Media Literacy Education: No Longer a Curriculum Option

by David L. Martinson

When he saw the blood, it was as though he had drunk a deep draught of savage passion. Instead of turning away, he fixed his eyes upon the scene and drank in all its frenzy. . . . He watched and grew hot with excitement, and when he left, . . . he carried away with him a diseased mind which would leave him no peace.

Is this passage the reflection of a mental health professional after examining a person exposed to excessive amounts of television violence? The words of a distraught parent describing the antisocial behavior of a child who that parent believes spent too many hours "playing" violent video games? The expressions of a law enforcement official trying to explain the latest incident in which a seemingly normal teenager felt the urge to bring a weapon to school?

Not at all. St. Augustine wrote these words to describe the experience of a young friend pressured into attending a gladiator fight. Augustine's friend entered the arena against his will and "was determined to have nothing to do with these atrocities" (Bok 1998, 30). However, he could not block out the sounds of the crowd and temptation overcame him. As a result (Bok 1998, 30):

He opened his eyes, and his soul was stabbed with a wound more pitifully than the man whose fall had drawn the roar of excitement from the crowd. The din had pierced his ears and forced him to open his eyes, laying his soul open to receive the wound which struck it down.

Concerns about the impact of violence and what many view as other forms of socially dysfunctional entertainment did not begin with the arrival of the Internet, technologically sophisticated video games, or cable television. DeFleur and Dennis (1998, 432) pointed out that once motion pictures moved beyond the novelty stage in the late 1920s, "the public . . . (became) uneasy about the influence of movies on children." By 1929, an estimated 40 million minors saw a movie at least once weekly and critics were concerned. Was this new technology (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 432) "destroying parents' control over their children . . . and teaching immorality?" It is noteworthy that "films with unwholesome themes—horror, crime, immoral relation-

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ships, and illegal use of alcohol (during prohibition)—were especially troubling" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 432). Public worry about the effect of the new motion-picture technology was so great that the first major studies of mass media effects were organized to examine the impact of movies on society, particularly young people. The techniques researchers used, in what came to be known as the Payne Fund Studies (1933–35), oftentimes lacked sophistication. The reported results of these studies, however, were accepted by many "without question, mainly because they were the first major studies of media effects, and the results were widely reported" (Biagi 1999, 271). Yes, there was criticism of the methodology among sophisticated researchers. Scholars point out, however, that "the public did not care about these controversies. They were frightened by the results" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 432). To the general public, "the technical criticisms of research procedures seemed . . . like debates over fine points of navigation conducted while the ship was sinking. Above all, the overall results of the Payne Fund Studies seemed to confirm the charges of critics of the movies and the worst fears of parents" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 432-33).

THE MAGIC BULLET THEORY

Results like those reported by the Payne Fund Studies appeared to support the magic-bullet or hypodermic-needle theory of mass media impact. Many people assumed, for example, that "if one could

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create the right message with the right media mix, one could get the masses to follow heedlessly" (Hiebert and Gibbons 2000, 126). From a connotative perspective, "the symbolism . . . is apparent—the media are a dangerous drug or a killing force that directly and immediately penetrate a person's system" (Baran 1999, 318).

The public's fears about the power of the media, particularly the new technologies like radio and television, were seemingly confirmed one evening in 1938 during a radio broadcast. On that evening, a young Orson Welles presented a production of *War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells on CBS's radio program *Mercury Theater of the Air*. The play "was so realistically presented in a 'newscast' format that . . . many listeners who tuned in late missed the information that it was only a play. They thought that Martian monsters were taking over" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 435). One woman in New York said, "I never hugged my radio so closely . . . [and] prayed while looking out my open window to get a faint whiff of gas so that I would know when to close my window and hermetically seal my room with waterproof cement or anything else I could get ahold of" (Vivian 1991, 294).

The radio broadcast "has been called the most famous of all radio entertainment programs" (Whetmore 1995, 122). As noted, it clearly seemed to indicate to many the awesome power of the new broadcast technology because "no newspaper or magazine had the ability to evoke such immedi-

ate emotional response" (Whetmore 1995, 122). Nevertheless, as scholars have pointed out, not everyone panicked. If the magic-bullet theory was correct, something resembling universal hysteria should have occurred. After all, creatures from outer space that apparently had the capacity to destroy civilization were invading earth. In fact, based on research conducted after the broadcast, individuals like social psychologist Hadley Cantril "concluded that 'critical ability' was the most significant variable related to the response people made to the broadcast" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 437). More particularly, "those high in critical ability tended not to believe the broadcast was real. They were more likely to be able to sort out the situation" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 437). Researchers took note that "statistical data obtained from CBS revealed that the amount of education was the single best factor in predicting whether people would check the broadcast against other sources of information" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 438).

LIMITED (INSIGNIFICANT) MEDIA EFFECTS?

Though many laypersons continue to cite Orson Welles' 1938 broadcast as evidence of the powerful effect of media, research has shown otherwise. Paradoxically, reaction to the *War of the Worlds* program became the turning point that eventually led the vast majority of media scholars to reject the magic-bullet (powerful effects) model.

In light of research by Cantril and others, a paradigm shift in mass communication theory had taken place by the 1940s and 1950s. Researchers came to perceive that the "media rarely had powerful, direct influence on individuals . . . [but instead] the effects were quite limited in scope—affecting only a few people or influencing rather trivial thoughts or actions" (Baran and Davis 2000, 122). This concept became

known as the *limited-effects perspective* which held that "most people are sheltered from direct manipulation . . . [from the media] by their family, friends, coworkers, and social groups. People don't believe everything they hear or see in the media . . . [but instead] turn to others for advice and critical interpretation" (Baran and Davis 2000, 132). In short, the researchers saw the media as but one variable in the process of opinion formation and change.

ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS?

For many, any suggestion "that the mass media ordinarily did not have any effects, just did not seem very reasonable" (Severin and Tankard 1992, 209). Certainly those who have "even an elementary acquaintance with recent American history must reach . . . a conclusion that, frequently, the media have had very powerful influences on a number of social and cultural situations, trends, and processes" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 459).

Here, then, is the dilemma. Credible—scientifically based—research clearly indicated that the mass media have limited impact. Was that research wrong? Such a conclusion, noted DeFleur and Dennis (1998, 459), "would contradict . . . [any] claim that science reveals trustworthy knowledge." The answer to this dilemma, they argued, rests in an acknowledgement that "the media do have weak effects, but . . . [that] they also have powerful effects"(459). Conceding their statement may sound like impossible double talk, they contended that "the key to understanding this seemingly irreconcilable puzzle lies in recognizing the difference between short-term effects on individuals and long-term influence on beliefs, attitudes, and behavior that can change shared cultural norms and social institutions in society at large" (459).

Illustrative of this point is research conducted by George Gerbner, the developer

of the area of communication research known as cultivation theory; research, it must be noted, that has been criticized strongly in some quarters. His research suggested that the mass media, particularly television, has a cultivation effect which "constructs a reality of the world that, although possibly inaccurate, becomes accepted simply because we as a culture believe it to be true" (Baran 1999, 333). Indeed, studies have indicated that television cultivates our views with regard to questions "such as beauty, sex roles, religion, the judicial process, and marriage. . . . Television cultivates realities, especially for heavy viewers" (Baran 1999, 333). When asked, for example, "Can people be trusted?" . . . heavy television viewers are more likely than light viewers to check a response such as "Can't be too careful" (Severin and Tankard 1992, 249). Research suggested "that heavy television viewers are getting a heightened sense of risk and insecurity from television . . . [and that it] may be leading heavy viewers to perceive a 'mean world'" (Severin and Tankard 1992, 249).

Another line of research contends that, while the media may not be that successful in telling individuals what to think, it may be influential in telling them what to think about. This line of research argues that the media may have considerable power in setting the agenda. What, for example, are the issues that citizens perceive most important when they cast their ballots on Election Day? Very likely, those issues highlighted by the media are a significant determinant. The media may be very influential in suggesting which issues people believe they should consider important in the process of deciding how to cast that vote.

One might propose that contemporary research into mass media effects has revealed an extremely complex picture—about which simple answers do not exist.

Mass media is no magic bullet; however, media effects cannot be ignored. It seems evident that "in contemporary society . . . (the) media play a central part in the overall socialization process by which individuals obtain their personal understandings of their culture and their knowledge of their social order" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 489). One might argue, in fact, that this "socialization shapes everyone's patterns of perception, thought and action" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 489).

To understand and respond intelligently to the media under such circumstances requires a media literate population. Schools in the United States and abroad can and must play a central role in developing a society literate about mass media. They must teach young people the intellectual skills they will need to comprehend and appreciate mass media's role and impact (both better and worse) in an increasingly complex, economically, and technologically driven society.

SCHOOLS AND MEDIA LITERACY

We are entering a new media age. As media scholar James Carey (1998, 34) asserted, new communication opportunities created by technologies such as satellite transmission and the Internet represent a movement "from a modern to a postmodern organization of communication." Carey (1998, 33) argued that we are in the midst of a "communication revolution . . . whose . . . dynamic is at the global rather than the national level, a revolution producing, in the words of the former chairman of Citicorp, 'the twilight of sovereignty.'" In other words, as we enter this postmodern era, we may find that even politics will be practiced at a global rather than national-state level.

"Interestingly, and of concern, Carey (1998, 34) cautioned that the end point of all these changes is quite uncertain. He

noted that "it could all turn out badly . . . We should remind ourselves that the culminating event of the communications revolution of the 1890s [which he cites as beginning the modern era of communications] came when the guns of August sounded in 1914 and the twentieth century really began" (Carey 1998, 34).

If schools are to meet the challenges presented during this revolutionary postmodern era of communication, the entire educational establishment—school administrators, bureaucrats, teachers, and colleges of education—must be committed to responding in an anticipatory and creative manner. A commitment to aiding the development of a media-literate population must become a central priority.

A "media literacy" program, according to Art Silverblatt, includes five key elements (Baran and Davis 2000, 359); these elements will help develop in students:

1. an awareness of the impact of the media on the individual and society;

2. an understanding of the process of mass communication;

3. the development of strategies with which to analyze and discuss media messages;

4. an awareness of media content as "text" that provides insight into our contemporary culture and ourselves; and

5. the cultivation of an enhanced enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation of media content.

It should be obvious that these suggestions go well beyond the traditional middle or secondary school journalism course during which the teacher is most concerned about getting the school yearbook or student newspaper published on time (Martinson 1993). More specifically, genuine movement toward meeting such educational objectives depends on:

• educators recognizing that it is important for students, and ultimately society, for schools to engage in media literacy programs; and

• educators—particularly school administrators and bureaucrats—acknowledging that such an effort will require resources—resources they must be willing to provide.

One legitimately might ask where, in the curriculum, would or should media literacy instruction be placed? I have suggested that optimally "all high schools should have at least one specific course . . . focusing on . . . [media literacy]" (Martinson 1993, 126). I further maintained that such a course "should be a graduation requirement for all students . . . [and that it] must be a vigorous and demanding academic exercise" (126).

If budget and other academic or curriculum restraints make it impossible to develop and establish a specific media literacy course, then media literacy instruction must be built consciously and specifically into existing curriculum. It cannot be an add-on or afterthought. Schools can accomplish this integration in either of two ways:

1. Media literacy education can be designated as a major component in one existing course or

2. Media literacy education can be

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smaller, but significant, components of several courses.

It is essential that, above all else, the person or persons assigned to teach media-related material be qualified. Resources are key. School administrators must find—and be willing to pay—persons who have *authentic* expertise in contemporary mass communication issues if instruction is to be relevant and educationally fruitful. Honesty forces one to admit that, in the past, "too frequently persons . . . [were] assigned to teach particular courses because the administrator . . . [needed] to place a football or basketball coach in a course that the administrator . . . [believed required] little academic background and minimal daily preparation" (Martinson 1993, 127). Consequently, since a coach likely saw "the daily newspaper and . . . [watched] the evening news . . . [that qualified him] to teach a course in the mass media" (Martinson 1993, 127).

PERCEPTION, TRUTH, AND MEDIA SOUND BITES

Establishing a curriculum program in media literacy education is important. In a postmodern era and new millennium, communication and its technology play an increasingly important role. Therefore, it is imperative that young people be prepared for that reality.

We should not spend too much time looking at the trees as we ignore the forest. Mass media's influence and effect on global society is complex. In the political process, for example, students must understand how new media technologies challenge the very manner in which we select our nation's leaders. Assuming truth in that assertion, educators must ask what the point is in having students "memorize Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address if it would be impossible for Lincoln to be elected [in the postmodern communications era]" (Martinson 1993, 126).

Finally, the importance of schools implementing a genuine program to build media literacy should become more apparent if one considers yet another emerging media theory. Called *media information dependency theory*, it maintains "that we live in a society in which networks of interpersonal ties are not as deeply established as they once were" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 3). In earlier eras, individuals were more likely "to pursue similar ways of life and . . . [were] linked to word-of-mouth networks of extended families, deeply-established friendships, long-term neighbors and other social ties from which they . . . [could] obtain the information they need" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 3).

In contemporary times, in contrast, "people of many diverse backgrounds live in physical proximity to each other, but with extensive differences based on ethnicity, race, education, income, religion, and other characteristics" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 3). In such an environment, people "become dependent on . . . [the media] for information needed to make many kinds of decisions"; so much so, in fact, that increasingly they turn to the outlets of mass communications "to find someone to date or even marry" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 3).

This article began with a quotation from St. Augustine in which he expressed concern about the media violence of his time—gladiator games. Bok (1998, 31) pointed out St. Augustine's main concerns:

> *[about] the nature of the harm imputed to . . . [the] spectators themselves—to their souls . . . and the risks that spectators thus debilitated might pose to others. Are they rendered more uncaring about suffering as a result of having partaken of carnage as entertainment, more pitiless, perhaps even more easily moved to aggression?*

The same questions need to be asked today—particularly in light of the increasingly important role the instruments of mass communication are playing in our postmodern society. Media scholars understand that a teenager viewing a violent program on television most likely will not leave the comforts of the living room and attempt to recreate that stylized mayhem. Yet, sources as credible as the U.S. Surgeon General contend ". . . there is no longer any question that a relationship exists between the exposure to violent television programs and increased tendencies toward aggressive behavior among individuals viewing such content" (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 454).

Media have the potential to serve or malign contemporary society and its individuals. How do we help choose media's purposes? Baran and Davis (2000, 358) point to education: "The best way to ensure functional (rather than dysfunctional) use of media is to increase individuals' media use skills." Our schools have enormous opportunity and responsibility in this regard. That obligation will be met only if the entire educational establishment recognizes the challenge, responds, and, just as importantly, commits the resources required to fulfill that responsibility.

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