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Voices in the Field Creating Critical Viewers: A Personal Reflection

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Education for the 21st Century

Abstract

This essay is a personal reflection on the implementation of *Creating Critical Viewers*, a national media literacy program sponsored by the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (NATAS), an industry association, in 1995. The television industry's decision to develop a media literacy curriculum in the 1990s was a powerful statement by certain broadcasters to take seriously the ethical and social questions being raised about the impact of their work and to learn how to address those questions through education.

Keywords: media literacy, critical viewers, media industry, television, NATAS, curriculum

My entrance into the world of media literacy education began in 1995, when the Children's Television Workshop, (CTW) producer of *Sesame Street*, where I had worked for almost seven years as a Research Director, had one of what became a series of layoffs. The Workshop, always dependent on grants and in a constant state of strategic planning, had decided that they were going to slowly dismantle their magazine group and de-emphasize any connections they might have to school curriculum and teacher education. Leaving this "mother ship" of progressive educational media was difficult since there were no other children's media organizations that could compare at that time. To educate and entertain was an ideal that few knew how to do well. What were my options after CTW?

I had a Ph.D. in Media Ecology (now called Culture and Communications) and a perspective honed by my doctoral advisor, Neil Postman, who had written "Teaching As a Subversive Activity." I wanted to find a home that would be as a transformative space, a place where education and media could intersect in lively ways. I wanted to be an agent of social change. One day, while leafing through the pages of *the Harvard Education Review*, I saw an ad in a rather large square box at the bottom of a scholarly page. It said that the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences was

looking for someone to be the coordinator of their newly formed media literacy initiative based on a curriculum called *Creating Critical Viewers* that was created by Yale researchers, Drs. Jerome and Dorothy Singer. The Academy (also known as NATAS) had adopted this curriculum and was looking to organize an educational venture that would unite broadcasters and educators in all of the seventeen cities where NATAS had chapters. It was supposed to be a part-time position but it had a large mandate. Though I wasn't totally sure what media literacy was (even though I had been a professor of Media Studies and English before coming to CTW), I decided to apply that summer and then promptly forgot about it as other priorities emerged.

In October of 1995, I received a letter inviting me to come for an interview with John Cannon, then president of NATAS in New York. I met with Cannon on Columbus Day of 1995. No one else was in the office because it was a holiday. As I walked into his office, lit by only one bulb from the lamp on his desk, I had a moment of confusion. This was not your typical job interview. The questions he asked me had little to do with my qualifications. He asked personal questions about my family and wanted to know what "persuasion" my hyphenated last name represented. I walked away thinking that I would never take this job and I was about

to write an indignant letter to him. But instead, I was invited to meet three members of the board—Wiley Hance, Joe Zesbaugh, and Hubert Jessup-- in a much more congenial setting. All lights were on and sophisticated questions about media and education were asked. What I was beginning to “read” in undercurrents was the relational tension among board members who wanted to open up new avenues of outreach and good community relations for the regional chapters and the leader of the Academy who did not really want any change but knew he had to mollify those on his board who did. This political strain was a constant part of my working on media literacy from within the broadcast industry -- but at the same time, it was part of a most stimulating challenge. And I found partners along the way during that period, many of whom have become lifelong friends on my journey in the world of media literacy education.

After the second interview, I wrote a letter to Mr. Cannon and his board colleagues with an agenda for how I saw the position evolving. Here is what I proposed:

Create a community of coordinators through annual or semi-annual conferences to share best practices and create a manual or newsletter as a common resource.

Work with each local coordinator separate to see how local community groups and local issues could become part of the teaching and learning process. This would include ascertaining interest in developing parent materials and possible materials for elementary schools (CCV was developed for middle and high school students by the Singers.)

Amplify and expand the curriculum resources so that educators could use these materials throughout the years in many different curriculum areas such as English, History and Art, and keep the materials fresh with reading lists, access to key players in the field and a variety of case studies which might be developed to explore issues for different curricular needs.

We would gather as much information as possible about other programs in media literacy designed by groups around the country to identify how NATAS could be a significant resource and a key player nationally and even internationally since Canada had a highly

developed media literacy curriculum that could be incorporated into NATAS' evolving curriculum.

Finally by developing feedback mechanisms and assessment strategies that document the CCV project, the data gathered could be presented at education and industry conferences to generate more interest in the concept of media literacy, more understanding of the resources available and why this initiative is important. I said that I was an experienced public speaker (from my years in education and presenting at education conferences) and would welcome the opportunity to be an advocate for such a program. Soon after their receipt of the letter, I was offered the position.

Inside and Outside: Content and Process

Once I moved from outsider to insider, I began to learn much more about the pressures of connecting seventeen cities and their individual local coordinators who had relationships with educators in each of the chapter cities. I was suddenly responsible for the coordination of a team of more than 35 people from across the country. As a part-time person, I realized that “part-time” was a misnomer. There was a lot to learn and a lot to do and a lot of internal politics that I had sensed early in the interview process that would manifest over time. It was daunting. But I also had creative freedom to figure out what *Creating Critical Viewers* (CCV), this newly minted program, might become.

The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences was created in 1955 to advance the arts and sciences of the growing field of television. Headquartered in New York, it created the Emmy Awards which were broadcast on national TV for the first time on March 7, 1955. NATAS distributes Emmy Awards in various categories including “Daytime,” “Sports,” “News and Documentary” and “Public Service.” NATAS also supervised the prime time Emmy Awards until a split between the East and West memberships in the 1970s led to the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (ATAS) to leave NATAS. ATAS supervises the prime time and Los Angeles area Emmys, while NATAS is in charge of the other awards. (In 2007, the organization created a peer organization dedicated to new media called the National Academy of Media Arts and Sciences NAMAS). But in the 90's, only NATAS and ATAS existed (in a rather tense co-existence). NATAS published its own quarterly magazine called *Television Quarterly* so there was some tradition of encouraging members to reflect on television and its cultural impact (Wikipedia, 2013).

The local NATAS chapters, some based in large cities and others statewide groups, also organized local award ceremonies to hand out Emmys resembling those given at the national ceremonies. I worked with Karen Rave and NATAS trustee Jan Jacobson in Arizona; Theresa Lina and Paul Fine in Atlanta; Carol Wintle and NATAS trustee Hubert Jessup in Boston-New England; Dan Magner and Ginny Weissman in Chicago; Joann

Piper in Cleveland; Loyal Darr and trustees Julie Lucas and Joe Zesbaugh in Colorado; Dr. Alvin Edelson and Char De Wolf in Detroit; Geneva Brignolo, trustee Joyce Rice and Dr. Linda Miller of Vanderbilt University in Nashville; Michael Blyth and NATAS trustee Wiley Hance in New York; Susan Maslyk in the Ohio Valley; Susan Cardin and Sherri Culver, Grace Stewart and Mary Beth Zigenfuss in Philadelphia; Jessica Brown in St. Louis; Pat Fitzmorris and trustee, Robert Gardner in San Diego; NATAS trustees, Alison Gibson, Linda Giannecchini, and Darryl Compton, and webmaster, John McLeod in San Francisco; Dr. Marilyn Cohen, Catherine Carbone and Vicki Schoettle in Seattle; NATAS trustee Irene Berman and Carolyn Cefalo of the University of Miami in Florida; and Sue Ann Staake and Deborah Dugan and Cathy Felix in Washington, D.C.

Each of these chapters sponsored unique CCV initiatives: offering workshops with sick children in hospital settings; delivering presentations at local and national educational conferences; creating city-wide awareness with participation from TV station promotions; working to promote state-wide media literacy standards; building community links through the Junior League, producing an interactive web site (these were early adopters of technology); offering workshops for teachers to deglamorize drugs and smoking and avoiding teen pregnancy through awareness of media depictions of this behavior; organizing meetings with high school students and government and social agencies involved in media literacy.

The synergies of these events began to give CCV a lot of momentum in 1996 and 1997. It received a lot of press in the *NATAS News*, a newsletter that was sent from national headquarters in New York to the chapters around the country (these were printed and not electronic). For example, the Winter 1997 newsletter was devoted to a special report on CCV. The quote on the headline next to my photo says: “media literacy “can become a catalyst for a true 21st century education” and that optimistic quote was the tone I tried to adopt throughout (NATAS, 1997; Whitaker, 2000).

Others must have thought so too! In fact, at the very beginning of my work at NATAS, I received a call from Elizabeth Thoman and Renee Hobbs, two names

that were becoming familiar to me but neither of whom I had ever met. During this time, Liz Thoman was preparing to run the second national media literacy conference in Los Angeles and Renee Hobbs was working with the cable television industry on “Know TV,” a media literacy education initiative developed in collaboration with The Learning Channel. Right before Christmas in 1995, Liz, Renee and I met in a dark bar near the NATAS office and they told me that I had a

bully pulpit to advance media literacy’s cause and then they told me how I should do it! Basically, they were encouraging me to be bold. And I appreciated their support, if not the sense that fingers were pointing at me and expecting something big. But from then on, I knew I was part of a community of people who had dedicated themselves to media literacy. It was a world that I did not know existed when I signed on to NATAS nor did I understand what the true scope of the work was or where its challenges might lead.

Looking back, I realize that I spent the entirety of 1996 in travel to support the CCV initiative. I traveled to each of the seventeen cities in my first year in the job. In addition, in March of 1996, NATAS and I organized a meeting in Boston of all CCV educational coordinators. It was an opportunity for the coordinators to meet each other and to meet me and to share a common vision of the project. Several of the members of the Board of Trustees also attended to give their support and, if I recall correctly, we ate some fabulous meals since John Cannon was a gourmand and liked nothing better than applauding a chef after a feast.

Media literacy was in the air during the 1990s and NATAS was a big part of the action. In an article on the front page of *NATAS News*, Joe Zesbaugh, the trustee whose support for and vision of CCV was preeminent, was quoted as saying about the efforts in 1996: “Every chapter has sponsored programs for teachers, created community awareness, and linked with regional leaders...” CCV was given “good press” within the organization and that did reach many others in the media field (NATAS, 1996). To refresh my memory, I talked with Joe Zesbaugh to ask about his memories of the experience, explaining why he thought CCV was the right idea for NATAS at the time. He reminded me that it was the period when the Surgeon General’s reports and other studies warned about too much sex and violence on television and how that was harming children. It was also the period when smoking and drinking could still be seen on TV. Regulation of how much advertising children could see was also part of the public policy debate of the day. Also, children were watching TV for many hours and the public policy

discussions about the impact of heavy viewing on health and educational attainment were also ongoing. It was also a moment in the history of television when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) began to discuss installing V-chips in TV sets so that parents would have more control over what children watched and rating programs for suitability for children. Under pressure from consumer groups, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) was thinking about regulating the amount of ads and their claims.

In this milieu, Joe Zesbaugh said that he pushed the idea of a media literacy initiative supported by NATAS because it would be good for the industry to respond positively and pro-socially to the reports of the negative effects of television and simultaneously be beneficial to audiences who might be disaffected by what was seen on television. The phrase “critical viewers” was not popular among the NATAS trustees – they thought it meant teaching people to “criticize” as opposed to teach them to be discerning. But the decision by the Academy to create CCV was voted in enthusiastically as was dedicating a budget to create a curriculum. Zesbaugh, (who had been a part-time professor of media studies at the University of Arizona and the University of Minnesota in addition to his role in the broadcast industry) suggested that NATAS contact Drs. Jerome and Dorothy Singer, developmental psychologists at Yale University’s Family Television Research and Consultation Center, who had a stellar reputation for their scholarly studies of media’s impact on young children and had created a media literacy curriculum for ABC television. With assistance from the Pacific Mountain Network, a public television and non-profit membership organization serving the 13 western states with which Zesbaugh was affiliated and the Teen Futures Media Network based in the College of Education at the University of Washington, the CCV curriculum was born.

The Creating Critical Viewers Curriculum

The curriculum created by the Singers embodies the many issues that early media literacy educators wished to address. Table 1 shows that topics and issues explored in the curriculum. In their preface, the Singers listed skills that learners could generalize to other areas of their studies such as language arts, social studies, economics, art and music. Students, they said, would learn how to: analyze material; interpret messages (direct and hidden); note details; understand sequencing; integrate aural and visual elements; identify fact and opinion; identify

emotional appeals, reactions and motives; draw inferences, predictions and conclusions. The Singers saw that these critical thinking skills would also foster the mechanics of writing and the ability to read with emphasis on comprehension and interpretation. Critical thinking skills connecting with critical viewing was essential and they made the connections that would be of use to teachers.

Looking back at the quality of the curriculum, I still feel it was very substantial. But our media landscape has changed so much over the past twenty years and today, television is only a small piece of the total media landscape. To be useful today, these lessons would need to be adapted or supplemented by the current lively and relevant work of the community of media scholars with interests in children and media. The second edition of the *Handbook of Children and the Media* (Singer & Singer, 2012) could be used to begin the process of re-thinking media literacy for the world of Internet, social media and digital marketing. Indeed, the *Handbook* reveals the fine bones of the CCV media literacy curriculum and one can see how we got from there to here.

Lessons Learned: Pros, Cons and Personal

The Singers stressed that an important element of using the CCV curriculum is rooted in the partnership between schools and television stations. However, this was only partially successful because the logistics were complex. CCV was a media literacy experiment in a very complex laboratory, the television broadcasting business itself. What I learned was that the idea of media literacy and “critical” viewing took time for broadcasters to warm to and for teachers to figure out how to integrate into their daily work at their schools. Many of the CCV coordinators had to cultivate relationships between broadcasters and educators and this was not always easy despite their efforts.

I found too that media literacy communities are to be found in likely and unlikely places. There are many people who would have been natural allies in each city—librarians, children’s museums, afterschool programs, universities and others. But developing those alliances took a great deal of time and energy. There were leaders in cities such as St. Louis and Nashville who worked toward large-scale community involvement in media literacy but this was not possible everywhere. When such coordination was developed, it made a difference in adoption and integration of media literacy ideas within a

Table 1
Creating Critical Viewers Curriculum

CHAPTER	TOPIC	ACTIVITIES
1	What You Watch and Why	Keep a Media Diary; Learn Names of Program Genres
2	Who Creates TV Programs? Career Opportunities in Television	Learn names of job functions at a TV station; watch programs and write down names listed in credits; learn about careers in TV
3	The Aesthetics of TV: Illusion and Reality: Illustrations of Camera Techniques, Practice Script, Script for Special Effects	Learn names of camera and editing techniques; discuss blurring of reality and illusion in programming; write a script
4	Commercials: Advertising Techniques, Commercials Chart, Storyboard Outline	learn about the economics of television advertising; recognize types of ads and persuasive techniques; attend to the volume of advertising through keeping a chart; create an ad
5	News, Information and Commentary: TV News Comparisons	Compare and contrast a local and national TV news show to analyze differences in content and format
6	Stereotypes	Discuss gender and racial stereotypes in media; create a new counter-stereotypical character for your favorite show
7	Action, Aggression and Violence	Distinguish between verbal and physical aggression and assertiveness; document the frequency of media violence
8	Ethics and Morality	Discuss how moral values are represented in TV shows
9	Health Issues and Safety: Alcohol Guideline for Producers, Writers and Directors, Entertainment Industry Task Force on AIDS	Read about the representation of alcohol, tobacco and sexually-transmitted diseases in the media and discuss its potential impact
10	The Environment	Discuss how environmental issues are depicted in entertainment and news media
Appendix	The Technical Side of TV: How TV Comes to Your House	Learn about how TV signals are transmitted

region. Every organization has to face the political tensions and ambiguities within the group and NATAS was no exception. Factions emerged and commitments frayed because some saw the value of this for the Academy and others did not. I was caught in the crossfire of these dilemmas. But the experience was very valuable and set an agenda for my subsequent career that, through my teaching, writing and speaking, has persisted.

Conclusion

The television industry's decision to develop a media literacy curriculum in the 1990s was a powerful

statement by certain broadcasters to take seriously the ethical and social questions being raised about the impact of their work and to learn how to address those questions with sophisticated and heartfelt pedagogy. The interdisciplinary collaboration of broadcasters, educators, and cultural leaders across the country by NATAS offered opportunities that served as a model by which to take media literacy to a new level. That the program did not remain does not diminish its impact. The story of this early media literacy venture helps us to see what is still needed in terms of widespread community engagement and how complex our mediated world has become in the two decades that have followed the CCV experiment.

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