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Murambi Genocide Memorial outside Gikongora, Rwanda.

“**C**ockroaches” was the term used to designate Tutsi people when the call for loyal Hutus to crush them underfoot was broadcast on radio in Rwanda. This Rwandan example of the strategic use of the media to achieve particular ends is often introduced to flag the power of media in society. The arguments that get put forward to justify strict media regulations are made from a position that the media can and do have a direct effect on their audience, (a kind of “monkey see, monkey do” attitude) and stricter censorship is legitimated on these grounds.

It is worthwhile staying with the Rwandan example for a moment. Yes, the radio could have broadcast very differently. It could have advocated for calm and tolerance; it could have urged people to follow other processes. To say to what extent that would have deferred or intervened in the genocide is mere speculation now, but what is clear is that many people could be mustered along ethnic lines of identity and act against fellow Rwandan nationals. What is also clear is that the discourses of citizenry and democratic governance did not prevail; such principles did not underpin the media production, nor those who rallied to the propagandist call. I cannot do justice to the complexity of the Rwandan events here, but I do want to hold onto two important aspects – first, the media are very important as social institutions and, sec-

Critical Media Literacy

A Design for the Future

by Jeanne Prinsloo

ond, they operate within and are informed by the broader social context.

While we cannot attribute all blame in the Rwandan scenario to the radio use, it is clear that the media mattered. Media representations and engagements play a significant role in the way we understand the world, its people and events, and ourselves therein. In fact, it has been argued that the significance of the media in people’s lives has increased to the extent that it has been described as their primary curriculum, thereby recasting formal education as the secondary curriculum. In this vein, critical educators have argued that pedagogy is not about teaching technique, but “refers to all those practices that define what is important to know, how it is to be known, and how this production of knowledge constructs social identities” (Scholle 1994:15) or “any practice which intentionally tries to influence the production of meaning” (Giroux and McLaren 1989:230). Clearly then, the media are implicated in the production of meaning, for through their content and concerns, the media set agendas for what we think about and they also provide frames through which to view these depictions. Extending the educational metaphor, the media act as a curriculum for people in the Twenty-first century. If we think of a curriculum as working to prepare people for their society in the future, then we need to think about how it (the media as curriculum) is preparing people for their future and what future it envisages. We must

be mindful of it as relevant not merely to the present, but as a “design for the future” (Kress 1995).

The media as curriculum and as design, enables one to think of media output not as crudely having a direct behaviour on actions, but just as the effectiveness of any curriculum depends on its subjects’ engagement, it makes it possible to propose a more nuanced understanding of their role as working to shape and mould people’s ideas and attitudes for they engage with media texts in relation to their existing sets of ideas and their particular social contexts. Rejection of particular kinds of messages frequently results in calls for censorship in a belief that regulation can protect society – or at least the values that the caller holds. In contrast, I propose that we need to intercede in how people engage with the media, both as producers and consumers; I want to argue in this paper that it is necessary to nurture critical media literacy¹ for all citizens.

Here, critical media literacy is argued to be crucial for nurturing critical citizenry but this argument requires that two contextual aspects be discussed; first, the media environment we inhabit and, second, the common form of literacies we encounter. These contextual aspects inform the argument presented here for critical media literacy and for who should be invested in, when designing for the future.

The Media environment

While the contexts people in the south of Africa inhabit in the early part of the Twenty-first century are different along national and other lines, there are certain shared aspects. In the first instance, access to the media has increased and more people have access to TV than before; radio access is available to most people and print media readership figures have increased. At one level, this access to such a range of ideas and images of places and cultures enables an expanded imagination of life and possibilities.

With this increasing access to electronic media in particular, the question to ask then relates to the messages and viewpoints that Southern Africans encounter in these forms. In the first place we have to remember that much of the media on offer originates elsewhere. It is the powerhouses of multinational conglomerates located in northern countries that produce and profit from the one-directional dissemination of media products and their discourses, a one-way trafficking quaintly referred to as “globalisation”. In much of the media materials sourced from the North, developing countries are either absent or might be represented in relation to their (in)abilities to service the interest on their debts, to wars, droughts and other assorted disasters. Within fictional media forms, particular narrative scenarios frequently replay and rehearse discourses

of class, gender and race and work to naturalise these scripts.

At the same time, the range of media produced locally is diverse and does some different ideological work. If one considers Southern African countries as young or aspiring democracies, particular expectations that accompanied changes of government have not been met. The belief in and desire for swift access to material possessions for those who have experienced poverty was arguably unrealistic and largely unrealised. Yet, these expectations are constantly fuelled by the cornucopia offered in all the media materials that now target us, not as citizens, but as consumers and which assure us our value lies in our levels and ability to consume. Accompanied by mantras such as “Because I deserve it ...”, such marketing is premised on promising happiness and success in relation to possession and consumption and these are powerful messages for those who have been so long denied the fruits of modernity, now proffered temptingly before them as trophies.

Even those media whose remit relates to the public sphere, notably the public broadcasters, have resorted to commercial models of financing. The consequence of the imperative to chase those segments of the audience with surplus cash has a significant impact on what gets aired and who is represented on air. The print media too are increasingly owned by fewer multinational corporations and the profit motive has resulted in a range of cost cutting rationalisations including a marked juniorisation of news rooms, usually at the expense of analytic and investigative journalism.

This crude overview is a fairly bleak picture of the imaginary worlds of possibilities that are proposed by the media to suggest that there is a need for media institutions and policy makers to recognise what cultural work is being carried out.²

Critical and other literacies

It is against this backdrop that critical media literacy needs to be argued at two levels, both at the level of production and at the level of reception. Central to an argument for critical media literacy is a particular conceptualisation of “literacy”, not as some neutral process of decoding texts, but as a term that refers to “literacies” as situated social practices that people acquire and which differ according to the context in which they are learnt and practised. From this perspective, literacy practices are understood as engaging values and attitudes and it assumes “... that literacy is a social and cultural construction, that its functions and uses are never neutral or innocent, that the meanings constructed in text are ideological and involved in

producing, reproducing and maintaining arrangements of power which are unequal” (Kamler and Comber 1996:1).

What is particular to critical media literacy is the nature of textual engagements it proposes and validates. As the term “critical” implies, it is concerned with relationships of power and locates itself with a concern for democratic practice. It is concerned with all forms of media representations, with how media texts are put together, by whom and for whom. It engages with what discourses are inscribed, how they are inscribed, and what positions and pleasures they propose for their audience. It is also concerned with production skills, with how media messages are conventionally constructed and how they might be constructed differently. Broadly speaking, it is concerned with the way the world is *mediated* by us and for us and with the consequences of such mediations in relation to social justice. And it is conscious of its particular socio-cultural and historical contexts.

The concern with how the world is mediated underpins critical media literacy and has resulted in foregrounding the conceptualisation of “representation” as always positioned rather than neutral. While photographic and televisual imagery, for example, might provide us with the appearance of truth, they should not be conflated with truth. Regardless of the apparent authenticity of a media text, it is necessary to acknowledge that it is the result of processes of selection and construction in line with particular conventions, produced within particular institutional constraints with the assumption of a certain audience. Within this critical approach, media representation is understood as part of the “circuit of culture” (Hall 1997) and the media is viewed as a fairly complex field. To be media literate in a critical sense calls for a holistic approach where the triple axes of institution, representation and audience (more crudely put, the sender, message, receiver trio) are considered together in relation to issues of identity, and to the socio-cultural context. It is an approach that opposes taking a single text or representation (usually out of context) to prove a point, as has been characteristic of some gender and race analysis – a kind of “spot the stereotype” attitude. Arguably, that approach often amounts to a self-fulfilling prophecy, a kind of “seek and ye shall find” exercise. Restricting attention to a search for stereotypes might help raise consciousness about that particular issue, but should not be conflated with critical media literacy for it is untheorised, tenden-

tious and ignores those other important media aspects, reception, institution and context.

Learning “literacy”

Critical media literacy, I suggest, is additionally important in this postcolonial space, precisely because of the history that has come to inform and make natural the way most people have become literate. There are two particularly important spaces to consider when thinking of what literacy practices have become naturalised, those that most people have acquired at school, and those that media producers have acquired in their training. (This is obviously only a partial account of the literacies people encounter and acquire, but they are arguably the more pervasive.)

“Schooled” literacies

Important to this discussion is the recognition that what has counted as appropriate literacy practices has emerged within largely authoritarian language classrooms and where different sets of practices have been rehearsed for indigenous languages and for English, for example. We bring those literacy practices we have acquired to our engagement with the media for these are the ones we have to hand. These are socially situated practices and they are infrequently critical.

Such literacy practices (which often had their roots in missionary education) validated a limited set of literacy practices particularly for indigenous languages that proposed a circumscribed way of making texts and making sense of texts. The focus was on the content of the text (therefore excluding context, production and reception), and the range of texts was confined, often tending to rehearse ethnic identities with a smattering of Christianity thrown in for good measure. The task was frequently to identify the moral of the story and the possibility of critical or ideological responses is excluded (see Prinsloo 2002, 2003). It becomes unimaginable to challenge the sentiments of a praise poem or suggest a Shakespearean text as not the most appropriate one. Rather the injunction is for a literacy of respect and deference. An insistence on loyalty, respect and the construction of identities (often along conservative ethnic lines) works against a critical spirit. Against this backdrop of considering the authority of the text as largely unchallengeable, critical media literacy is an even more pressing task both in democratic and non-democratic spaces.

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“Trained” literacies

Most media producers acquire their particular literacies either on the job or at tertiary institutions. By processes of immersion, they take on the literacy practices that have been normalised as appropriate. Here I confine my remarks to journalistic production as one particular discursive site.

Journalism within democratic societies has emerged and justifies its existence in terms of its role within what might be called the public sphere. While the idea of a public sphere is critiqued (Eley 1992, Fraser 1992), it is important to hold the idea of public spheres as sites where discursive reasoning can challenge authoritarian power, and of the public as not synonymous with the state or economic corporations, but inclusive of citizens and communal well-being. However, what counts as journalism education has been argued to have, “by and large, abdicated its vision as watchdog over power to one of conduit for the maintenance of power by elite groups in society” (Hochheimer & Hochheimer 1996:124). The curricula tend to focus on certain literacy practices, like learning to write an inverted pyramid story, to acquiesce to a particular set of criteria of news values that privilege “elite” people and nations, to accept a particular version of “objectivity”, to seek opinion from particular people located in readily accessible bureaucracies, and to assume that there are only two sides to any story or debate.

A look at any journalism textbook makes it clear that a particular “grammar” is assumed necessary and specific conventions are the common-sense of the profession. There is an authoritarian assumption of what counts as news and how it is taught. In fact that the acquisition of such literacy is referred to as “training” is in itself significant, for what is undervalued is the importance of a broad understanding of society and its history and the ability to be analytic in relation to the power relations in society. Sound-byte journalism and quotes cobbled together from “experts” as a “story”, do not assist citizens to understand their society. While the production of compliant and compliant knowledge workers might make sense in the short-term for employers, it makes little sense in the long-term

for democracy and, by extension, the favourable conditions that enable democracies and consequently business to flourish. While professing a concern with the public sphere and accountability, convincing concern for social justice is not readily evident in the output in terms of whose stories are told and how they are framed.

Both the “schooled” and “trained” forms of literacy I have sketched and, of necessity, caricatured, have similar implications. They are examples of what Freire (1978) termed “banking” education in contrast to empowering education. If, as curricula, they are designed to achieve particular objects, they work as designs for the present and that present is marked by grave inequalities. The existing “curricula” rehearse existing hegemonic patterns of thought and knowledge and are simply not adequate as a design for the future for they reproduce a conserving imagination that is ill-suited to the challenges that are faced.

This discussion leads to the ultimate and difficult question of what curricula or designs for the future should be like. This question seems to me to require that thought is given to the kinds of social humans we would hope might inhabit the future. (Do I hear the murmurings of charges of utopia? Well yes, maybe, but preferable to the dystopic present, I respond.) Different strategies need to be nurtured in order to create an aware citizenry that values democracy, has the insight to question authority, and that attempts to understand the implications of existing power relations. Central to this design must be the ideas of insight and social action, for social action and participation in society at various levels is the mark of democracy. Media makers need to be part of this project of envisaging and designing alternatives for the world of tomorrow. Indeed that world would need to be different, a world where people are encouraged to think outside the frames already drawn and envisage and design other ways of being in the world in order to foster social justice.

Stakeholders

It is vital to begin rethinking how we might create critically literate future generations if we wish to ensure demo-

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cratic governance and this responsibility of designing the future falls to many people. At a state level, it falls to policy makers in education and the broad field of media to reconsider existing conditions. The current literacy curricula and teachers are presently inadequate to the task of critical media literacy which calls for a paradigm shift and the necessary support for teachers to understand and take on something that goes against the practices that they know so well. In tandem with the formal educational curricula, civil society needs to respond to the need for media programmes that engage with media holistically and to envisage ways of responding in the future. Moreover, public broadcasters have an educational mandate that is a central site for engaging with nurturing a critically media literate populace.

In addition, media institutions themselves hold one of the keys to this dilemma. The arguments that they currently use to justify their present practices relate to a profit imperative. Their reluctance to change, legitimated on the grounds that the public like what they get, is arguably cynical and could be rethought more creatively. In tandem with them, media education institutions need to re-evaluate their role. To continue to act as the servant of something as reified as “the industry” and to service it in line with profit motives rather than envisaging, designing and creating alternatives amounts to little more than prostitution.

This argument for critical media literacy at all these levels calls for boldness in action for this is not merely an academic argument. We recall Rwanda and we know of the savage realities experienced on this continent (and elsewhere). We realise the importance of democratic rather than despotic governance. As citizens and as stakeholders then we have, I suggest, a responsibility to take very seriously the challenge to take part in (re)designing our own and our children’s futures. ■

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Endnotes

- 1 What I refer to as critical media literacy here is frequently identified as “media education”, particularly in Australia and the United Kingdom.
- 2 It is not my intention to overlook the rich and interesting productions that do (infrequently perhaps) get produced.

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On the job training.