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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to express the importance of visual/media literacy and the teaching of critical television viewing. An awareness of the properties and characteristics of television--including camera angles and placement, editing, and emotionally involving subject matter--aids viewers in the critical viewing process. The knowledge of how television works can be used to help teachers, parents, and students understand the potential of media to manipulate. Parents and teachers can support critical viewing by asking children to control their viewing time, analyze what they see and hear, and share their judgments with other children and adults. Bias in newspapers and television news can be detected through selection and omission of details; headlines; photos, captions and camera angles; use of names and titles; and choice of words. (AEF)

Challenging Popular Media's Control By Teaching Critical Viewing

By Richard A. Couch

"Contemporary students need to learn how to critically listen, critically read, and critically view in order to critically think. The alternative to critically thinking about what citizens see, read and hear is unpalatable for a democratic society. Images over substance resulting in emotionality over rationality is the death knell of reasoned discourse. Critical viewers, however, will demand something worth viewing and will require that more substantial arguments from a variety of sources be made available through a variety of media." (Dr. John Splaine, University of Maryland, in Hamner and Alexandrowicz, 1992)

Why Critical Viewing?

Today's youth are bombarded with video messages as they spend an average of 22 hours each week in front of a TV. Nielsen Media Research announced in August, 1994 that the number of U.S. homes with TV sets has grown 1 percent from a year ago to 95.4 million or 98.3 percent of all homes in the country. Sociologists predict that an average teenager will have watched more than 23,000 hours of television before high school graduation. (Hamner and Alexandrowicz, 1992) This generation of viewers is certainly not the only generation of TV addicts, but they enjoy the widest variety of choices in programming. The "MTV generation" has found the wide variety video that entertains them, but do they make conscious choices or simply surf the channels?

The typical "Power Rangers" episode spends 25 to 35 percent of the time fighting and in spite of the "pro social" messages that often conclude each episode, the violence was not essential to the plot or character development yet violence was generally the preferred means of conflict resolution. Programs often gloss over the consequences of violence inviting young viewers to imitate the martial arts techniques that they see. Anyone who has been on a school ground lately can attest to this fact. The impact of the show has promoted a dialogue over censorship in Canada. New Zealand has dropped the show completely and Scandinavian network TV- 3 dropped it then reinstated it (*Connect*, 1994). Is censorship the answer? Can movies and TV shows be socially responsive, highly profitable and artistic? The media moguls will say that we are only producing the shows people want. In his book, *A Martian Wouldn't Say That*, Leonard

Stern related many funny stories. One TV executive suggested, "We must de-emphasize violence this season. Make the room red so the blood won't show." (Austin, 1994). Those of us involved in the field of visual literacy have explored the implications of censorship and many of us feel that a better alternative to censorship is teaching people about visual/media literacy and how to think about TV critically.

What Is Critical Viewing?

Media literacy is the ability to be aware of how images and information are presented by various media and the properties inherent in each medium that may dictate the format (Hamner and Alexandrowicz, 1992). Much of what is communicated on TV is communicated because of the format or other characteristics of the medium, e.g. newspaper is much different than TV.

Critical viewing means actively thinking and evaluating the messages and images that glow at us from the television set. Critical viewing skills are necessary for constructive intellectual use of the information received. An awareness of the properties and characteristics of television aids viewers in the critical viewing process. By understanding how television behaves, the viewer knows how to intercept images and decode them logically.

The press, both written and video, has become more aware of how political advertising uses TV's characteristics to create specific images and emotional responses. Most commentators and "spin doctors" often point at the use of camera angles, dramatic musical scores and phrase repetition when describing the influence of the media. Even adults may not be aware of the techniques used by the director. Many people are unable to critically evaluate the intended message. Adults, young adults, and children need to be learning how to make meaning from these visual messages.

There are certain characteristics inherent in television which are found in TV programming of all kinds. This is a starting point on the road to critical viewing. Critical viewers, for example, know that the camera is the conduit to the viewer. The viewer sees only what the camera provides. Camera angles or placement and camera movement have an impact on the viewer. Editing techniques have a similar effect. For example, a camera shooting up at a speaker creates an image of power, and quick cut edits can create a sense of urgency, power and leadership.

Critical viewers know that emotional involvement keeps the audience attentive. Most television programming is commercial and contains paid advertising. Successful commercial programming must hold its viewers, which means that the viewer must be emotionally involved. Subject matter that is unusual, contentious or controversial is often used to grab or hold the viewer's attention. Conflict, whether real as seen on talk shows or fictionalized in prime time dramas or sitcoms also holds the audience. Producers and directors know this. Do children assume that all

problems can be solved by simple solutions as is often done in a 30 minute or hour long TV show? Are these the messages we should be sending our kids? Or is the message that violence is the quickest and easiest solution to a problem the message we should be sending? Viewers need to know the dramatic structure of television programs in order to be critical viewers as well; without conflict, no one would watch. In many cases on television, spoken language may only be used secondarily to emotion-evoking images. The result is that the viewer may feel an emotional response but may not know why they feel what they do.

Critical viewers will know that the material seen on the screen was preselected. The video product that reaches the viewer is a processed product. Camera operators, directors, producers and often a large crew worked together to produce the program or news segment. Many choices are made throughout the production process, including some choices that may change the perception of the event or create certain impressions of a program. Condensing a long speech into a short 20 second sound bite is common in news reporting. The bite may not accurately reflect the intended meaning of the speaker whether a criminal or a politician. The particular bite may be taken out of context to make the politician look bad if the news producer does not agree with the politician's stand on an issue.

We can use our knowledge of how TV works to help teachers, parents, and students understand how the managers of media are trying to manipulate us. Critical viewers know that directors often use the "talking heads" technique implying legitimacy for the speaker's point of view and suggesting the speaker has status as an important person; the news anchor is a good example. We can ask children to try to come up with other visual techniques which would have conveyed the message differently. Filming wild animals can be dangerous to the camera person and disturbing to the animals. We can ask our students what responsibility does a camera person have in getting a good picture. Directors can use a low camera angle and extreme close-up shots to emphasize a speaker's statements. We can have students count the number of times the technique is used. Ask students to perceive the background of a video or the music and how important it was in influencing emotion. Would it change the impact of a documentary if Walter Cronkite was not narrating it?

A director can capture the viewer's attention by selecting a particular camera shot. A speaker on camera may be making a point when the camera cuts away to an uninterested listener. How is that message different than if the camera had cut away to a very interested listener?

We need to make people aware of the techniques that are used to manipulate us. We also must teach people how to think critically about the true messages behind the images. Image isn't everything as the famous tennis player would have us believe; content is important too.

What Can Parents and Teachers Do?

Parents and teachers can support critical viewing by asking children to:

- Control their viewing time; make choices on the quality of the program; make a priority list of programs the child wants to watch and limit the amount of time; require the children to do other things.
- Analyze what they see and hear; ask them to evaluate the quality; what makes a "good" TV program?
- Share their judgments with other children and adults including family discussions. Ask students to explain their judgments.

Drama

When viewing dramatic programs together with children:

- Provide clarification for new words; ask them to look up the word.
- As children to recall the order of events in the story.
- Discuss the geographic location of the story and the time period of the story. Find it on a map; discuss the historical period.
- Ask the child to predict what will happen next.
- Encourage children to think of cause and effect within the plot of the story.
- Discuss the motivation of the characters. Discuss conflict in the story, how the conflict was resolved, was it a "satisfying" resolution, and the importance of conflict in a drama.
- Ask children to discuss if they would have behaved the same way or differently if they had been in that situation.
- Suggest books or short stories that have the same plot line or similar characters.

News

When viewing the news with your children:

- Suggest that students compare and categorize different kinds of news, e.g. hard news, features, sports and editorials.
- Have children identify fact or opinion. Identify words, body language, tone of voice, edits or camera movement that indicate personal opinion.
- Ask children to paraphrase or summarize the news story.
- Ask students how they would go about finding additional information that would clarify the story. How would they go about doing research on this story?
- Ask for opinions on a specific story and discuss it; ask the children to play devil's advocate and argue for the opposite side of their beliefs.

- Compare the coverage of the same story on different channels, e.g. C-SPAN, CNN, the evening news for different networks.

- Have children predict how the particular news story will turn out; follow the progression.

Detecting Bias in the News

Several guidelines for detecting bias in the newspapers and television news follows:

1. Bias through selection and omission:

Within a given story, some details can be ignored, others included to give readers or viewers a different opinion about the events reported. Only by comparing news reports from a wide variety of outlets can this type of bias be observed.

2. Bias through placement:

Readers of papers judge first page stories to be more significant than those buried in the back of the newspaper. Similarly, television and radio newscasts run stories that draw ratings first and leave the less significant for later. Exciting or titillating stories serve as "teasers" to keep people watching even after commercials.

3. Bias by headline:

As the most-read part of a newspaper, headlines can convey excitement where little exists as well as express approval or condemnation. Headlines at the beginning of a TV newscast indicates the stories that are deemed important by the news director.

4. Bias by photos, captions and camera angles:

Which photos a newspaper or a television news director chooses to run can influence the public's perception of a person or event. Captions and the narration of TV anchors or reporters are also potential sources of bias.

5. Bias through use of names and titles:

In many places around the world, one person's "terrorist" is another person's "freedom fighter."

6. Bias by choice of words:

The use of positive or negative words with a particular connotation can strongly influence the reader or viewer.

If we as enlightened consumers of visual information can spread the word and if teachers and parents can follow some of these guidelines then we can start to develop a more visually literate society and certainly a society which is capable of thinking critically about what we see in the mass media.

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