

9-22-2006

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Boulton, Chris and Scharrer, Erica, "Shifting currents in media awareness" (2006). *Academic Exchange Quarterly*. 1.
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Shifting Currents in Media Awareness

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Abstract

This longitudinal qualitative research study examines how a group of parents and teachers sought to raise awareness in their community about harmful media effects. Initially condemning the influx of new digital media technologies such as violent video games, the group eventually shifted tactics in an effort to go beyond ‘preaching to the choir’ and bring other parents into the fold. Their experience suggests that we might reconsider media literacy as a form of social work.

Introduction

The introduction of media literacy initiatives into U.S. public schools faces numerous obstacles (Kubey, 2003). Beyond the curriculum restrictions of recent standards-based legislation and a general lack of funding for in-service teacher training (Hobbs, 2004), efforts to address students’ media diets are often stymied by the gulf between lessons taught at school and values learned at home. Despite the challenges, a group of parents and teachers at a public elementary school in rural Massachusetts have banded together to form the Media Awareness Project. Concerned about the relationship between violent media consumption and aggressive playground behavior, the group has organized two regional media literacy conferences in the past three years. This essay will consider the trajectory of the Media Awareness Project, a journey which has produced a host of growing pains and epiphanies that can serve as a lesson to us all.

Preaching to the Choir

Our analysis is based on a comparison of interviews[1] conducted with members of the Media Awareness Project in the Fall of 2004 and Spring of 2006. In 2004, all our informants echoed the same refrain: “we’re preaching to the choir.” As one teacher observed, “99.9% of the people who attended [the 2004 conference] have this knowledge and awareness [of harmful media effects], so one of the problems was that people who would have benefited were not there.” Moreover, it seemed that mindful parents were already taking steps to regulate their children’s media diets. The challenge was how to reach parents who used TV as a “free babysitter” devoid of quality control. In 2004, Boulton (2005) conducted a two-month qualitative study of the Media Awareness Project and came to the following conclusion.

Most members of the Media Awareness Project are outraged by the end of childhood as they knew it and the moral decline of popular culture in general. Such nostalgia could offend their target audience, namely families who consume the very media that they so despise. Likewise, blaming the ‘third person’ for social ills such as aggressive socialization and protecting your child from the ‘contagion’ of other children could form attitudes that only further alienate other parents. (p. 5)

The “third person effect” theory predicts that individuals will perceive media to have more harmful effects on others than on themselves (Davison, 1983). For example, while we might be perfectly capable of resisting anti-social media messages, other people are more likely to simply imitate what they watch. As for “contagion,” some of the parents in the Media Awareness Project expressed a concern that, despite strict rules at home, their children would be infected by bad media habits at their school via exposure to other children. Such an attitude is consistent with the “two-step flow of communication,” a theory which describes how media is filtered and distributed to the masses through “opinion leaders” who hold influence within particular social groups (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This “two-step flow” was summed up nicely by Cathy, the Media Awareness Project coordinator, in 2004:

I don't care what they let their children watch, if we could instill that they didn't bring it to school. But it's all brought to school...whatever the children in my son's class are exposed to, whether I insulate him or not, those are the things that he's exposed to.

Moreover, in late 2004, it seemed to us that the Media Awareness Project was caught in a double-bind. On the one hand, the group was not content with holding a conference and preaching a sermon to the faithful—they hoped to reach out and evangelize in the community in order to gain new converts to their cause. On the other hand, the group's embrace of the “third person effect” coupled with fears of “contagion” from other children only increased their hostility towards the very families they were trying to persuade. Such a dilemma is a familiar obstacle to agents of social change. In the next section, we will examine how shifting currents within the Media Awareness Project are now flowing in new directions.

Turning the Tide

In contrast to the most prevalent definitions of media literacy (Aufderheide, 1997), the Media Awareness Project was not initially created as a form of education directed at children per se, but rather as an effort to alert *parents* to the dangers of digital media and inspire them to intervene on their children's behalf. Angela, the school social worker and one of the founding members of the Media Awareness Project, recalled a collective recognition of a common enemy. She said that, as the children's playground behavior began to imitate violent TV shows and video games, “it just dawned on all of us at the same time, wow, we're all saying the same thing...the handwriting was on the wall and it was like, ‘Oh my God.’”

But even at the very genesis of the Media Awareness Project, group members began to split along ideological lines. Darlene, the school principal, remembers feeling more inclined to adapt to the new currents of technology:

The media group was all on the bandwagon and I had to kinda' reel them in from time to time about [them saying that] ‘media's bad’ and ‘we have to put an end to this’ and I kept saying ‘no, no...we have a river of media here and we are never

going to stop the flow of this, we have to jump in and swim with people and show them how to use it.' I said 'it's not our job to say stop the river!'

Since they were trained with the printed page, it should come as no surprise that the teachers in the group harbor some suspicion towards the digital screen. So if the rushing 'river' of media technology is passing them by and threatening to flood the valley of cherished literature, then they'd better do their best to dam it.

But two years later, awash in a flood with new digital devices, many in the group had changed their tactics. Theresa, a pre-school teacher and group member, now hoped to channel, rather than stop, the energy of the rising tide: "I was in the camp of thinking that we've got to screen it all out, but I've come to the understanding that it's part of our culture and we've got to find creative ways to work with it and equip people to be selective about it." Likewise, Angela's initial alarm has been replaced with a more pragmatic attitude towards digital media: "It's here to stay so let's use it wisely."

This shift within the Media Awareness Project reflects a broader trend within the national media literacy movement as a whole. For example, the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA) recently chose British scholar David Buckingham as a keynote speaker for the 2005 National Media Education Conference[2]. This is a significant gesture since Buckingham (1998) is an outspoken critic of the "media effects" tradition, arguing that public outrage over offensive media content amounts to a moral panic, distracting policy makers from more pressing social issues such as poverty and gun-control. According to Buckingham, children are not innocent victims in need of our protection, but rather active players capable of resisting, even rejecting, the media messages they consume for pleasure. Moreover, Buckingham opposes calls for government regulation of media content, instead advocating for increased access to more diverse forms of programming.

Though we doubt that the Media Awareness Project would ever go as far as Buckingham, their own choice of keynote speaker is illustrative of a profound philosophical change within the group. In 2006, the Media Awareness Project invited Faith Rogow, founding president of the AMLA, to speak at their Spring media literacy conference. In her remarks, Rogow (2006) strongly discouraged censorship while advising the assembled teachers and parents to make careful 'selections' among the various media options. It's as though she was coaxing the audience to take a dip in the digital media river: come on in, the water's fine, but don't jump...wade in slowly.

Video Games and the Gifted Child

But some still see danger at the water's edge. Theresa, for one, is keeping her feet firmly anchored on dry ground. In 2004, she described how a four-year-old boy came to school and said, "I watched *The Terminator*[3], but I'm not supposed to talk about it because my Dad and I like to watch it together." This boy would then act out violent scenes from the movie on the playground, bumping into other kids to "blow them up." Now, two years later, the same family has a daughter in Theresa's preschool class. When she noticed the girl having some cognitive processing issues, Theresa asked the four-year-old girl what she does at home:

She said ‘I play *Halo 2*[4] with my brother’ ...so tell me about *Halo 2*...what do you see? ‘we shoot and blood comes out.’ This same child is coming in everyday and reporting to me about bad dreams. ‘I had a bad dream last night, I had a bad dream.’

In 2006, Theresa described a very bright five-year-old who struggles with video game addiction. When speaking with the boy’s mother, Theresa learned that he throws a tantrum every morning because “he doesn’t want to be torn away from his video games.” The mother complained to Theresa that she “literally has to physically drag him away from [the videogames] to put him on the school van—*physically* airlift him out of the house.” One would think that such behavior would trigger tougher parental restrictions on the boy’s video game use. Not so:

I talk with the Mom—she’s extremely intelligent—and she says ‘Well, I don’t see where it’s a problem because he may play for two hours but he comes out in half hour intervals to tell us how he’s doing’ and I said, ‘You know, I think it would be best if you didn’t start your day with any video games.’ The mother responded by saying ‘Oh we don’t usually do that but sometimes we need to because the baby’s crying and I can’t do both.’

Clearly, new media devices can provide a valuable service for busy parents. Like television, the video game console is a relatively inexpensive way to keep an active child quiet and stationary for long periods of time. Of course, some resent this strategy as replacing more traditional forms of play. As Cathy, the original coordinator of the Media Awareness Project, complained in 2004, “children don’t play outside anymore...people are inert, they’re playing their *Gameboys*[5].” The media landscape for children has certainly changed dramatically. Having found that one-third of young children now have a television in their bedroom[6], Roberts and Foehr (2004) wryly observe that “where once the words ‘go to your room’ implied the punishment of isolation, for many children today it is little more than a directive to visit a media arcade” (p. 42).

But now, in 2006, Theresa makes an interesting move. Recalling her student’s video game addiction, she wonders if media is not just a free baby sitter but also a point of parental pride: “I think the confusion is that she feels that he’s gifted, and because he’s gifted, he can handle adult information...[like video] games for kids who are 16.” In other words, this new twist on the “third person effect” flatters parents into thinking that their own child is more developmentally mature than his/her peers and, therefore, somehow immune to harmful effects from media intended for adults. It’s easy to see how such an attitude could serve to justify the permissive parenting styles that the Media Awareness Project so passionately opposes.

In 2004, Theresa spoke on behalf of the group when she said, “I feel that parent education is the number one goal.” Cathy added that “97 percent of parents realize that media and overexposure to media has an adverse effect on children, but what do they do about it?” In planning their 2006 media literacy conference[7], the group was determined to avoid preaching to the choir and get other parents on board. This year was going to be different.

Less reactionary. More positive. The new coordinator of the Media Awareness Project, Melinda, even read *Got Game*[8], to consider the educational applications of video games. It was time for the group to meet their target audience half-way. They did everything right: lots of publicity, free childcare, free lunch, but no dice. At the end of the 2006 conference, Anne flatly observed what had become obvious to everyone: “We had a very poor show of parents here today.”

When asked about the low parent turn-out, Melinda was visibly disappointed: “Yeah, that hasn’t changed from when you wrote your [2005] paper, quite apparently...I don’t know how to reach them.” Theresa did her best to rally the parents in the days leading up to the conference: “I told people in my classroom ‘you can come for an hour’ I was practically begging people...but then I think, ‘What do people come for?’ they come for that pot-luck.”

Social Work

The pot-luck is a monthly support-group for parents that takes place at the elementary school. It’s a time for parents to gather over a meal, socialize a bit, then listen to a program run by the school social worker. For a rural and isolated community, such gatherings are an important outlet for social interaction helping to incubate relationships and nurture mutual trust among peers. The pot-luck would thus appear to be the perfect forum for parents to consider challenges and generate solutions. In addition, it would seem that media literacy for parents could be more effective when data on harmful effects is coupled together with viable alternatives such as play-dates and other forms of collaborative childcare.

Thus, after three years of community organizing and two regional conferences, the Media Awareness Project has just drafted the blueprints for a better way to reach parents. Instead of trying to mount a special once-a-year event and then recruit parents to attend, the group is now considering going to where the parents *already are*. As Theresa put it,

We’re looking for ways to tap into how people are responding to and communicating with each other because they are not coming to these conferences...Why don’t we use the existing things that are vehicles of communication that are really strong and really well attended to target some of these areas of concern?

For the past three years, the Media Awareness Project has defied the odds. Sometimes swimming with, other times against, the current, these teachers and parents never wavered in their commitment to the welfare of children. Not only did the program manage to survive personnel changes and maintain its funding, but the members evolved from their initial stage of outrage to a sober acceptance of the group’s failure to draw other parents into the fold. Out of this disappointment came hard-earned insight and hope for the future: media awareness just might work best when the work is social.

Endnotes

[1] Chris Boulton conducted the interviews, obtaining voluntary consent from all of his interview subjects, changing names, and concealing the geographic location of the school in order to preserve the anonymity of his sources.

[2] For more information on NMEC 2005, visit the AMLA website at <http://www.amlainfo.org/>

[3] *The Terminator* is an R-rated 1984 action movie starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.

[4] *Halo 2* is an extremely popular first-person-shooter video game. It is rated M, mature audiences only, for blood, gore, language, and violence.

[5] *Gameboy* is a popular line of battery-powered handheld video game consoles sold by Nintendo.

[6] A Kaiser Family Foundation study conducted in the late 1990's and based on an in-home nationally representative sample of over 1,000 younger children (age 2-7) found that one-third of two to seven-year-olds have a television in their room (Roberts & Foehr 2000, pp: 18, 42).

[7] The lead author helped plan this conference and facilitated an afternoon workshop on the persuasion strategies of television advertising.

[8] *Got Game* (2004) argues that video game use can develop sequential thinking, problem-solving strategies, interactive engagement, and fearlessness—a combined set of skills attractive to future employers.

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