

Screen-Agers... and the Decline of the “Wasteland”

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Newton Minow himself tells the story that the two words from his 1961 speech to the National Association of Broadcasters he originally thought would stand the test of time were not “vast wasteland,” but rather, “public interest.”¹

He had intended his remarks that described the media environment of the 1960s not so much as a condemnation, but as a challenge, and a reminder to broadcasters that, as owners of the airwaves, viewers have rights, too. “Never have so few owed so much to so many,” he said. “It is not enough to cater to the nation’s whims—you must also serve the nation’s needs... For every hour that the people give you, you owe them something.”²

But whether one sees the significance of the speech as a lament or as a challenge, the focus of the speech is overwhelmingly on the *content* of television—the programs, the production values, the storylines, the “product.” This is because the Chairman’s challenge issued from a set of assumptions common in the 1960s, not only about technology and the economics of broadcasting, but also about the power of visual images and about the receiver skills of the audience to make sense of those images. These in turn came from assumptions about education and about how children learn about their world and their role in it.

Against the use of television as an economic engine of a consumer society was posited the “better” use of television—“to teach, to inform, to uplift, to stretch, to enlarge the capacities of our children.”³ The vision of educational television in the 1960s was as a temporary substitute for, or an extension of, the teacher whose function was to pass along the accumulated knowledge of (primarily western) civilization to the receptive ears, eyes, and brains of children, sitting quietly in order to take in the teacher’s words of wisdom. Expanding this teaching approach with television, and later computers, not only proved ineffective in achieving educational goals but was unmasked in later decades by the exploding diversity of American culture as a narrow and elitist interpretation of human experience—whether past, present, or future.

But there were deeper assumptions, as well, about the role and function of communication in human society and the privilege of the scientific method as the preferred way of describing human experience. The common model of human communication at the time used the concepts of stimulus/response, cause/effect, and sender/receiver. The goal was to have the receiver “get” the message sent by the sender in an unimpeded path, without “noise” or degradation. The highest goal was “fidelity” of the message from sender to receiver and back again, with the original sender becoming the receiver and vice versa.⁴

Receivers were not perceived as participating in the process much at all. Although readers of print messages were assumed to be intellectually stimulated and, to some extent, radio “engaged” its listeners, television was thought to be passive because “nothing was left to the imagination.”

Furthermore, the prevalent hypodermic or "bullet" theory of communications assumed that message receivers, especially children, were rather passive "blank slates" over which message senders, such as television broadcasters, had the awesome power to influence "for good, or for ill." "Your industry possesses the most powerful voice in America. It has an inescapable duty to make that voice ring with intelligence and with leadership," observed Chairman Minow.⁵

LITERACY IN A MEDIA AGE

Forty years later, we are looking not just at a changed world of communications technology, but a changed world of education and a dramatically changed psychological understanding of how human beings, especially children, learn and grow in understanding about themselves and the world they inhabit. With children exposed to hundreds, even thousands, of images and messages each day through not only television but also videos, DVDs, music, video games, and, of course, the Internet, educators are becoming less concerned about the overt (or even latent) messages in a specific media experience than about the internal process a young person (even a toddler) goes through to *make sense* of the mediated world around him or her.

A few years after Minow's speech, noted communications theorist David Berlo provided a clear rationale for why schooling should no longer be about knowledge *acquisition*, but rather about knowledge *processing*:

For the first time in history, two related propositions are true. One, it no longer is *possible* to store within the [human] brain . . . all of the information that [a human] needs; i.e., we can no longer rely on [ourselves] as a memory bank. Second, it no longer is *necessary* to store within the [human] brain . . . all of the information that [humans] need[]; i.e., [we are] obsolete as a memory bank. . . .

Education [therefore] needs to be geared toward the *handling* of data rather than the *accumulation* of data.⁶

If, in 1961, Minow's concern was about media content and measuring it against some arbitrary standard of "quality," today, in the twenty-first century, our concern must be about the process of *internal meaning-making*. This process includes the ability to "read" a mediated message (whether print or electronic) by translating the visual and verbal languages used, putting the message in context with other messages and with one's current reality, and ultimately evaluating whether one wants to pay attention to and internalize this message or not.

It is, in effect, a new kind of literacy for the twenty-first century—media literacy—and it is spreading rapidly in classrooms and in schools, not only in the United States, but around the world. Indeed, countries such as England, Australia, and Canada are a decade ahead of the United States in training teachers and implementing media literacy across the curriculum. In England, for example, the concept of "moving image education" is a core component of language arts instruction beginning in the earliest grades.

I want to be clear that the introduction of media literacy into our nation's schools is not an excuse for the producers of media to abandon all standards of production, propriety, or even aesthetic taste. But I propose the growth of media literacy in U.S. education circles makes obsolete the very question of whether the television landscape in the twenty-first century is "better" or "worse" than in 1961. How so?

Author Douglas Rushkoff calls the current youth generation "screen-agers"⁷ because their media use is not distinguished specifically as television, video games, movies, computers, or even telephones, but simply as a series of screens which they both access and manipulate in a constantly evolving stream of

shared communication. This capability, in turn, is transforming the use and impact of media in everyday life:

Screen-agers see media not as discrete products that can “impact” them or their culture, but as elements of a multimedia mosaic that *is* their culture.

Screen-agers “read” and “write” seamlessly, using images, sounds, and words.

Screen-agers experience the world not in physical boundaries, but as an instant global network of connections and interconnections.

In this kind of world, the content of a specific media message is no longer all that relevant. It is only one of thousands received every day. What *is* important is facility with asking questions, with problem-solving, with being able to access a message, then to analyze and evaluate it, and finally, to communicate your point of view resulting from your inquiry.

In its recently released *MediaLit Kit*, the Center for Media Literacy, one of the pioneering organizations behind the media education movement in the United States, identifies Five Key Questions for media literacy.⁸ These, in turn, flow from Five Core Concepts that have evolved from media literacy practitioners and scholars around the world. Starting with simple versions of the questions in the elementary level and moving on to more sophisticated analysis in upper grades, students learn how to apply the questions to any message in any medium. It is a multilayered “Framework for Learning and Teaching in a Media Age.”⁹

Core Concept #1: All media messages are “constructed.”

Whether we are watching the nightly news or passing a billboard on the street, the media message we experience was written by someone (or probably several people), pictures were taken, and a creative designer put it all together. But this is more than a physical process. What happens is that whatever is “constructed” by just a few people then becomes “the way it is” for the rest of us. But as the audience, we do not get to see or hear the words, pictures, or arrangements that were rejected. We only see, hear, or read what was accepted. Helping people understand how the media are put together—and what was left out—as well as how the media shape what we know and understand about the world we live in is a critical first step in helping them navigate their lives through a global and technological society.

Key Question #1: Who created this message?

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Core Concept #2: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

Each form of communication—whether newspapers, TV game shows, or horror movies—has its own creative language: scary music heightens fear, camera close-ups convey intimacy, and big headlines signal significance. Understanding the grammar, syntax, and metaphor system of media language increases our appreciation and enjoyment of media experiences, as well as helping us to be less susceptible to manipulation. One of the best ways to understand how the media are put together is to do just that: make a video, create a Web site, or develop an ad campaign about a community issue. The four major arts disciplines—music, dance, theatre, and the visual arts—can also provide a context through which one gains skills of analysis, interpretation, and appreciation, along with opportunities for self-expression and creative production.

Key Question #2: What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

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Core Concept #3: Different people experience the same media message differently.

Because of each individual's age, upbringing, and education, no two people see the same movie or hear the same song on the radio. Even parents and children do not see the same TV show. This concept turns the tables on the idea of TV viewers as just passive "couch potatoes." We may not be conscious of it, but each of us, even toddlers, is constantly trying to make sense of what we see, hear, or read. The more questions we can ask about what we are experiencing around us, the more alert we can be about accepting or rejecting messages. Research indicates that, over time, children of all ages can learn age-appropriate skills that give them a new perspective with which they can "read" their media culture.

Key Question #3: How might different people understand this message differently from me?

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Core Concept #4: Media have embedded values and points of view.

Media, because they are constructed, carry a subtext of who and what is important—at least to the person or persons creating the construction. Media are also storytellers (even commercials tell a quick and simple story) and stories require characters, settings, and a plot that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The choice of a character's age, gender, or race, mixed in with the lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors that are portrayed, the selection of a setting (urban, rural, affluent, poor, etc.), and the actions and reactions in the plot are just some of the ways that values become "embedded" in a TV show, a movie, or an ad. It is important to learn how to decode all kinds of media messages in order to discover the points of view that are embedded in them. Only then can we judge whether to accept or reject these messages as we negotiate our way each day through our mediated environment.

Key Question #4: What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

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Core Concept #5: Most media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power.

Newspapers and magazines lay out their pages with ads first; the space remaining is devoted to news. Likewise, we all know that commercials are part and parcel of most TV watching. What many people do not know is that what is really being sold through television or other commercial media is not only the advertised products to the audience, but also the audience to the advertisers. The *real* purpose of the programs on television, whether news or entertainment, is to create an audience (and put them in a receptive mood) so that the network or local station can sell *time* to sponsors to advertise their products in commercials. Indeed, sponsors pay for the time based on the number of people the station predicts will be watching. The sponsors also *target* their advertising message to specific kinds of viewers: for example, women twenty to thirty-five years old who have the ability to spend money on the advertised products, or children two to seven years old who influence their parents' spending.

But the issue of message motivation has changed dramatically since the Internet became an international platform through which groups and organizations—even individuals—can attempt to persuade others to a particular point of view. As an exercise in power unprecedented in human history, the Internet provides numerous reasons for users of all ages to be able to interpret rhetorical devices, verify sources, and distinguish legitimate online sources from bogus or "hoax" Web sites.

Key Question #5: Why is this message being sent?

TRANSFORMING LEARNING AND TEACHING

In a real classroom, the media literacy process is both simple and complex. It also transforms learning and teaching because very often students know more about their media culture than the teacher does. Retaking the principles of democratic pedagogy dating back to Socrates, wise teachers realize that their role is returning from being a "sage on the stage" to a "guide on the side." Their job is not to give answers but to stimulate more questions—to coach, prod, challenge, and open up an inquiry process that lets the learner discover how to find an answer. As media literacy penetrates the educational system, classrooms in every discipline are becoming lively laboratories for critical thinking (analysis) and creative communication (production):

The day's activity in a high school English class studying persuasion involves exploring questions that relate to a collection of advertisements that students have brought in to analyze: How does the camera angle make us feel about the product being advertised? What difference would it make if the car in the ad were blue instead of red? What do we know about a character from her dress, makeup, and jewelry? How does the music contribute to the mood of the story being told? The power of media literacy lies in figuring out how the construction of any media "text" influences and contributes to the meaning we or others make of it.

The teacher of a middle school civics class helps his students wrestle with the difficulty of society coming to agreement on controversial issues by forcing the students to "take a stand" — literally to walk to a place on a line of tape stretching across the floor between two end points: "Violent" and "Not Violent" — in response to a series of scenarios about violence in the media which the teacher reads:

"On the evening news there is a report of a bank robbery that results in police officers killing one of the robbers. Is this media violence, or not?"

"The report shows the officer actually shooting and the dead person covered with a sheet. Violent, or not?"

"A new video game is released in which the player gets to higher levels of the game by "killing" women. Is this violence, or not?"

"A rap star records a song in which he describes his bitter anger toward someone else, but does not advocate hurting them. Is this media violence, or not?"

After each scenario, students at different points on the line were selected to defend their "stand." The fact that each situation could generate many points of view helped expand their ability to appreciate ambiguity and tolerate differences, as well as to express their own viewpoint respectfully.

An American history class working group presents a report on the reasons why the Colonies wanted to separate from England by being callers to a radio talk show. To convince the show's "screener" to put them on the air, students had to succinctly summarize their position in a ten-second sound bite that, if successfully presented, earned them time for a three-minute presentation.

Even kindergarten children learn to appreciate media storytelling by creating their own story and then drawing it in a sequence of five or six scenes which the teacher mounts on a long roll of construction paper and hangs on the wall like a giant piece of film.

COPYRIGHT ISSUES

If the multi-channel multimedia world of the twenty-first century is not about content, but process, is there any room at all for a discussion of the "public interest" much less a "vast wasteland"?

Yes, but not where most broadcasters, policymakers or government officials would think to look. In the scenarios described above, the "public interest" is most realistically served when the public, especially our children and their teachers, have the support and protection of society to examine, critique, analyze, and evaluate the mediated experiences that define their culture.

I am not talking about the First Amendment. Rather, the "vast wasteland" we face today is the morass of contradictions in the intellectual property, copyright, and Fair Use regulations (and their interpretations) which threaten to stifle and even shut down the process of critical inquiry—of comment and criticism that is so fundamental for an educated citizenry in a democratic society in this or any century.

The most-often-asked questions the leaders in the media literacy movement get are usually related to copyright: "Can I show that movie clip in the classroom?" "Can I make thirty copies of this ad so every student can read the fine print?" "Can my students bring in taped examples from TV that demonstrate different persuasion techniques?"

Teachers are anxious and afraid for their jobs if they or their students bring "unauthorized" material into their classrooms. Librarians have become copyright police. School-district lawyers, working through vague definitions and no case law to back them up, too often strictly interpret the Fair Use provision—which does allow the use of copyrighted material for "criticism, comment...teaching...scholarship, or research."¹⁰

And perhaps the most significant impact of this vast copyright wasteland is that educational producers and textbook publishers, quite often a division of some larger media conglomerate (which may also own TV networks, cable channels, movie studios, magazines, or record labels), are nervous about incorporating contemporary media as "texts" for analysis—either to protect another part of their company from potential criticism or for fear of lawsuits from other corporations who use "copyright infringement" to preempt scrutiny of their media texts.

If there is a "vast wasteland" today, it is not in Beavis and Butt-head's backyard (or even Barney's front yard) but in the 1960s mindset that television, movies, and popular culture are, at best, problematic; that technology is just a "pipe" through which content flows to passive receivers; and that the role of society is to monitor and control the flow—and thus control the "problem."

The better alternative is to mobilize our educational, political, and legal systems so that Dick and Jane, as well as Raheem and Yolanda, Sean and Sivia, Ricardo and Zoe have the teachers, the technology, and the contemporary media texts to learn twenty-first-century skills for living in a twenty-first-century world.

The time has come to lay the "vast wasteland" to rest. What's needed instead is media literacy—*empowerment through education*.

1. Newton N. Minow, "How Vast the Wasteland Now?", Address at the Gannett Foundation Media Center, Columbia University (May 9, 1991).
2. Newton N. Minow, "Television and the Public Interest," Speech Before the National Association of Broadcasters (May 9, 1961) [hereinafter Vast Wasteland Speech].
3. *Id.*
4. For an overview of communication theory and debates over the past decades, see DENIS MCQUAIL, MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION, (1994).
5. Vast Wasteland Speech, *supra* note 2.
6. David K. Berlo, *The Context for Communication*, in COMMUNICATION AND BEHAVIOR 3, 8 (Gerhard J. Hanneman & William J. McEwen eds., 1975) (emphasis added).
7. DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF, PLAYING THE FUTURE: HOW KIDS' CULTURE CAN TEACH US TO THRIVE IN AN AGE OF CHAOS (1996).
8. *MediaLit Kit™/A Framework for Learning and Teaching in a Media Age*, Center for Media Literacy, available at <http://www.medialit.org>.
9. *Id.*
10. Copyright Act of 1976, Pub. L. No. 94-553, Title I, § 101, 90 Stat. 2546 (codified as amended at 17 U.S.C. § 107 (2000)).