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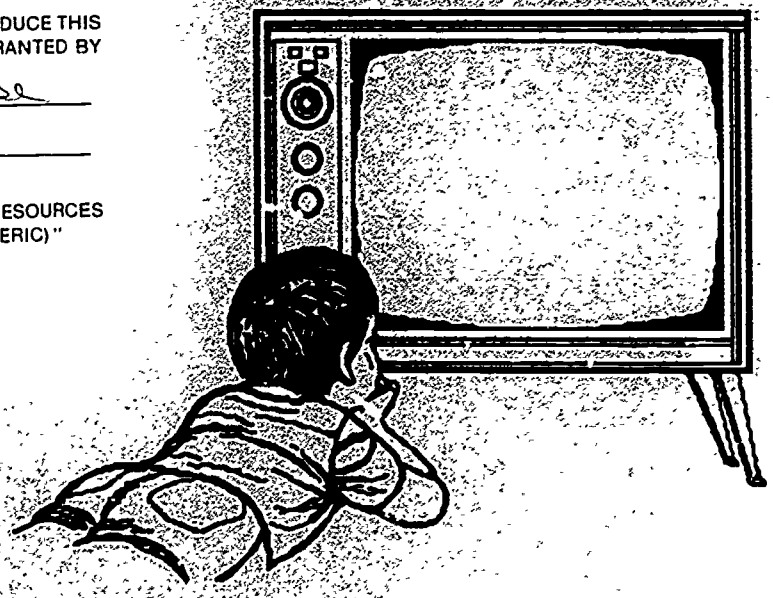
ABSTRACT

This report provides suggestions on how a language arts mass media and visual literacy skills assessment program might be structured to ensure that school districts meet the Common Curriculum Goals of the public elementary and secondary schools in Oregon. This report includes: (1) a list of Common Curriculum Goals that relate to mass media and visual literacy; (2) general implications for assessment; (3) criteria for differentiating among insufficient, acceptable, and ideal assessment practices at the classroom and district levels; (4) a bibliography of mass media and visual literacy instruction and assessment sources; and (5) sample mass media and visual literacy assessment tools and procedures. (RS)

English Language Arts

Assessing Student Progress on the Common Curriculum Goals

Report 6: Mass Media and Visual Literacy Skills



Division of Curriculum and School Improvement
Oregon Department of Education

September 1988

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Oregon Schools . . .
A Tradition of Excellence!

The review of research and initial draft of this paper were done by Edna DeHaven, Director of Reading Center, University of Oregon. The paper was revised to reflect comments from Oregon educators and published by the Department of Education.

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Verne A. Duncan
State Superintendent
of Public Instruction

September 1988

ASSESSMENT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS COMMON CURRICULUM GOALS

Report 6: Mass Media and Visual Literacy Skills

School districts in Oregon are required in Standards for Public Elementary And Secondary Schools 581-22-602 and -606 to use student assessment information on the Common Curriculum Goals to assist in making decisions about instruction of individual students and effectiveness of instructional programs. The standards suggest that a broad range of information is required to profile student and program progress and needs. There is also the assumption that instructional programs in schools have a clear alignment among the goals for instruction, the activities in the classroom, and the assessment of students' knowledge and skill.

This report provides suggestions on how a language arts mass media and visual literacy assessment program might be structured to ensure that districts carry out the intent of the standards.

The suggestions offered within this report are based on what current research indicates works best in measuring mass media and visual literacy. Clearly, there may be differences in mass media and visual literacy assessment district to district, and even classroom to classroom within the same building. To the extent that classroom or program assessment approaches differ from what is suggested here, those differences should nevertheless reflect a sound research base.

The report includes:

1. A list of the Common Curriculum Goals that relate to mass media and visual literacy (keyed to Essential Learning Skills, as appropriate).
2. General implications for assessment.
3. Criteria for differentiating among insufficient, acceptable and ideal assessment practices at the classroom and district levels.
4. Bibliography of mass media and visual literacy instruction and assessment sources.
5. Sample mass media and visual literacy assessment tools and procedures.

COMMON CURRICULUM GOALS RELATED TO MASS MEDIA AND VISUAL LITERACY

The following Common Curriculum Goals relate to mass media and visual literacy skills and include propoganda techniques and reasoning skills. Other Common Curriculum Goals may also be assessed through mass media and visual literacy activities (note particularly 1.5, 1.6, 1.11, 1.12, 2.9, 2.15). However, in order to avoid repetition in these reports, each Common Curriculum Goal appears only once in the area where it is most frequently and easily assessed. Where appropriate, the Common Curriculum Goals have been keyed to relevant Essential Learning Skills (ELS), which cut across curriculum areas.

Some procedures and resources are included later in this report which may be helpful in assessing mass media and visual literacy skills. However, it is NOT necessary that these Common Curriculum Goals be individually assessed, nor assessed separately within different content areas. In other words, a well-structured performance-based mass media and visual literacy assessment—as an example—might well meet the assessment requirements for all the Common Curriculum Goals listed here.

Further, districts that are focusing on the Essential Learning Skills may find creative ways to structure assessments that touch on more than one curriculum area: speech and mass media, for example, or art and visual literacy. This integrative approach is encouraged to the extent that districts find it a natural and logical outgrowth of their preferred assessment procedures; however, it is also perfectly acceptable for districts to assess different curriculum areas separately.

Common Curriculum Goals (Relevant to Mass Media and Visual Literacy)

Students will:

1.8 and 2.13 Determine the significance and accuracy of information and ideas presented in written, oral, aural, and visual communications (ELS 4.1).

1.9 and 2.14 Listen, read, view and evaluate presentations of mass media (ELS 4.4).

IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT

The primary focus of the goals in this area is for students to use mass media (including print, audio and visual media) as a source of information and to determine how they can critically interpret the information. Many of the skills can be taught directly and assessed through their application in everyday situations, for example, being able to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information, or logical and illogical conclusions (CCG 1.8/2.13). Some skills, such as identifying emotional appeals, propaganda techniques, bias, stereotypes and persuasion techniques can be assessed by analyzing newspapers, magazines, television and radio advertisements, editorials and reports (CCG 1.8/2.13, 1.9/2.14). In many cases, students may be expected simply to recognize the technique applied or the intended effect. However, in other cases the student may be expected to analyze the piece of work and to build a case using primary and secondary sources to verify a position or develop a counter-argument. Students will need to use writing and/or speaking skills in order to demonstrate analysis of the techniques employed in the media. Students may be asked to fill out critical listening charts or checklists while viewing or listening to media or presentations (see appendices).

Students' ability to apply appropriate audience skills (CCG 1.9/2.14) can be observed during ongoing presentations in the classroom and school. Oral and/or written feedback may be given to students following the presentation.

CLASSROOM LEVEL MASS MEDIA AND VISUAL LITERACY ASSESSMENT

Guidelines for Insufficient/Acceptable/Ideal Assessment Practices

The following examples are intended to be illustrative of the procedures and practices teachers might follow in assessing students' mass media and visual literacy skills to help make instructional decisions. Note that at the first (INSUFFICIENT) level, the practices followed, while not necessarily inherently wrong, are insufficient to ensure compliance with Standard 602. At the second (ACCEPTABLE) level, the practices extend beyond what is described as INSUFFICIENT, and—though not ideal—are likely to ensure minimal compliance with Standard 602. At the third (IDEAL) level, the practices described are likely to exceed the minimal requirements for compliance, but still be within reach of districts that want the most effective and thorough possible assessment of their students' mass media and visual literacy skills. It is hoped that this IDEAL level will serve as a goal for which most districts will aim in practice.

INSUFFICIENT

If mass media and visual literacy skills are assessed, the primary source is often questionnaires designed to assess students' favorite television programs and their ability to tell about events and characters in their favorite programs.

Opportunities to develop visual literacy take the form of unstructured discussions of films or programs recently seen by several class members. There is no planned curriculum and learning is incidental. Criteria for evaluating visual media is likely to be limited to its appeal to individual students.

Assessment is based strictly on teacher judgment of students' understanding of various favorite programs. Students are not given an opportunity to demonstrate the degree of visual literacy they possess by responding critically in a planned, typical viewing situation.

* * * * * * * * * * *

ACCEPTABLE

Teachers engage in both formal and informal assessment of students. They might assess knowledge through teacher-made or textbook tests, collect written responses to content and process questions and observe students' skills in discussions and actual viewing situations. Teachers provide oral and written feedback to students concerning their mass media and visual literacy skills related to the Common Curriculum Goals.

Feedback is based on established written performance criteria which are thoroughly discussed and understood by students in advance of assessment.

Students have two or three opportunities during the school year to respond to different genre of mass media. Criteria for judging performance are appropriate to the particular genre.

Assessment includes not only evaluation of students' skills and understandings in a test situation, but also considers students' responses in informal discussions and spontaneous comments about viewing experiences. Students' ability to make logical connections is considered of prime importance.

Students are instructed and assessed in the context of various actual viewing situations (e.g., commercials, situational comedy, newscast), reading situations (e.g., newspapers, magazines, bulletins), and listening situations (e.g., radio broadcast, audiotape of a speech, etc.). Teachers record results of students' performance and discuss evaluations with students individually in light of agreed-upon criteria.

* * * * * * * * * *

IDEAL

In addition to the Acceptable level, students have many planned opportunities throughout the year to participate in activities that develop mass media literacy. They participate in developing criteria for evaluating a variety of mass media and in validating their criteria, making changes as necessary. Teachers provide input, suggest learning resources, and carefully monitor students' growth. Written and oral feedback on students' understanding of mass media and visual literacy skills related to the Common Curriculum Goals is given to students on a regular basis.

Evaluation data are discussed with individual students in light of agreed-upon criteria, and together the teacher and student develop a plan for further improving visual literacy.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION

Guidelines for Insufficient/Acceptable/Ideal Assessment Practices

When evaluating a program, one of the sources of information is student achievement data. In addition, the program philosophy, goals, materials and other characteristics should be reviewed and evaluated. The student achievement data will help to identify where strengths and weaknesses might exist in the current program. The following examples are intended to be illustrative of the procedures and practices districts might follow in assessing student achievement for program evaluation. At the first (INSUFFICIENT) level, the practices followed, while not necessarily inherently wrong, are insufficient to meet the Standards. At the second (ACCEPTABLE) level, the practices would ensure at least minimal compliance with the Standards. The third level (IDEAL) exceeds minimum compliance but should still be in reach of districts.

INSUFFICIENT

Mass media skills are assessed as part of a standardized achievement test which focuses mainly on the student's ability to identify common fallacies and propaganda devices.

* * * * * * * * * *

ACCEPTABLE

At the lower grades (3 and 5) students are assessed on their ability to distinguish among fact-based and emotional-based media appeal. At the upper grades a district test or publisher's test is used that not only asks students to identify common fallacies and propaganda techniques in media, but also asks for critical evaluation of mass media influences.

****

IDEAL

The link with classroom assessment is particularly strong, given established criteria related to the Common Curriculum Goals. Classroom teachers are trained to use scoring criteria to assess students' ability to analyze, either orally or in writing, media presentations. The assessment may also incorporate the judgments of other trained teachers (e.g., from another school or district) to help validate the scoring. Assessment follows an annual cycle, evaluating all students at several different grade levels.

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APPENDIX A

CHARTS AND CHECKLISTS

Critical Listening Chart

Name of student conducting analysis:

Nature of spoken presentation:

Where heard:

Name of speaker:

Speaker's expressed purpose:

Speaker's possible hidden purpose:

Qualifications of speaker:

Examples of emotive language:

Evidence of bias:

Propaganda devices used:

1.

2.

3.

Examples of facts and opinions given in talk

Facts:

Opinions:

Noteworthy features of presentation:

Opinion of student conducting analysis:

In what ways was the talk effective? ineffective? Why?

Figure 10. Critical listening chart.

Reprinted from publication, Listening Skills Schoolwide: Activities and Programs. ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and National Council of Teachers of English, 1982.

Persuasion Analysis Chart

Name of student conducting analysis:

Time shown:

Length of commercial:

Product being sold:

Reasons given for customers to buy:

1.

2.

3.

People included:

Description of action (if any):

Description of music (why selected, why appropriate, and if effective):

Description of scenery (why selected, why appropriate, and if effective):

Propaganda devices used:

1.

2

3.

Noteworthy features:

Opinion of student conducting analysis:

Figure 9. Persuasion analysis chart.

Reprinted from publication, Listening Skills Schoolwide: Activities and Programs. ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and National Council of Teachers of English, 1982.

SAMPLE STUDENT CHECKLIST

Code: A Always U Usually S Seldom N Never Names of Students	Skills	Note bias	Distin-guishes fact from opinion	Notes emotive language	Recognizes propaganda devices
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
6.					

Reprinted from Listening Skills Schoolwide: Activities and Programs. ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and National Council of Teachers of English, 1982.

APPENDIX B

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE MEDIA COMPETENT

The Nature and Measurement of Competency in English

Edited by

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5 What It Means to Be Media Competent

Herb Karl
University of South Florida

This chapter is something of an anomaly in this book. It begins by arguing for the inclusion of its subject in school programs. No one doubts that language, reading, and writing are central to school programs or that they are the proper business of English language arts teachers; but most people, teachers included, have strong reservations about media studies in school programs. Or it may be that teachers and administrators simply don't see how to find space for media studies in already crowded curricula. At any rate, such studies have a limited place, if they appear at all.

My argument, developed and documented at length, is this: Since the electronic media in all their variety represent the dominant mass public communication mode, they deserve serious study in schools. Furthermore, in the context of this book, I am arguing that any serious approach to *assessment* of basic communicative competence in American schools in the years ahead must be concerned with media competence. I am making the assumption that the place for such studies and their assessment is in English programs. My view is that they deserve their own place, as in the new college and university departments of media studies and communications. But so far, where they have appeared in the schools, they have found a comfortable home among English teachers.

This chapter is also an anomaly in that there is no history of assessment (of measurement and evaluation) to point to in media studies. There are decades of psychometric work on language and reading, and recently there has been a surge of new developments in evaluation of writing. But so far in media studies everyone's efforts have been devoted primarily to theory, program development, and teaching methods. While this lack of assessment history made my task more difficult in one way, in yet another way it left me free with the challenge of conjecturing very tentatively about appropriate ways to assess media competence. I stop far short of

specifying tests of *minimal* media competence, but so far as I know no state legislature is interested in that anyway.

My approach in this chapter is to extend gradually my description of media competence to include the following nonprint media: television, movies, radio, and recordings. As I discuss competence in viewing and/or responding to these media, I suggest a few ways teachers might assess a student's competence.

The Meaning and Purpose of Media Competence

Time use studies and consumer surveys (particularly those of A. C. Nielson and Elmo Roper) continue to unearth all manner of findings regarding the media habits of children and adults. Among other things, it appears that junior and senior high school students spend more time with electronic media (TV, records, radio, and movies) than they do with books; the average sixteen year old has spent as much time watching TV as attending school; many people find television a more believeable source of information than the daily newspaper; and finally, more American homes have TV sets than have indoor plumbing.

Such claims notwithstanding, several related questions on which there is little if any agreement continue to receive a considerable amount of attention from groups as diverse as the national PTA and congressional investigating committees. The questions have fueled the debate among educators on whether or not media studies should occupy the precious time of young people in school.[1] They include the following: Is TV or movie violence harmless? Is mass media advertising harmless? Does TV programming distort our perceptions of reality? Does TV news programming, in particular, tend to shape the events which are being reported? Does contemporary recorded music exert significant political and social influences on its listeners?

If you happen to believe the claims are generally true, and, furthermore, if you feel the questions are worth examining in school, you probably already possess a commitment to media competence, a concept which will be defined and occasionally redefined throughout this chapter.

The failure of school systems to make a commitment to media competence and the failure of teachers to involve students in the critical examination of the newer electronic communications media is seen by some as an ironic refusal to recognize a traditional educational responsibility—a responsibility not unlike that which led originally to the teaching of reading: namely,

> to prepare the young to cope with the dominant media of communication in their society. By abandoning that responsibility, the schools have implicated us all in a hazardous gambie with the future. At stake are not just the skills, but maybe the lives, of a generation of children. (Postman and Weingartner, 1974, p. 88)

The assumption underlying this quotation is of course that the electronic media have displaced print media as the dominant forms of mass communication.

The implications of such an assumption for the teacher of English have been the subject of a number of studies, most of which began appearing in the 1960s. Neil Postman's *Television and the Teaching of English* (1961) and Edmund J. Farrell's *English, Education and the Electronic Revolution* (1967) represented serious attempts to state the case for media study in English classrooms. In an article which appeared in *English Journal* 58 (November 1969), Bryant Fillion argued persuasively for the structuring of English around the three "cys": literacy, oracy, and mediacy. In adding mediacy to the traditional categories of literacy and oracy, Fillion raised these questions:

> How do we educate our students to cope with mind- and behavior-shaping influences of the electronic media? How can our curriculum be adequate or relevant when the most powerful forces of communication in the world today are considered, if at all, as peripheral concerns of teachers? (p. 1232)

In these earlier studies a great deal of attention was given to the verbal message—the content or *what* is being communicated. Recently, emphasis has shifted to the medium itself—*how* a message is being communicated. The importance of the medium, the impact which medium has on meaning, underlies Marshall McLuhan's procrustean assertion: The medium is the message. What McLuhan is implying by this statement is that the medium (TV, radio, film) through which content is transmitted has as powerful an effect on an audience as content. In fact, some would claim that it is sometimes impossible to determine what is actually affecting an audience more—medium or message. Tony Schwartz in his book *The Responsive Chord* (1974) states unequivocally that no one understands precisely how the electronic media affect people:

> Electronic media have been viewed merely as extensions of print, and therefore are subject to the same grammar and values as print communication. The patterned auditory and visual information on television and radio is not "content." Content is a print term, subject to the truth-falsity issue. Auditory and visual information on television or radio are stimuli that affect a viewer-listener.

> As stimuli, electronically mediated information cannot be analyzed in the same way as print "content." A whole new set of questions must be asked, and a new theory of communication must be formulated. (p. 19)

Even as concern mounts over the subtle effects which a particular medium may have on an audience, it is interesting to note a corresponding concern over the issue of *who* has access to the mass electronic media. Patrick Brantlinger (1978), for example, writes that the problem of understanding the impact of TV is inextricably bound up in

> the web of institutional controls and arrangements in which television is enmeshed in a given society. . . . Given its commercial base, American television is perhaps inevitably going to be low-brow rather than high-brow. But to reach that conclusion is also to suggest that the medium is not the message; it is only the channel for messages otherwise determined. (pp. 89-90)

For Brantlinger and others like him, media competence is the desired outcome of the careful study of the social, political, and economic objectives of institutions which have access to communications media.

Regardless of the manner in which one chooses to develop media competence—whether the focus of study is verbal content, the medium itself, or the socio-political motives of powerful public and private institutions—the question remains: What can English teachers do to promote and evaluate media competence in their students?

It would seem English teachers could provide students with the skills to comprehend the verbal content of the various electronic media—skills that John Mellon identifies as discourse, critical, and appreciational. Moreover, attempts could be made to develop in students the ability to determine the special effects of the medium in which the content is "wrapped."

The verbal content skills associated with media competence would probably not differ in kind from those expected from someone literate. The skills of interpretation and critical judgment are as basic to media competence as they are basic to print literacy. A media competent person, therefore, is one who at the very least is able to

> distinguish between claims and appeals in advertising,
>
> recognize bias (social, economic, political, technical) in news and entertainment programming, fictional or documentary films and broadcasts, and advertising,
>
> distinguish between reports, inferences and judgments in news programming, and determine the effects of context on "the news."

While the special skills needed to cope with the nonverbal dimension of electronically mediated information remain controversial, if not illusive, enough is known about film and television to say that a competent viewer should be able to respond intelligently to the effects of shot composition, sound editing, motion, color, and lighting.[2] Such characteristics of form make it very obvious that electronically mediated communication requires more of a person than the ability to understand language. Essential differences exist between print and electronic media, and these differences must be taken into account in shaping a definition of media competence. For example, while print is arranged discursively (the eyes of the reader are greeted by symbols in linear and sequential order on the page), electronic media are nondiscursive (the eyes/ears of the viewer/listener are greeted by images on the screen/in the air for which patterns must often be created). Moreover, while print provides essentially "delayed" information (this morning's newspaper was printed last night), the electronic media have the potential to deliver immediate or "live" information. Additionally, certain electronic media provide great masses of people with simultaneous, though not necessarily "live," information which in turn generates effects that further differentiate these media. Ninety million people, for example, watched ABC's initial presentation of "Roots" on the same evenings at the same time in different places throughout America. Indeed, it is no wonder that the subjects of "Roots" found their way into countless English and social studies classes during the several days the production was aired. In sum, media competence would consist of the acquisition of content skills (which resemble higher order comprehension skills) and knowledge of the effects of the medium itself—those features principally visual and auditory which augment the senses and affect people in significantly different ways from print.

Only marginal efforts have been made in schools to develop media competence in students, and tests of media competence remain, for all practical purposes, nonexistent. Is this good or bad? Can such tests be developed? Ought they be developed? How do you really go about determining the ability of a person to interpret electronically mediated information?

Competence Is Complicated

One way we might begin to deal with such questions in this chapter is to simulate a process which a classroom teacher might go through in order to establish some estimation of the media competence of students. Let's say, for example, that a teacher wants to focus on TV advertising. This would seem to be reasonably justifiable in school curriculum if we did no more than randomly cite such information as the following: The average American at retirement age will have been exposed to more than fifty million advertisements, most of them on television. About twenty percent of all national television advertising is done by just three companies. Broadcast advertising rarely transmits a verifiable claim about the product, service, or idea being marketed. A prominent group of researchers (Liebert, Neale and Davidson, 1973) who studied the effects of television on young people has prompted them to conclude that "by age 11, children have become cynical about the purpose and credibility of commercials, feeling that they are being lied to in an attempt to get them to buy products which are not as desirable as the adman's copy would have it" (p. 131).

In any event, our hypothetical teacher desires to develop in students some basic TV advertising survival skills. First, an assumption is made about the language of advertising—namely, that it consists in part of statements which are verifiable, statements in other words that can be judged true or false. These true-false statements (or claims) are introduced and studied in class. As a test of competence in identifying verbal claims in TV advertising, students are asked by the teacher to view several commercials, making note of those statements which fit the definition of a claim. Thus, the process evolved in the classroom by the teacher yields a very specific media competency: *The student identifies advertising statements which are verifiable.* It should be pointed out that the strategy for determining the ability of students to demonstrate competence requires that they view actual TV commercials.

What makes the "claims" competency attractive to some is that it is very testable. For example, if a TV commercial states that a particular brand of wristwatch is waterproof, we know that a claim has been made, one that can be proven true or false under the appropriate conditions. To suggest, however, that such a competency yields even minimal understanding of the meanings and effects of TV advertising would be gross exaggeration. Though testable, it fails to reveal the spectrum of truth values that characterize advertising claims, since there are vague claims and irrelevant claims as well as precise claims and relevant claims. Moreover, the student's perception of TV advertising is restricted to verbal language. And, most importantly, we are not testing the critical judgment of students—the kind of judgment that responds to a question such as that which appears at the outset of this chapter: Is mass media advertising harmless? Genuine media competence permits a person to raise questions which in turn lead to judgments that show

> what advertisements under what conditions are *harmful* to whom and for what reasons, or,
>
> what advertisements under what conditions are *harmless* to whom and for what reasons, or,
>
> what advertisements under what conditions are *helpful* to whom and for what reasons.

To avoid, in this process, dealing with the nonverbal aspects of TV advertising is to risk missing the whole point of what it means to be media competent. Though difficult to assess in an objective test—since so little is known about the possible effects generated by visual information and sound—some attempts have to be made to glean student responses to these vital meaning-making elements. The impact of sound in TV advertising, for example, is apparently capable of yielding such powerful effects on its audience that media critic Ron Rosenbaum (1975) finds himself both moved and puzzled by a new genre of commercials which he calls the inspirationals:

> You know the ones. Generally they have a large, vibrant chorus filling the background with a strong upbeat tune. Half hymn, half marching song, they are the national anthems of their products. On the screen crowds do energetic things such as jogging, marching and eating fried chicken while singing anthems, or getting ready to burst into song . . .
>
> [But] no matter how suspicious I get about them, the new inspirationals never fail to work their happy-making magic on me. That's what makes them so impressive, even scary. Inspirational technology has grown so sophisticated and powerful that TV commercial makers are capable of making one feel happy, *naturally* happy, without any sense of being manipulated into feeling happy. . . . (p. 55)

Though often not as subtle as auditory effects, the visual techniques of TV commercial-making can be just as surreptitious. The juxtaposition of visual images in order to shape the viewer's thoughts has been used since the beginning of TV advertising. For

example, we are bombarded—in rapid alternation—with images of a popular soft drink and scenes of people surfing, skateboarding, playing games, etc., with the anticipated result that we associate the soft drink with moments of pleasure and excitement. We are being visually massaged into thinking that drinking a popular soft drink is inextricably linked with having a good time.

The point is simply this. Media competence implies much more than the identification of advertising claims. Understanding the meaning and effects of TV advertising requires a person to do more than decode the verbal messages of advertising. In addition to determining who is making the message, the intended audience, and what hidden assumptions underlie the message-making process, attention must be paid to the medium itself—the visual and/or auditory qualities which together with language contribute to the total meaning and effect of the advertising message.

In fact, if one were pressed to develop some items that would be used to assess the media competence of students in the area of TV advertising, it might not be unreasonable to expect some of the following:

> Select a TV commercial which makes no verbal claims. Since the ad does not resort to making a verbal claim explain how its selling message is communicated.
>
> Find a product advertised on TV which you judge to be non-essential and potentially harmful to you or other people. Explain the reasons for your judgment.
>
> Create a script for a TV commercial about a product, service or idea which you feel will be helpful to someone or some group. (The Sierra Club's "Activist Checklist," for example, contains a number of practical ideas for improving the environment.)

B-5

TV Drama and the Feature Film

As we shift attention from TV advertising to TV drama (which embraces all the various subgenre, including situation comedies) and the feature film, the need to develop in students the skill to deal with the visual and auditory elements of these media becomes increasingly apparent. Competence in responding to verbal content remains very important, but some proficiency is needed in what could be called the rhetoric of camera and sound.

When we ask students to demonstrate their competence in viewing films by asking them to respond to language or pictures and sound, we are actually asking them to recognize the tendency of the film's subject to be revealed to the viewer from a particular

angle—whether the angle is that of a writer or that of a speaker or that of a camera. That is, we are asking students to recognize bias —social or technical. There are few more graphic examples of the need to develop a perspective on bias in film and televised drama than that illustrated by Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* which Joseph Goebbels released to the German public in 1937. While it was called a documentary, it remains in fact a cinematic fiction so subtle and powerful that it earned Miss Riefenstahl the right to be compared with Eisenstein as a master of film editing. An eminent critic of the period (Rother, 1960) wrote of the film:

> the deep feeling of uneasiness which *Triumph of the Will* arouses in unbiased minds originates in the fact that before our eyes palpable life becomes an apparition. . . . This film represents an inextricable mixture of a show simulating German reality and of a German reality maneuvered into a show. (p. 590)

The effect of this and similar films on the Nazi war effort was undoubtedly of considerable significance.

Neil Postman (1966) speaks directly to the matter of social bias in TV fiction when he states that the literature of television " may be used as a kind of index to the social values of the American community" (p. 187). Patrick Hazard (1966) in a publication of the National Council of Teachers of English writes that the "cultivation of judgment about TV programs and other manifestations of cultural democracy must surely be one of the primary responsibilities of the contemporary school" (p. 3). When you connect these remarks with those made about *Triumph of the Will*, it is possible to argue that the perception and understanding of bias is central to determining the meaning and effects of film and TV drama.

In a book designed especially for teachers of mass media, Robert Cirino (1977), a high school English teacher, has prepared what appears to be an excellent description of how a person attains competence in the viewing of film and TV drama. Anyone who can accept the exercise of critical judgment and the identification of bias as legitimate goals underlying the competent viewing of film and TV drama will find Cirino's book extremely useful. He stresses the importance of providing opportunities for students to watch a TV drama or feature film, to analyze it, to follow up with an evaluation of the impact on the audience, and to create alternative versions. If one were to use Cirino's ideas as a point of departure for developing a test of media competence, one might end up with items like these:

After viewing the drama, write a condensed version in which you provide samples of the original dialogue. Then answer the following questions:

What assumptions are made about criminals? For example, are you led to believe that organized crime can control the police?

What assumptions are made about the police? For example, are you led to believe that the public does not appreciate the police as much as it should?

What assumptions are made about the local, state, and national government? For example, are you led to believe that federal law enforcement officials don't cooperate as equals with local policemen?

Is there a prevailing political or social bias in evidence? For example, are the crimes which are committed distinctly blue collar crimes or crimes of the impoverished or socially ostracized?

Are there particular emotional appeals in evidence? For example, is a clear attempt made to create a contemptible villain whom you are made to feel deserves whatever he gets? Does the portrayal of violence serve a purpose or is it inserted of its own sake?

Write an alternative version of the film or TV drama you've just viewed in which you transform the main character into a totally different kind of person.

B-6

The substance of these items is designed to evoke the kinds of perceptions and thoughts about televised and filmed drama that will enable a student to make the judgments necessary to discover or uncover bias. In defense of such a goal, Donald Lazere (1977) has stated:

> If English is to fulfill the Arnoldian ideal of seeing life steadily and whole, it must address itself to the primary social function of mass culture today, its all pervasive role in shaping political and social consciousness.
>
> [The] most recent studies of the influence of television and other mass media on declining literacy rates have defined literacy narrowly in terms of fundamental reading and writing skills and have focused on TV only insofar as it is a visual rather than written medium. If literacy is defined, as it should be, in the larger sense of breadth of knowledge and capacity for reason, then it is evident that the greatest threats to literacy in the twentieth century are mass-mediated political thought control and the reason-numbing effects of mass culture, and that English, as the discipline preeminently responsible for fostering literacy, must provide critical weapons for combatting these anti-rational forces. (p. 754)

The arsenal of critical weapons for coping with film and TV consists, as has been suggested already, of more than questions about verbal content. The camera, for example, appears to have the capacity to generate a technical bias which can create meanings and effects distinct from, yet frequently complementing, the words that actors speak and the things that actors do. Possessing some minimal knowledge of what is meant by technical bias would seem to be a necessary adjunct to critical judgments about the verbal content of film and television.

Of all the technical aspects of film and television, shot composition is at once the most conspicuous and the most pervasive (see Figures 1-4). When a person views a movie and finds himself feeling some sense of morbid fascination during a scene of extreme violence, his competence in understanding the technical structuring of the scene will make the difference between being manipulated into feeling that violence is enjoyable or knowing that the director, cameraman, and film editor have collaborated to produce such an effect. Because it is photographed from multiple angles in slower than normal slow motion, the scene portraying the death of Bonnie and Clyde in the Arthur Penn film is transformed into what is now referred to with almost classical regard as a *danse macabre*. Thus, what we would expect to find repugnant is given aesthetic dimension by the structuring of space (through camera angle) and time (through the speed at which the shooting is done). The connotations of a shot in a sequence of shots can be as powerful as the connotations of a word in a sentence.

If we were to assess a person's knowledge of the features of shot composition elemental to understanding a rhetoric of the camera, we might want to know, among other things, the extent to which that person can recognize and explain the possible meanings and effects suggested by

- the sense of distance perceived between viewer and subject
- the angle at which the camera is placed with respect to the subject
- lighting and color tones
- camera speed at which a shot is recorded
- transition techniques between shots
- cropping (i.e., isolating the camera eye on a certain part of a larger scene)

Figure 1 Connotations of strength and dominance are suggested by manipulating the perceived distance between the viewer and the characters depicted in Shot 1 (top) and Shot 2 (bottom) Shot 1 is a relatively close shot, whereas Shot 2 is a relatively long shot

Figure 2. Connotations of strength and dominance are also suggested by manipulating the succession of angles at which the viewer is permitted to view the above sequence of shots. Shot 1 (top) is typically referred to as a low angle shot (the camera is aimed upward at the subject) as compared to the high angle shot (Shot 2, bottom) in which the camera is mounted above the subject and aimed downward.

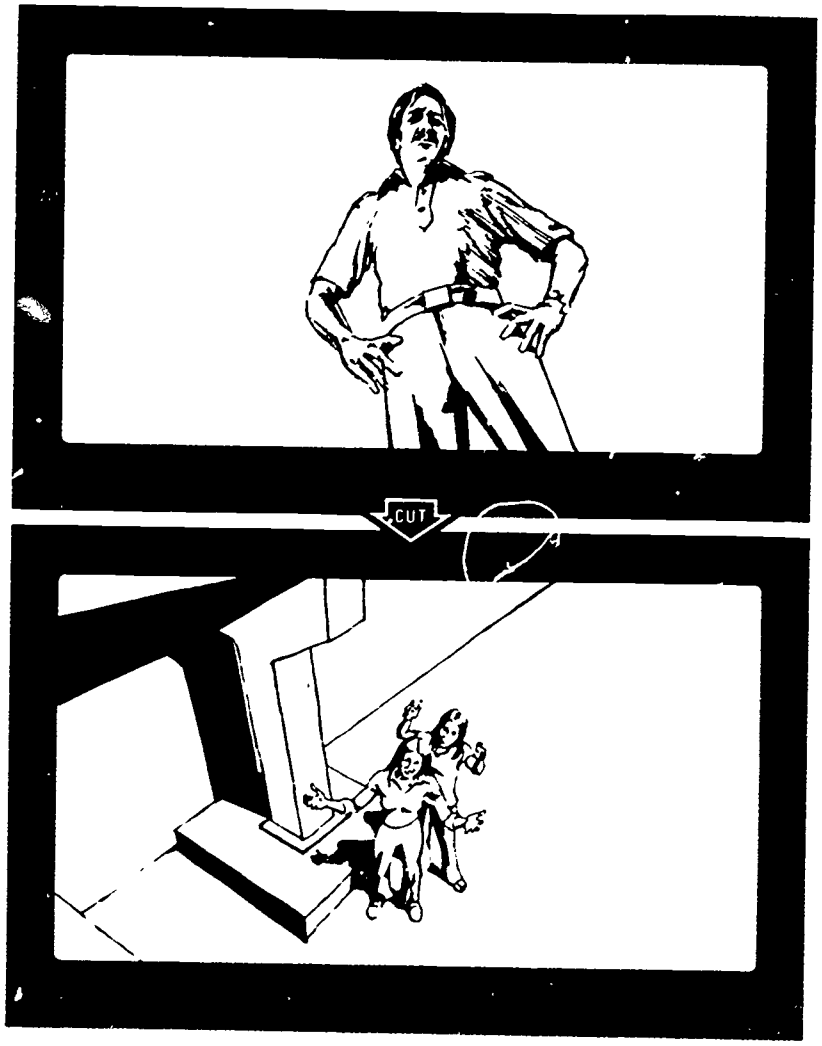

Figure 3. By manipulating both the perceived distance and the angle of perception (Shot 1, top, is a relatively close, low angle shot, while Shot 2, bottom, is a relatively long, high angle shot), the combined or synergetic effect becomes greater than the sum of the effects of each of the four (close, long, high, low) separate shots.

B-8

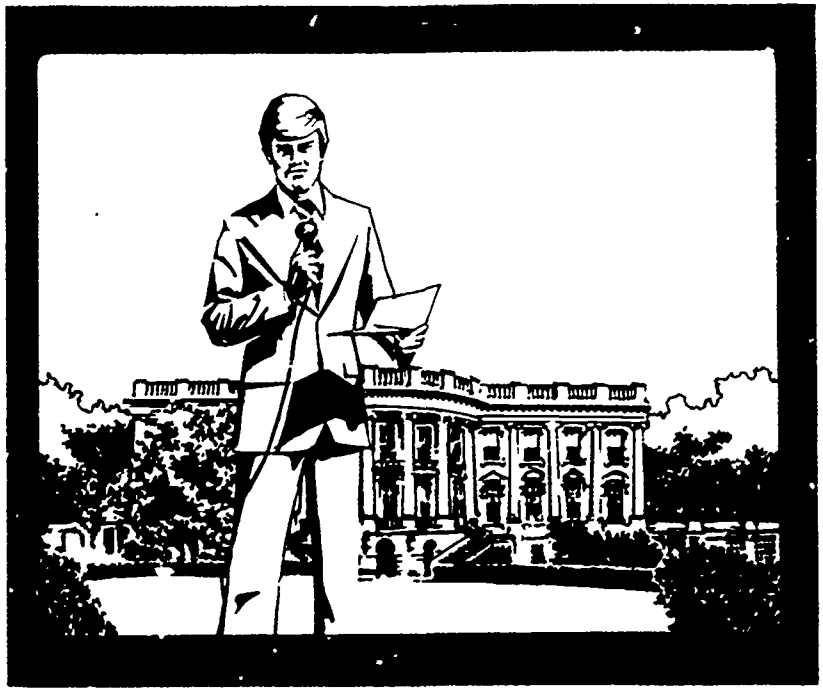

Figure 4. When the special visual techniques of the dramatic fictional film used, for example, in routine TV news reporting, the technical bias of shot composition merits serious attention in any attempt to judge the meanings and effects of such reporting on the viewer.

Becoming aware of the meaning and effects of visual devices such as these is one—but by no means the only—prerequisite to coping with the nonverbal elements of movies and television. What Ron Rosenbaum said about the impact of sound in TV commercials applies equally to TV drama and the feature film. The manner in which sound, or the lack of it, is used to manipulate audiences merits particular consideration in any efforts to evalute the competence of the film or television viewer.

Media competence in film and television has been narrowly construed here to mean the ability to discover or uncover bias in the verbal content and nonverbal structure of these media. So far in this chapter I have given no explicit attention to movies or TV programs as works of art. A well made film, to some, "has a power not yet equaled by that of any other medium to capture and satisfy the mass audience" (Sheridan, Owen, Macrorie, and Marcus, 1965, p. vii). However, to approach TV drama or the feature film as belles

lettres—as art forms of the highest order—would be, for the most part, presumptuous. After all, most of the products have not been around long enough to have attained the permanence of a *Hamlet* or *Huckleberry Finn*. At the same time, it would be a serious mistake to assume that there is nothing to be gained from the careful analysis of the so-called film or TV classic. The value of such an activity is well documented. Besides it is difficult to take issue with the suggestions of Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle, and Edwin B. Parker (1961) who have prepared perhaps the most reputable sociological study of the effects of television on young people:

> Anything to which children devote one-sixth of their waking hours has obvious importance for schools. If children are helped to know good books from poor ones, good music from poor music, good art from bad art, there is no reason why they should not be helped to develop some standards for television. . . . It seems to us all to the good to bring television into the real-life process of learning, to break down the barrier between passive fantasy experience and active use. (pp. 184-185)

Nonetheless, we are not talking about TV or film appreciation in this chapter. We are talking about basic media competence—one's ability to identify and question the views of reality which are being communicated through film or television during a particular interval of time. This is not to suggest that studying film in the same manner one would study literature is of no value. In fact, the distinction between what has been talked about in this chapter as the discovery of bias (social and technical) and the study of film as art will be blurred to some readers. Much of what is to be found in *The Motion Picture and the Teaching of English* (Sheridan *et al.*, 1965) will be useful to someone struggling to determine what it means to be a competent viewer of movies. The same can be said of Howard Poteet's *The Compleat Guide to Film Study* (1972) and David Coynik's *Film: Real to Reel* (1972).

More adequate critical judgments about these media require that attention also be paid to questions such as the following: What is the effect of stereotyping (situations, characters, and values)? What do the "ratings," Emmy's, and Academy's mean? Does fictional violence cause real violence? To what extent are racism and sexism still a problem? What effect will recent Supreme Court rulings on obscenity and pornography have on the presentation of feature films?

So far, we've explored the concept of media competence with a focus on certain competencies needed to cope with the nonverbal form and verbal content of TV advertising, movies, and TV drama.

We've defined and redefined what it means to be competent in each medium—to be able to render critical judgments about the meanings and effects of a TV commercial, a film, or TV drama. We've even speculated on what test items of media competence might look like. We're ready now to take a fairly comprehensive look at another electronically mediated communication phenomenon—broadcast news and public affairs programming—and some of the basic knowledge and skills needed to cope with it.

News Programming

The power of news and public affairs programming is made rather explicit in an oft-quoted anecdote pertaining to the Kennedy-Nixon debates of the 1960 presidential campaign. After a viewing of one of the debate videotapes, John Kennedy is alleged to have turned to his press secretary, Pierre Salinger, and said: "We wouldn't have had a prayer without that gadget." JFK had just intuited the mystifying power of the medium of television as a transmitter of information about public affairs. Three years later, a poll conducted by Elmo Roper confirmed Kennedy's intuition. In 1963, Roper reported that television had not only replaced newspapers as the primary source of news for most people, but was regarded as the most "believable" of all the mass media. These curious facts coupled with Thomas Jefferson's conviction that the survival of the nation depended on an informed electorate provide some justification for the need to understand what news is, how news is reported, what kinds of meanings are to be made of the news and news media, and what effects news and news media can have on the shaping of attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

The need to pay attention to such matters is even more apparent if we believe anthropologist Edmund Carpenter's (1977) assertion that televised newscasts and public affairs programs are being transformed into a new form of entertainment, one that offers

> cliché drama costumed as news. The commentator occupies the screen most of the time, though his visual appearance is totally irrelevant: Irrelevant to the news, but not irrelevant to the drama of the news hour, which is something utterly different, its own reality, with the commentator as star. (pp. 15-16)

The current practice on the part of the networks of raising newspeople to celebrity status, of paying large sums of money for what is often little more than reading the news in front of a TV camera, gives substance to Carpenter's assertion.

There is also the charge that the news media have begun to significantly influence the events which are supposed to be reported objectively—that important political events are scheduled to coincide with news media deadlines and that Spiro Agnew may have made a legitimate observation when he framed the following question: "How many marches and demonstrations would we have if the marchers did not know that the ever-faithful TV cameras would be there to record their antics for the next news show?"

Since television is far and away the most widely used source of information about the news and public affairs, it stands to reason that this communications medium ought to be given some attention in schools which lay claim to the goal of developing literate and responsible citizens in a democratic society.

First, though, it's important to understand that regardless of the medium, there are some essential awarenesses which every reader, listener, or viewer has to bring to a news report. Charles Weingartner (Postman, 1966) puts it this way:

> At the very least, we must be able to distinguish among factual, inferential, and judgmental statements. Unless one can recognize a fundamental difference between the statement, "Senator Mundt asked the witness twelve questions in half an hour," and the statement, "Senator Mundt harassed the witness," one is, of course, hopelessly unprepared to evaluate the news. (p. 113)

The distinction between reports, inferences, and judgments is not that much removed from the distinction made earlier between advertising claims and appeals. Like advertising claims, news reports are capable of being verified. And like advertising appeals, inferences and judgments have more to do with a person (in the case of the news, the reporter) than with the event being reported. Since reports, to some extent, are verifiable, any news story which does not subscribe to the language of reports is using the label "news" in a specious manner. Two obvious points need to be made here: (1) Any report is the result of any number of intervening judgments; (2) Such variables as voice intonation and camera angle can have the effect of transforming reports into judgments. This is not to say that inferences (statements about the unknown which are based on the known) and judgments (expressions of approval or disapproval) have no place in news programs. There is no question that the First Amendment to the Constitution gives the press the right to comment on as well as report the news. By making inferences and judgments about what it reports as news, a free press can challenge any belief, any law, any institution, any body that it feels needs to be challenged.

Responsible citizens, Jefferson would surely have argued, need to know when the press is reporting the news and when it is commenting on the news. Responsible citizens, in other words, need to be competent consumers of the news. Developing such competence and determining its attainment, therefore, can be looked upon as legitimate functions of the educational process. The problem of writing adequate test items for news comprehension competence is not much different from that of writing adequate test items for broadcast advertising, TV drama, and film. Here are some possible items:

> Read the fictional news article below. Assume that it is a transcript of a TV news segment:
>
> MARS—The United Nations of Earth were embarrassed here yesterday for the first time in interplanetary sports history.
>
> The Earthling soccer team was hammered by the Martians 4-0 before 75,570 Martian citizens at Crater Stadium.
>
> "It's the worst game I've ever seen us play," said Earthling goalkeeper Melvin Birdsong. "Of course, the fact that the Martians have two extra legs didn't help us either," he added.
>
> If the Earthling team is to have a chance to win in the future, it appears that some system for handicapping Martian players will have to be devised by the Interplanetary Sports Council.
>
> Which of the statements in the story are reports?
>
> How would you go about verifying the reports?
>
> Which of the statements are inferential?
>
> Which of the statements are judgmental?
>
> If you were a news editor, would you accept the story as a news report? If not, how would you turn it into a news report?

There is at least one other item that should probably appear on a list of basic understandings about the language of news reporting. It has to do with the general semantic principle which states, in essence, that one cannot know the meaning of what one is perceiving unless something is known about the contexts or environments which affect perceptions. You can't know the meanings, in other words, unless you know the contexts. There are many contexts. The most obvious is the immediate verbal context. Taken out of its immediate verbal context, the following statement allows us to draw a number of inferences: "The Russians don't like to fight. They would rather attack us with finesse, which they will do if we give them the opportunity." The political and martial tones of the quote dissolve rather quickly once we are told that it came from the mouth of a Canadian ice hocky coach moments before a match with a Russian team. Getting at the effects of immediate verbal contexts can be illustrated for students with an activity like this:

> Below are statements which cannot be understood adequately without knowledge of their immediate verbal contexts. Create an original context for each in order to clarify meaning.
>
> Motorcycle racing is dull.
>
> Too much skiing is likely to give you blisters.
>
> Spaghetti will kill you.

The context principle actually takes us beyond the language content of news into the effects of the medium itself. Consider the effect that the limitations of air time imposes on broadcast news reporting. A story which can be reported in detail in a newspaper must be reduced considerably for use on a typical news broadcast. To get an idea of just how dramatic the change is, consider the following:

> Select what you judge to be an important front page report from your local newspaper. Read the article aloud, noting exactly how long it takes to complete the reading. Now go back over the article deleting sentences in an attempt to reduce the reading time to thirty seconds. You have just approximated the task of a TV or radio news editor.
>
> How much of the original meaning, if any, is lost in the version edited for TV?
>
> Did you make any inferences in the edited version?
>
> Imagine the job of the TV film editor who must take thirty minutes worth of film footage and reduce it to thirty seconds to accompany the verbal report. How different are the problems of the film editor from those of the news editor?

Our primary goals in assessing media competence in the area of broadcast news programming can be reduced to that of determining the ability of a person to distinguish among reports, inferences, and judgments, to estimate the effects of context (both verbal and technical) on perception of the news, and to recognize bias. An obvious debt is owed in this section to the principles of a brand of linguistic study commonly known as general semantics. In fact, much of this chapter—insofar as it addresses itself to matters of competence in understanding the verbal content of media—draws heavily on knowledge of a very practical nature to be found in S. I. Hayakawa's *Language in Thought and Action* (1972).

There are, of course, other important questions that must be asked in order to get a comprehensive sense of the meaning and effects of the form and content of broadcast news. These include: Can there really be objectivity in news reporting? Do all the networks report the same event in the same manner? How do news and editorial policies vary among the networks and local stations?

What is known about the censorship of specific news items and programs? What are the effects of private subsidization (advertising) on news and editorial policy? To what extent do the networks and local stations observe the Equal Time Provision and the Fairness Doctrine? To what extent are the news media being exploited by those who would attract news coverage in order to make money? The Committee on Public Doublespeak of the National Council of Teachers of English has been raising questions of this type for the past several years in an attempt to alert people to the necessity of examining the rhetoric of those who have access to the mass media.

The Electronic Enigma: Recorded Music

Some will argue that neither news programming, TV advertising, TV drama, nor the feature film has exerted as much social and political influence on America's youth as has the LP record and the local disc jockey. According to music critic Nik Cohn (Valdes and Crow, 1973), recorded music

> mirrors everything that happens to teenagers in this time, in this American twentieth century. It is about clothes and cars and dancing; it's about parents and high school and being tied and breaking loose; it's about sex and getting rich and getting old; it's about America. . . . (p. 235)

Any attempt, therefore, to define what it means to be media competent would be lacking something if it didn't attend to such questions as: Who listens to what on the radio? In what ways do recording artists appeal to their listeners? What attitudes and values do recording artists seem to promote in their music and lifestyles? Are auditory media (radio, records, tapes) more engaging sensory experiences than those of TV and the movies? How does the "character" of radio and recordings shape meaning and effects?

The questions to be raised and the items to be constructed around the lyrics of recorded music could follow a strategy not that much different from what has already been proposed by Robert Cirino for the analysis of TV drama. The outcome of such analysis ought to enable students to identify underlying social and political biases. But as many a teenager will quickly point out, such an activity is at the very least incomplete—since it ignores the beat, the melody, the whatever—and at the very most an invasion of privacy. For youth has perennially adopted current popular music as its personal property. To some teenagers, it's almost an encroachment on territorial rights for schoolteachers to give class time to

studying the meanings and effects of what the DJs are playing and what the popular artists are saying.

Not only teenagers but grownups as well have questioned the value of looking for meaning and predicting effects of electronic media by focusing exclusively on verbal language. To Tony Schwartz (1974), a competent judge of the meaning and effects of recorded music knows something about how brain, sounds, and language merge into a state of emotional symbiosis. H. E. Krugman's (1970) studies indicate that the character of brain wave activity during exposure to television indicates that humans respond to TV and printed matter in significantly different ways. The more recent attempts to study brain functions (especially those attempts prompted by the work of neurosurgeons Roger Sperry and Joseph Bogen) promise to further illuminate the effects of media on human behavior. One thing is certain: We are in a tenuous area now, where media competence is as much a measure of feelings as it is a measure of rational intelligence.

The prospect of having to unravel the mysteries of how the brain makes meanings out of recorded music—or how it makes meaning out of the augmented sensory information of TV and the movies as well—is enough to blunt the enthusiasm of any testmaker. It would be ironic indeed if some time in the future we were to discover that Schwartz's hypothesis turns out to be the only basis for developing and testing media competence—that all the traditional concerns rooted in the verbal content of media are dwarfed by the effects which the medium itself has on the human brain. Such possibilities have the positive effect of making sure that any current attempts to assess media competence must be regarded as primitive and tentative.

Conclusion

The fact remains, however, that electronic media dominate a significant portion of the lives of children and adults. And for schools to ignore this fact—to abdicate responsibility for developing some degree of media competence is nothing less than, as Postman and Weingartner have already warned, "a hazardous gamble with the future."

It would seem that we are capable marginally of meeting the challenge. We can at least develop (and evaluate) some higher order literacy skills by providing students with opportunities to respond to the verbal content of electronically mediated information; and

we can develop some lower level awareness of form by helping students understand the structural and technical features of electronically mediated information. We can also, whenever possible, engage students in certain media activities (filmmaking, video and audio taping, still photography), thus providing an experience-related awareness of the possible effects of the commercial uses of such media.

Undeniably, students must find ways to demonstrate informed and intelligent responses to the media which so dominate their lives. These responses need not take the form exclusively of tests of media competence. Writing a letter, conducting a counter-advertising campaign, making use of the radio and TV broadcast time guaranteed every citizen under the law—all of these options can be nurtured in schools. Students must be encouraged to act as well as think critically about the media. The willingness to speak up, to resist the temptation to passively accept, is probably the best indicator of media competence we shall ever devise.

Notes

1. The U.S. Office of Education has taken a firm stand on the need for media studies in the schools. In October, 1980, it unveiled its $1.6 million investment in the development of school programs in the critical viewing of TV. This effort is the first of its kind for the U.S. Office of Education and is supposed to yield programs and materials which will enable students at all levels (kindergarten through college) to analyze both their own TV viewing habits and the messages they receive from the medium. Classroom courses on critical viewing skills will be offered for four different grade levels and are being developed by four different groups: the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in Austin, Texas (kindergarten through fifth grade); WNET/New York's education department (grades six through eight); the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development in San Francisco (grades nine through twelve); and Boston University's School of Public Communications (post-secondary). The Far West Lab has subcontracted WGBH in Boston for a curriculum that may be used as a one semester elective or as part of an existing course. Debra Lieberman, project associate at the Far West Lab, states that the course will increase skills in the basics of reading, writing, critical thinking, research, debate, and math: "The list is endless when you realize that television is a communication medium with content that can be studied and approached in a wide variety of ways."

2. For an academic discussion of the structural devices of film, see Louis D. Giannetti's *Understanding Movies* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972). For a less academic approach to the same subject, see James Morrow and Murray Suid's *Moviemaking Illustrated: The Comic Filmbook* (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden Book Company, 1973).

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