant for historical claim"(2001, 240).

Sam Wineburg argues that we need to understand how the media "shape historical consciousness... and how they might be used to advance students' "historical thinking"

In *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (Carnes, 1995) Mark Carnes makes it quite clear, why any attempt to get students to conceptualize time, continuity and change, must take into account the history they have learned from the media. 'Television's continuous old movies", he writes, "function as a night school, a great repository of historical consciousness in these United States of Amnesia" (9).

The Patriot, Amistad, Forrest Gump, 13 Days, Saving Private Ryan, Blackhawk Down, The Gathering Storm, The Path to War and *Live from Baghdad* are just a few of the recent films or TV movies that are capable of permanently shaping the way our students conceive of everything from the Revolutionary War to the Cuban missile crisis and U.S. involvement in Somalia. Unquestioned and unchallenged they will become reality for many of our students. Armed with the skills of media literacy however, these same students can be critically and creatively engaged as they compare and contrast, separate fact from fiction, and real people from composite characters.

3. PEOPLE, PLACES AND ENVIRONMENTS. This theme assists students as they "develop geographic perspectives of the world"(x). Unfortunately for too many students this is a rather skewed perspective. Last year for example, 1 in 10 young Americans could not find their own nation on a world map and only 13% could find Iraq (Associated Press, 11/20/02) .The NCSS standards also report that students "speak in stereotypes about Arab people and the religion of Islam" (103). Even when they believe they are getting a world perspective from say, CNN, or ABC's "World News Tonight," such stories are always filtered through an American lens.

The Internet however, provides students with the opportunity to encounter, first hand, the stories of another country and culture told through their own media in their own words and images. WWW.NEWSLINK.ORG for example opens up a menu of newspapers from across the country and around the world. Now students can compare and contrast accounts of conflicts as they are covered in the U.S. press compared for example to *The Mid East Times.* U.S. reports of Prime Minister Blair's support for President Bush's "war on terrorism" can be contrasted to how that is covered in domestic U.K. newspapers like *The Guardian* or *The Times. Free Speech TV* and *Democracy Now* also offer alternative voices and visions, frequently covering the perspective of activists in other nations rather than simply the official government line. Beyond the realm of the news media, our sense of people, places and environments is also shaped by the entertainment media. In July of this year for example, AMC broadcast the

documentary, "Hollywood and the Muslim World," which examined the impact of American media and marketing in the Middle East.

4. INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY. This theme argues that "personal identity is shaped by one's culture" and "by institutional influences."

5. INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS. The examples of institutional influences offered in the NCSS standards make specific reference to "schools, church, families, government agencies and the courts" (xi). What's missing, of course, is the institution of the mass media, with its ability to influence each and every one of the institutions named in the standards.

What for example is the relationship between the Catholic Church and press coverage of the sexual abuse scandals? How has television including the sit-com, historically depicted the composition and concerns of the American family and how have these media representations of families related to the nature of real American families at the time the shows were produced and consumed? Much more than mere entertainment, such programs are cultural products and artifacts than can tell us much about the era that produced and consumed them, including the regulatory guides and assumptions about audiences (Leibman 1995).

Those who think that such study is somehow wasting time on popular culture, might be interested to learn that sitcoms actually contribute to 'images of America" in terms of 'what youth do know about the United States." While some students accept media depictions, others "discounted ... or reacted against ... sitcoms depicting the perfect American family" (Cornbleth, 2002, 539).

Two very useful teaching tools, for teachers interested in this theme are *Enlightened Racism* (Jhally and Lewis) which focuses on Black and White audiences' readings of "The Cosby Show," and *Color Adjustment*, a video tracing television's depiction of African Americans by the late Marlon Riggs.

Finally, one of the most potentially significant aspects of this strand is expressed this way: 'How am I influenced by institutions? How do institutions change? What is my role in institutional change?' (xi) This is enormously important if the public is to grasp the concept of the public airwaves and the responsibility the broadcast industry has to serve the needs of a democratic society. Teachers looking for real world case studies about individuals, institutions and "the power

> *"Students should be helped to construct a personal perspective… an academic perspective and… a pluralistic perspective based on diversity… This involves respect for difference of opinion and preference; of race, religion and gender; of class and ethnicity… Students need to learn that the existence of cultural and philosophical differences are not problems to be solved, rather they are healthy and desirable qualities of democratic community life…"*
> CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES: EXPECTATIONS OF EXCELLENCE)

of one," can certainly find them in the movies. Oscar nominated, "The Insider" shows how Dr. Jeffrey Wigand took on the tobacco industry and his struggles with 60 Minutes. Erin Brokavich shows how one woman took on Pacific Gas and Electric in a major environmental court case.

6. POWER, AUTHORITY AND GOVERNANCE. In developing civic competence, students are asked to consider the issue of power, including 'Who holds it? How is it gained, used and justified?" This includes "the dynamic relationships among individual rights and responsibilities' and 'addressing the persistent issues and social problems encountered in public life" (26).

"There has been tremendous media consolidation…the landscape has changed… This has had some unfortunate effects from the standpoint of the homogenizing of programming, from the standpoint of stifling creativity in the arts…It's had a debilitating effect on the public dialogue and the public discourse in this country by stifling diversity and localism… What's at stake goes to the root of what this country is about…"

FCC COMMISSIONER, MICHAEL COPPS (DEMOCRACY NOW. 1.16.03)

In this context, it is crucial that citizens and students understand the role of the FCC. Traditionally rules and regulations governing media ownership were intended to foster competition, localism and diversity. This year however, by a 3-2 vote, the FCC decided to eliminate or ease ownership restrictions, moving this nation perilously close to a media monopoly of like-minded individuals and corporations. As William Safire wrote, "no other decision made in Washington will more directly affect how you will be informed, persuaded and entertained." The point was not lost on the Senate. Senator John McCain and a bipartisan group from the Senate commerce committee rejected the FCC decision, leaving the matter unresolved.

Also unresolved is our sense of security and liberty, as more and more individuals, local governments and organizations voice their concern about the Patriot Act. In the post 9/11 environment, Americans are weighing the relationship and delicate balance between national security and individual rights. One is reminded of Ben Franklin's observation that those who are prepared to give up a little liberty, for security, will achieve neither.
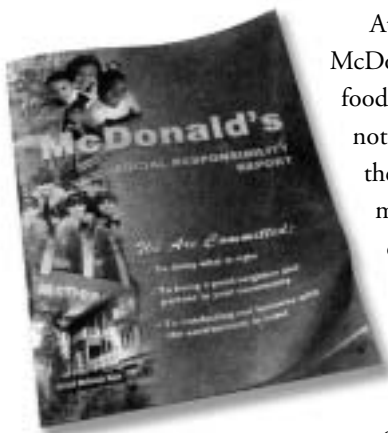
Beyond the issue of government agencies like the Office of Homeland Security and the rights of individuals, there is also the issue of institutional relationships.

In January 2003, for example, a poll indicated that 28% of the American public believed that even in peacetime the government should have the right to control what the media reports. In time of war, that figure increased to two-thirds.

Frank Blethen, publisher and CEO of *The Seattle Times* has cautioned against "jeopardizing the press's role of preserving the American system of checks and balances," noting that 'the watchdog has been replaced by the lapdog" (September 2002).

In terms of studying, both state and federal politics, legislative policy and process, teachers could utilize TV series like *The West Wing* and *Mr. Sterling* to help students understand the role of the President, the Senate and the system of checks and balances. In the case of *The West Wing*, the first season episode "Five Votes Down," explores the pressures and the process as the president and his team attempt to rally enough votes to secure passage of the gun bill they favor. Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry observes, "there are two things in the world you never want to let people see how you make'em—laws and sausages."

7. PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION AND CONSUMPTION. The standards note that "young learners begin by differentiating between wants and needs" (27). In a culture of conspicuous consumption young people often confuse wants and needs, assailed as they are by the slick pitches of the advertising industry and the constant encouragement to 'biggie size it." New legislation and food labels regarding "trans fats," make it clear that the fast food industry and its advertising methods shape public perceptions that in turn influence our diet. One result has been a dramatic increase in childhood obesity and diabetes.

Corporations with a Conscience. McDonalds has developed a Social Responsibility Report.

At the same time, McDonald's and other fast food companies are changing not only their menus, but their livestock management methods, as a result of growing public concern about animal welfare. Once again, we see how individual access to information can shape institutional and organizational policy and practice.

One approach that has proved successful in energizing many young people is the so called "unbranding of our schools." Aligned with a movement to make schools commercial free environments, the approach is perhaps best articulated in Naomi Klein's *No Logo*. Whether battling vending machines in the hallways or corporate intrusion into the curriculum, the approach engages many young people and provides them with the opportunity to influence policy in their own schools, which serves as a lesson in grassroots activism and democracy.

However, as the bumper sticker says, in addition to acting locally we need to think globally. American materialism, including the love affair with the automobile and the mobility it offers, has implications for us domestically and internationally as the shrinking rain forests, global warming and other environmental developments indicate.

A useful starting point for teachers addressing this issue at the secondary level is *Consuming Environments: Television and Commercial Culture* (Budd, Craig, Steinman, 1999). The book explores the role of media in the production consumption cycle and the environmental impact of this cycle. It also warns, "we cannot avert this crisis as individuals, only as engaged participants in an interdependent world" (5).

Closely aligned to the concept of interdependence, is our understanding of public and private space and the role of information in those spheres. Lawrence Lessig argues that we are already witnessing an assault on the revolutionary nature of the Internet, an assault which has implications for our entire understanding of freedom of information. In *The Future of Ideas*, he writes: "Our single overriding view of the world is that only property matters; our systematic blindness is to the lesson of our tradition- that property flourishes best in an environment of freedom, both freedom from state control and freedom from private control" (2001, 236).

8. SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY. This theme presents challenging and relevant questions that are particularly pertinent to media literacy. Technology, the standards note, "bring changes that surprise us and even challenge our beliefs" (28). These technologies often result in unanticipated social change. Two examples offered in the standards include a consideration of how 'the transistor radio altered the course of history' and the way 'values beliefs and attitudes' were influenced by the invention of the printing press.

How might these discussions then be applied to television, computers and the Internet? In what way are our notions of laws and jurisdiction rendered irrelevant or obsolete by global developments like the World Wide Web? This strand also challenges us to think about: How can we manage technology so the greatest number of people benefit from it? And, how can we

preserve our fundamental values and beliefs in a world that is rapidly becoming one technology-linked village? (p 28). For example, how might media coverage of a controversy like cloning (the birth and death of Dolly the sheep) shape public attitudes and government policy?

These questions can certainly be applied to an examination of the role information and entertainment technologies (e.g., computers, television, videogames, music) could or should play in our schools, communities and families. Do they serve as agents of enlightenment and engagement or have they become distractions that signify the breakdown of the family into distinct demographic groups, blocks and generations, each retreating to the privacy of their own wired world and cabled cocoon?

9. GLOBAL CONNECTIONS. This area of the social studies strands states that students need to "be able to think systematically about personal, national, and global decisions, interactions and consequences...including peace, human rights, trade and global ecology" (29). Benjamin Barber describes two competing global forces, tribalism and globalism each operative at the same time.

Former member of the Reagan administration, Clyde Prestowitz provides a disturbing view of America's economic power, geopolitical presence, unilateralism and the public obliviousness to declining international respect for this nation.

The forces of Jihad and the forces of McWorld operate with equal strength in opposite directions, the one driven by parochial hatreds, the other by universalizing markets … neither offers much hope for citizens looking for practical ways to govern themselves democratically (1992).

Beyond the view of most Americans—though not the media that serves them—globalization is producing some potentially destructive effects. A recent UNESCO report, *Children, Young People and Media Globalization,* put it this way: "There is a risk that globalization has a homogenizing effect, that totally foreign countries may soon be a thing of the past, as dominant cultural patterns set global standards...the institutions and enterprises that control globalized mass culture do have such a standardizing effect" (Carlsson, 2002, 11).
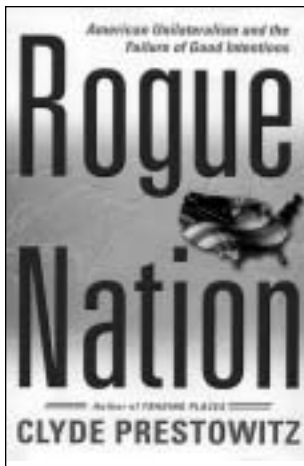
The social studies standards also state that "through exposure to various media, students become aware of, and are affected by events on a global scale. The global protests against war with Iraq were described by *The Age* in Melbourne, Australia, as "the biggest coordinated anti war march in history." However, seeing and understanding are not necessarily synonymous.

Do U.S. media help Americans understand how their nation, its people, its government and its policies are perceived throughout the world and just as importantly, why? While most Americans are conditioned to see their nation as a champion of human rights, it is increasingly true that on a range of issues, their country is frequently at odds with much of the world, particularly the western world.

In the case of Australia, for example, the U.S. has a strong and loyal ally whose people fought and died alongside Americans in Vietnam at a time when the rest of the western world turned their back on the U.S. Most Americans that I have met in my quarter century in this country, express admiration and affection for the land "down under." They also uniformly have absolutely no idea about policy differences between the two nations.

In the case of unfair trade policies, farmers marched on parliament house in Canberra when the first President Bush spoke there a decade ago. Last year with a new Bush in the White House, former conservative Australian prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, penned a piece which he called, "The United States of Hypocrisy."

Whether challenging the authority of the World Court, continuing capital punishment, questioning the relevance of the United Nations,

being penalized by the World Trade Organization, distancing its engagement in Earth Summit 11, or rejecting the Kyoto proposals on the environment, the U.S. often appears out of step and out of touch with other nations including our nearest neighbors.

The cumulative nature of these differences and the resentment it has fostered outside of the U.S. was somewhat belatedly addressed by *U.S.A Today* ('French See Bush as The Ugly American", 2/14/03). That was also the day when the French representative on the U.N. Security Council received unprecedented applause in the chamber when he challenged the U.S. interpretation of the Inspector Hans Blix's report on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

In an era of complex global connections the news media can help or hurt the way we see other countries and cultures and the way they in turn perceive us.

In April 2002 the *Globe and Mail* in Canada reported that "a majority (75%) of citizens feel George W. Bush doesn't understand Canada or its people" (A12). The context for that poll was the friendly fire incident in Afghanistan in which American fliers accidentally killed four Canadian soldiers. Many Canadians, including the Canadian media, felt President Bush was slow to express condolences, especially given the Canadians high degree of support after 9/11. Bush also failed to name Canada, in a speech that thanked other countries for their help in the aftermath of 9/11.

In December of 2002, *The International Herald Tribune* wrote that "the global image of the United States has suffered a dramatic bruising in the past two years, most seriously in Muslim countries, but also to a surprising extent among many traditional allies." While America's favorability ratings had increased in Russia, "anti–American sentiment was striking in Egypt, one of the largest recipients of U.S foreign aid."

Over half (54%) of Canadians said that "the spread of American ideas and customs was bad." In Britain and France, as *The Economist* reported in early 2003, those sentiments were shared by half and three-quarters of the populations, respectively.

A recent global study reported "The Next Generation's Image of Americans: Attitudes and Beliefs Held by Teenagers in 12 Countries" revealed that with the exception of Argentina, the teens in the other 11 nations studied "appear to hold consistently negative attitudes toward Americans as people" (DeFleur and DeFleur, 2003, 2).

Let me be perfectly candid and acknowledge that a danger clearly exists, that excessive consideration of international criticism of the U.S. could leave teachers open to misguided charges of anti-Americanism. There is however, another danger: the danger of downplaying. It is the danger of both global and domestic disconnection which can only be damaging for a democracy.

In her study of "Images of America" held by U.S. youth, Catherine Cornbleth found that the students were aware of "inequities associated with race, gender, socioeconomic status or disability" (519). She also reported that many young people viewed their nation as "imperfect but best."
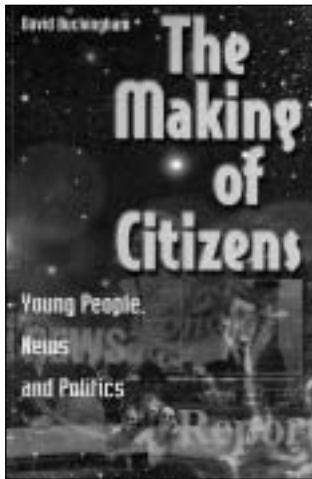
Of particular significance, especially as we consider engaging young people in their communities, was that fact that one third of the students surveyed voiced "an incipient critique and/or activism." This group of young people constitutes a potential pool of citizens who see wrongs and try to right them. Recognizing and responding to their concerns and criticism is a means of engaging them.

Ignoring that criticism in our classrooms by stressing "traditional patriotic mythology and symbolism" says Cornbleth, may well backfire. This is likely to happen "when students' own experiences or sources they trust provide counter evidence." The danger then, she warns, is that these young people become "unnecessarily cynical ... distrustful of the nation ... joining the growing ranks of apathetic nonvoters or followers of extremist gurus" (548).

10. CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES. This final theme focuses on civic "participation" and "involvement." It asks students to examine the role of citizens in the community, nation and world, including "community service" and "political activities." Its goals are perhaps complicated by the conduct of politicians and by the way the press covers the political process.

In his study of American and British youth, David Buckingham found their attitudes decidedly negative; "politicians were often condemned, not merely as boring, but also as corrupt, uncaring, insincere and self-interested; and politics was widely dismissed as a kind of dishonest game, which had little relevance to their everyday lives and concerns" (2000, 176).

There is a fine line between healthy skepticism and cynicism. The difference is crucial in engaging young people with their democracy. David Buckingham's, "The Making of Citizens" offers constructive advice. (Buckingham will come from London to teach at Appalachian State University's media literacy summer sessions in July 2004. For details contact considinedm@appstate.edu)

Shifting this group from apathy, alienation and cynicism to healthy skepticism and activism is not going to be an easy task. They will need to be provided with opportunities and meaningful experiences that validate their opinions and give them the opportunity to facilitate change.

Whatever the media tells them about elections, voting, legislatures or the political process, the opportunities for change and commitment will have to be provided in the schools, classrooms and communities. Talking about democracy without actually allowing students to share in decision-making breeds cynicism and readily exposes the credibility gap between rhetoric and reality. Just watch the young candidates addressing their high school classmates in the movie, *Election,* and you'll get some sense of this disdain and disconnect.

Writing in *Educational Leadership* magazine, Frieberg argued for more democratic classrooms: "Tourists simply pass through without any involvement, commitment or belonging." The alternative, he said, is to "turn tourists into citizens by helping educators create active classrooms, where cooperation, participation and support are the cornerstone" (1996, 32).

CONCLUSIONS & CONNECTIONS: THE NEED FOR NARRATIVE

Sam Wineburg tells us that "history teaches us to make choices...balance opinions, tell stories and to become uneasy, when necessary about the stories we tell" (ix) He recognizes the need to engage students in the past by helping them empathize with the period and the people so they may 'see through the eyes of the people who were there" (e.g., Patton, Nixon, Gandhi, JFK, Malcolm X). Textbooks, he says, offer little opportunity for such empathy, consisting as they do of "a compendia of names and dates" compiled by "a corporate author who speaks from a position of transcendence, a position of knowing from on high"(12-13).

Not so with movies and television. With three dimensional characters, plot, conflict, resolution, and point of view, they construct powerful narratives, sometimes accurate, sometimes not, but always capable of bringing the past to life with more power than the printed page. And yet, like the printed page, particularly the novel, film and television depictions of the past are populated not simply with dead white men, (e.g., Horatio Hornblower, Benedict Arnold) but with characters we might connect with.

Ayn Rand, who gave us *The Fountain Head* and *Atlas Shrugged,* not to mention the controversial philosophy

of objectivism, knew the power and the purpose of the narrative: "My basic test for any story is—would I want to meet these characters and observe these events in real life? Is this story an experience worth living through for its own sake? Is the pleasure of contemplating these characters an end in itself?" (1963).

The American film and television industry affords teachers an extraordinary opportunity to engage students in a contemplation of their nation's past, present and future. This February as part of Black History Month, they could access the films *Boycott* and *The Long Walk Home*, two outstanding accounts of the Alabama bus protests and the courageous actions of Dr. Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks.

Also available that same month, was HBO's compelling and creative documentary *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives.*

Teachers looking for a global perspective, for an international view of human prejudice, institutional intolerance and personal courage could draw upon movies that address these shameful episodes in the history of other nations: *The Power of One* (South Africa) *Gandhi* (India) and the new offering from Australia, *Rabbit Proof Fence.*

Although we tend to be rightly suspicious of Hollywood history, the movie industry is capable of getting it right and when it does so, it makes policy meaningful by showing us the people who implemented it (HBO's *Conspiracy*) or suffered from it. Historian Robert Manne says *Rabbit Proof Fence* is a "simple story of the seizure and capture of 3 young half-caste girls ... a sober, historically accurate account of the racial fantasies and phobias, as well as the frankly genocidal thoughts that masqueraded as policies promoting Aboriginal welfare in Australia's interwar years" (2003, B4).

Approach history this way, with resources and criteria like this, and we build a bridge not only between the past and the present but also to human nature that transcends time in great works of literature and in real life. This was recognized 15 years ago in The First National Assessment of History and Literature. *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know* (Ravish and Finn 1987) wrote that

"this generation...has been weaned on television and movies. It takes more than a textbook and a lecture to awaken their interest and grab their attention" (241).

The report argued that teachers needed to integrate media, technology, art and literature into the teaching of history. But teaching *with* media and technology is not the same as teaching *about* media and technology. Media literacy provides the principles, frameworks and context for fostering critical inquiry about the form, content, style, ideology, ownership and impact of media in our society.

While some educators are genuinely distrustful of pop culture, lamenting the impact of mass media on everything from concentration spans to student perceptions of the past, leaving mass media outside of our classrooms does nothing to prepare students to think critically about its impact on their own lives and their worldview.

In the conclusion of *Historical Thinking: And Other Unnatural Acts*, Sam Wineburg argues that the time has come, once and for all, to engage kids with media culture. "Rather than pretending that we can do away with popular culture, confiscate videos, banish rap music, … unplug MTV and the Movie Channel, we might try instead to understand how these forces shape historical consciousness , and how they might be used rather than spurned, or worse, simply ignored, to advance students' historical understanding" (250). ◎

The author, David Considine, at the National Media Education Conference he chaired in Baltimore. Shown here with NTC board member Mary Moen, another recipient of the Jessie McCanse award for life time contributions to media literacy along with this year's recipient, Len Masterman from the U.K.

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KEY MEDIA LITERACY CONCEPTS

BY

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Media literacy, or media education as it is better known in Australia and the United Kingdom, generally refers to the ability to ACCESS, ANALYZE, EVALUATE and COMMUNICATE/CREATE information in a variety of forms including print and non-print media.

While it clearly involves teaching WITH or THROUGH media, its central focus concerns teaching ABOUT media.

To do this effectively requires awareness of, and adherence to, some of the key concepts and principles that define the theoretical foundations of media education. The following represents a brief overview of some of these key areas.

MEDIA LANGUAGES

This approach examines the unique characteristics and attributes of discrete media forms. For example, photography is a still medium, while both film and television are based on moving images.

The language of both film and television include a series of key shots (long shots, close- ups, etc) which are not used randomly but are selected based on what the director is trying to convey to the audience. A camera positioned below a person or object for example, almost always conveys some send of power (physical, moral, psychological, political), while a camera that shoots down on an individual frequently conveys a sense of powerlessness or vulnerability.

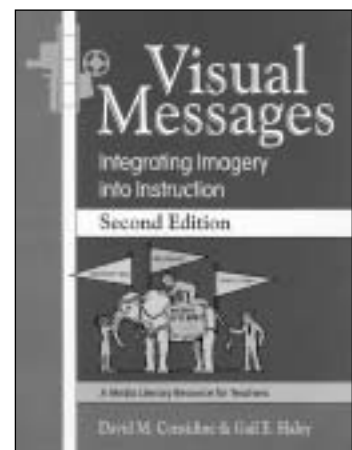Decisions about the form or style to be used in presenting the story or narrative are not random, but are carefully considered design decisions. Why for example was Schindler's List made in black and white when color was obviously available and is usually preferred by contemporary audiences?

Discrete media also have their own codes and conventions. Both television and cinema for example work in key genres or story- types (western, sci- fi, sit-com, etc). Each of these genres has typical locations, stock characters and standard plot or narrative formulas.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

This concept refers to the way the media depict people, places, individuals, issues, countries and cultures, along with consideration of why these production patterns persist and the possible social effects or outcomes of these cumulative, dominant forms of representation.

In The Celluloid South for example, it is argued that cinema has a profound impact on the way the American south is perceived in the popular imagination. Relatively recent films like The Divine Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood, Midnight in The Garden of Good and Evil, and Sweet Home Alabama continue traditions evident in earlier vehicles like Steel Magnolias and Fried

VISUAL MESSAGES: INTEGRATING IMAGERY INTO INSTRUCTION
This classic media literacy text by David Considine and Gail E. Haley can be accessed at Greenwood Publishers, Westport CT. 1- 800- 225-5800.

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Green Tomatoes, not to mention the literary traditions of Faulkner, Tennessee Williams and others.

At the most basic level, a study of media representations invites our consideration of stereotypes . On a more sophisticated level it   requires an examination of media industries to see why such patterns of production continue.

Anyone who witnessed Halle Berry's acceptance of her Oscar for The Monster's Ball, heard a speech which articulated the fact that the film industry and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences had for too long denied black women quality film roles and their resultant rewards.

Beyond the world, of fiction, the concept of media representation also has special significance in considering the window on the world that the news media construct. Key questions include analysis of the type of stories that are consistently considered newsworthy at the national and local level, along with the evaluation of the balance and bias evident in the way these stories are presented.

In the process this includes not only analyzing and evaluating the stories the news media selects; it also includes an examination of the stories, issues, events, and perspectives that are not considered newsworthy.

MEDIA AUDIENCES

Media education initially often asked questions about what   MEDIA DID TO audiences, particularly to impressionable children and teens. Today, while this remains a concern, it is equally important to consider what audiences DO WITH THE MEDIA.

The emergence of relatively affordable digital technologies, means that many young people are not only consumers of corporate mass media messages, but they are themselves creators and producers of their own media products, from websites, to videos.

Related to the different ways in which audiences select and utilize media, are the key area of media uses and gratification theory, which includes studying the pleasure we derive from our encounters with the media, and our motivations for our media tastes and preferences.

Demographics and psychographics make it evident that race, class, gender, religion, level of education and other factors all influence the media we select and the way n which we read and comprehend media messages. To use a phrase from media literacy theory, "audiences negotiate meaning."

In a pluralistic culture it is also worth considering whether mass media serves as a form of social cement, a common culture to hold disparate audience groups together, or whether in fact we have moved from an era of broadcasting to one of narrowcasting in which audiences increasingly have less and less in common with each other and the family home finds a TV in each room so each member of the family can watch their own choice of programming. A casual look at television listings shows specialized outlets like WE, targeting very distinct demographic groups.

Media Industries

A study of media industries is necessary to understand the social, political, and economic context in which media messages are both produced and consumed. While part of this includes the production process, the creative and artistic decisions involved in bringing a movie to the screen for example, it also involves more than this awareness.

Anyone seriously interested in understanding the mass media as an influential social institution, must have some understanding of who owns these giant communication conglomerates and what their other holdings consist of.

ABC, NBC, and CBS for example are only part of the public face of the wider conglomerates they front for. Walt Disney Company long ago ceased to be simply the owner of Mickey Mouse and some theme parks. The holdings of this group include ABC News, Miramax Films, Hyperion Books, Discover Magazine, The St. Louis Daily Record and others.

Australian media magnate Rupert Murdoch's, News Corporation Limited controls media in the U.S, Canada, Australia and Europe. These holdings include newspapers like, The New York Post, The Times (London),The Australian. Publishing interests include Harper Collins, and William Morrow .TV outlets include Fox Broadcasting and British Sky Broadcasting.

Despite the constant claim that we live in an information age, the fact that so much information at the national and global level is controlled by a shrinking handful of companies (Bertelsman, AOL Time Warner, Viacom, Vivendi Universal) raises series concerns about access to authentic, diverse points of view and opinion, the healthy ingredients of a vigorous democracy.

Behind all of these concepts, is the recognition that the media is much more than a mere distraction .It is also considerably more than a simple reflection of society. The relationship between society and mass media is symbiotic. The media shows and shapes, reflects and reinforces, creates and controls, reveals and conceals . Any attempt to understand ourselves as individuals, the United States as our homeland, or other countries and cultures, will be more meaningful if we reflect upon the role that media play in shaping our identity, values, perceptions and consciousness.

Want to Know More?