Popular Media, Education, and Resistance

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Although the mainstream media and education systems are key institutions that perpetuate various social inequalities, spaces exist—both within and beyond these institutions—where adults and youth resist dominant, damaging representations and improvise new images. In this article, we address why educational researchers and educators should attend closely to popular media and democratizing media production. We analyze and illustrate strategies for engaging with and critiquing corporate news media and creating counter-narratives. We explore media education as a key process for engaging people in dialogue and action as well as present examples of how popular culture texts can be excavated as rich pedagogical resources.

Key words: media literacy, cultural studies, participatory democracy, popular culture, news, youth, schooling, public sphere, media education, educational policy

Bien que les médias et systèmes d'éducation traditionnels soient des institutions clés qui perpétuent divers types d'inégalités sociales, il existe des espaces – à l'intérieur comme à l'extérieur de ces institutions – où les adultes et les jeunes opposent une résistance aux représentations dominantes préjudiciables et improvisent de nouvelles images. Dans cet article, les auteures expliquent pourquoi les chercheurs en éducation et les enseignants devraient porter une attention spéciale aux médias populaires et à la démocratisation de la production dans le domaine des médias. Elles analysent et illustrent des stratégies favorisant l'implication dans les médias d'information, la critique de ces médias et la création de discours variés apportant un contrepoids au discours dominant. Les auteures explorent l'initiation aux médias comme un outil-clé pour inciter les gens au dialogue et à l'action et montrent, à partir d'exemples, comment le dépouillement de textes tirés de la culture populaire peut constituer une méthode pédagogique fructueuse.

Mots clés : initiation aux médias, études culturelles, démocratie participative, culture populaire, informations relatives à l'éducation, jeunes, éducation, sphère publique

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In this article, we have addressed the question why educational researchers and educators should attend closely to popular media and democratizing media production. To unpack this question, we have discussed key terms and introduced relevant literatures and debates: media, popular culture, democracy, resistance, and media education. We take a critical stance in our focus on three facets of media—mainstream news, popular culture, and knowledge production—to argue that they be explored as public pedagogies (texts and cultural practices of everyday life) linked to democratic possibilities.

FROM "KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY" TO "BILLBOARD SOCIETY"?

What are media? The media system, like the education system, is "one of society's key set of institutions, industries, and cultural practices" (Masterman, 2001, p. 16). The term *media* is commonly invoked to mean both the mediums of communication (radio, recorded music, Internet, television, print, film, video) as well as the products or texts of these mediums (journalistic accounts, television shows and film productions, video games, web sites). The central media—print, radio, and television—are the ways we "imagine ourselves to be connected to the social world" (Couldry, 2003, p. 7).

The media are a central, if not primary, pedagogue. Children and youth spend more time with media than any other institution, including schools (Buckingham, 2003, p. 5). Three-quarters of children from grade 3 to grade 10 watch television daily (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2003, p. ii). During an average week Canadian children and youth watch 14 to 15 hours of TV, adult men watch about 21 hours, and adult women about 26 hours (Statistics Canada, 2005b). Meanwhile, youth (aged 12 to 17) listen to 8.5 hours of radio each week, compared to 19.5 hours for Canadians of all ages taken as a whole (Statistics Canada, 2005c). Young adults, teens, and children are offsetting the time they used to spend viewing television and (especially) listening to radio with Internet activities (Avery, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2005a), including computer games (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2003, p. iii).

A massive increase has occurred in the amount of media directed at children. Carlsson (2002) has found that, in the latter part of the 1990s, over 50 television channels were geared towards children—many of

them owned by media conglomerates (p. 9). Advertisers have taken a keen interest in the child and youth market. In the United States, advertising aimed at children has gone from $100 million in 1983 to 1997, when the total spent on advertising and marketing towards children topped at $12.7 billion (McChesney, 2002, p. 28). Advertisers have increasingly segmented the market aimed at children based on age and gender (Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Kline, 1993).

Children are inundated with advertising through TV shows that are full-length commercials and through marketing at schools. Jhally (1990, p. 89) has noted that opportunities for advertisers have increased, given the interconnections that have emerged between entertainment and advertising. For example, with the rise of the Internet, corporations have created game characters for the purpose of selling products (Montgomery, 2002). Cash-strapped schools increasingly agree to advertising in return for equipment and sometimes curriculum (see Blair, this issue). The first national survey of commercial activities in Canadian schools, done in 2004-2005 (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2005), found that the majority of elementary and secondary schools advertised or promoted commercial products from companies in exchange for money, materials, or classroom equipment. For example, 54 per cent of secondary schools surveyed reported the presence of advertising; soft drink corporations (Coke and Pepsi) had the most prominent logos. In addition to beverage machines, ads appear on scoreboards, clocks, banners, school signs, and gym equipment. As Kenway and Bullen (2001, p. 99) have noted, poor areas have Burger King "academies" where children learn how to flip burgers, while districts save money by partnering with Burger King. Rich areas have Microsoft "academies" where children are prepared for postsecondary education. As a consequence of this kind of school advertising, children, inundated with thousands of messages at school and home, learn that belonging is not rooted in concepts of democratic citizenship but in consumerism.

Computer and video games sales topped $10 billion in the United States in 2004 (Secko, 2005, para. 5). "'For people under 30, they [digital games] are almost an indigenous cultural form,' says Jim Gee, Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Wisconsin and a leading

researcher on the role video games can play in learning" (cited in Secko, 2005, para. 13).

Rarely are Canadians not engaged with the corporate media. Hamelink (2002) argues that, given the power of global conglomerates around the world, we should think of ourselves as the "billboard society" rather than the "knowledge society" (p. 37). The majority of what we read, listen to, and watch is owned by a cartel of five giant media conglomerates: Time Warner, Disney, Murdoch's News Corporation, Bertelsmann of Germany, and Viacom (formerly CBS) (Bagdikian, 2004). Increases in commercialization, concentration in media ownership, and mega-mergers under the banner of convergence have occurred at the same time that local and national control over media has been threatened and public funding for noncommercial media has been cut (see Beers, this issue).

While highlighting the increasing barrage of media and consumption, we acknowledge that the media are not monolithic and that viewers can interpret any media text in a number of ways. An ample number of audience studies (e.g., Brooker & Jermyn, 2002) demonstrate that people do resist the meanings intended by media producers and that media do not present only one viewpoint at all times. This special issue contributes to this growing literature by spotlighting the pedagogical complexities that occur when educators provide space for learners to critique and resist popular media (Mackie & Norton, this issue).

The focus of public debates about the effects of media revolves around children and youth. Left largely unexplored is the way media influence how adults come to understand children and youth (but see Gilliam & Bales, 2001). For example, youth crime dominates the mainstream news media, especially crime committed by racialized minorities (e.g., Henry & Tator, 2002). Missing from much of the news coverage is the participation of youth in civil society, the reasons for their cynicism towards politics, and the social policies that affect the everyday lives of children and youth.

A large literature on "third-person effects" (Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Hoffner et al., 2001) looks at how children and adults think others are influenced while they are immune. Older children think younger

children should be protected, and young children think those even younger than they are should be protected from the influence of media. For example, a recent national survey of over 5,700 students in grades 3 to 10 in Canada found that their favourite TV show was the animated situation comedy, *The Simpsons*, yet they were also most likely to name *The Simpsons* (along with *South Park*) as the television program that "kids a few years younger than them should not watch" (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2003, p. vi).

For the most part, it appears most of us do not want to admit that media influence the way we come to know ourselves and others. Of course, we have the ability to think critically about what we see and hear, and institutions other than the media have an influence on how we come to know the world. But the media are a pivotal vehicle through which the social is continually recreated, maintained, and sometimes challenged. Simultaneously, we can be both "vulnerable and savvy" to the "empire of images" (Bordo, 2003, p. B7).

DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP AND EDUCATION

Given the pervasiveness and influence of media in our daily lives, the *informal* public pedagogies of popular (news and entertainment) media may be surpassing the *formal* public pedagogies of schooling and postsecondary education in terms of where and how we form citizens. Yet with the largely for-profit, advertising-supported media system in fewer and fewer corporate hands, it has become more difficult for the press to hold people in power to public account, to present a wide range of informed views on the important issues facing the citizenry, and to promote democracy defined as widespread, meaningful participation in decision making or the rule of the many (McChesney, 2000). Citizenship is at risk of being reduced to consumerism.

The need to strengthen public education's responsibility to prepare people to participate in a democratic public sphere has rarely been so urgent. Educators must model and offer rigorous media critique and opportunities for media production, not only in media literacy classes but across the curriculum and at the school level and beyond (see Beers; Orlowski; and Poyntz, this issue). Young people need opportunities to inquire into, and debate, who controls the media system and whether a

predominantly corporate commercial media system is compatible with democracy.

The meanings of democracy, of course, are multiple and contested. Many Canadians associate democracy narrowly with representative government. In theory, we vote for people who presumably will represent our interests, and yet many of us are aware of how money and power can manipulate representative institutions to the benefit of elite groups. Our actually existing democracy engenders widespread disconnection and de-politicization and is compatible with today's media landscape.

Some critics of liberal or republican democracy have put participation, dialogue across differences, and egalitarianism at the center of an alternative vision of democracy. John Dewey (1954/1927) espoused an expansive and communicative understanding of democracy, arguing, for example, that "The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion" (p. 207). Political philosopher Nancy Fraser (1997) defines democracy as "a process of communication across differences, where citizens participate together in discussion and decision making to determine collectively the conditions of their lives" (p. 173). Importantly, Fraser notes that in our stratified society, multiple publics exist, albeit with unequally valued cultural styles and unequal access to the material means of disseminating their ideas.[1] Members "of subordinated social groups —women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics" (p. 81). In these alternative publics (what Fraser calls *subaltern counterpublics*), marginalized groups invent and circulate oppositional interpretations of their needs and interests, in strategic resistance to the power of dominant groups and institutions whose ideologies are accepted as common sense in wider public spheres.

EVERYDAY ACTS OF RESISTANCE

Understand that the major media will not tell you of all the acts of resistance taking place every day in the society, the strikes, the protests, the individual acts of courage in the face of authority. Look around (and you will certainly find it) for the evidence of these unreported acts. And for the little you find, extrapolate

from that and assume there must be a thousand times as much as what you've found. (Howard Zinn, 1999, para. 4)

Although we are far from living in a truly participatory democracy, many everyday acts of resistance go unnoticed and unreported by mainstream media. For example, a group of self-described marginalized youth constructed and sustained anti-jock websites (most notably SpoilSports and High School Underground), where they articulated "dissatisfaction with and anger toward institutions that uncritically adulate hyper-masculine/high contact sport culture and the athletes who are part of this culture (i.e., the 'jocks')" (Wilson, 2002, p. 206).

Even in a stratified society such as ours, classrooms and even whole schools operate where teachers aim to help students articulate their interests and learn analytic, communicative, and strategic skills required in more participatory models of democracy. School-sponsored programs and extracurricular activities and community-based programs sometimes create a relatively safe and private discursive arena where members of subordinated groups can explore who they are and want to become and prepare to voice their needs, concerns, and issues in wider public realms. In and out of school, youth have produced their own media that articulate or participate in resistant discourses (we explore the issue of youth media production later in this essay).

In this issue, Kelly examines how adults can engage with youth to challenge media representations that present them in a stereotypically negative fashion. T. Riecken, Conibear, Michel, Lyall, Scott, Tanaka, Batten, J. Riecken, and Strong-Wilson explore how involving Aboriginal youth in video production can serve to challenge mainstream media representations. And Leard and Lashua look at how Aboriginal youth use rap and popular theatre to create new self-representations that counter corporate media images of the rapper as criminal.

The contributors to this special issue draw from a variety of theories—critical and neo-Marxist, poststructuralist, feminist, post-colonialist, and anti-racist—and hence invoke plural meanings of the word *resistance*. They are united, however, by a critique of neoliberalism, a political-economic framework that extols the virtues of the marketplace, largely unfettered by government control, and that

promotes policies of deregulation and privatization. Adherents of neoliberalism prefer to treat both education and communication as commodities, subject to trade on the global market. By contrast, the contributors to this special issue believe education and communication are public goods and the forces of commercialization and privatization need to be resisted.

By resistance, we mean "opposition with a social and political purpose" (Knight Abowitz, 2000, p. 878). Given our focus on the intersection of education and popular media in this special issue, we find Kathleen Knight Abowitz's definition of *resistance as communication* attractive: "As an impetus of social and political transformation in a school, resistance communicates; that is, it is a means of signaling, generating, and building dialogue around particular power imbalances and inequalities" (p. 878). Although the mainstream media and education systems are key institutions that perpetuate various social inequalities, spaces exist—both within and beyond these institutions—where adults and youth resist dominant, damaging representations and improvise new images. Although some critical scholars have acknowledged this resistance, they have focused, for example, on resistant peer cultures that end up unwittingly contributing to their own subordination (e.g., Willis, 1977). More recently, progressive scholars have spotlighted micro-level resistance to material inequalities and injustices to argue that schools, peer groups, and newsrooms do not always and inevitably reproduce the status quo (e.g., Carlson, 2005; Kelly, 2003; Kelly & Brandes, 2001; Weis & Fine, 2001). Without romanticizing this resistance, this special issue contributes to the growing literature that explores moments when educators, young people, and others seize or create possibilities for democratic change.

MEDIA EDUCATION

Barry Duncan (2005), a leading Canadian media educator, identifies the civil rights movement, the media coverage of the Vietnam War, feminism, as well the development of a Canadian film and television industry as catalysts for the media education movement in Canada. The Association for Media Literacy, a group of Canadian media educators, parents, media professionals, and cultural workers, created key concepts

for media literacy which are used by schools across Canada. The AML's principles included the following: media are constructions, an analysis of the media industry and media audiences, codes and conventions, and values and ideology in media. Ontario was the first to make media education compulsory (in 1986) and by 1997 media education was part of provincial policy guidelines across Canada and soon after was also part of the curriculum in the territories. Many educators see Canada as a leader in media education; however, there is still a lack of preservice and in-service education around issues of media education. Furthermore, critical media education requires not just content knowledge but a shift to a democratic pedagogy.

Critical media education is sometimes represented as the land of the hand wringers who decry pleasure and insist on somber meditations on the ideological workings of consumer media. We believe this is simplistic, and instead position ourselves as taking a political economy perspective in which pleasure and analysis are seen as equally important. In this time of media conglomeration, we cannot afford to be merely playful. Educators need to engage students by analyzing that which is playful as well as engaging in an ideological analysis of that which is serious. In other words educators need to give students the tools to understand both how and why the media reports on issues such as war and curtailment of civil liberties, as well as how to foster discussion about what makes the latest shows, Internet sites, and computer games pleasurable. Thus, critical media education, broadly defined (e.g., Kellner & Share, 2005), provides one important means of "signaling, generating, and building dialogue around particular power imbalances and inequalities" (Knight-Abowitz, 2000, p. 878). Critical media education engages educators in a search (with their students) for pedagogical strategies aimed at promoting the democratizing of interpretation as well as the production of media.

A crucial issue for critical educators is how to promote learning about the political economy of the media as well as the social construction of media texts while also focusing on strategies for democratizing media through creating media. Lewis and Jhally (1998) suggest that "Media literacy should be about helping people to become sophisticated citizens rather than sophisticated consumers" (p. 109). This

position requires educators to shed the façade of neutrality and instead to see their role as providing a greater diversity of symbolic resources for students, who are inundated by messages from a few massive conglomerates.

By shedding this façade, we do not mean that critical media educators should abrogate their authority, particularly in the case where educators encourage young people to create their own media and discover the challenges and problems with this approach (see, e.g., Buckingham, 2003, esp. chap. 8). With Carmen Luke (1999), we believe that:

It is therefore important that media studies pedagogy be guided by social justice or equity principles that will enable students to come to their own realisations that, quite simply, racist, sexist, ageist, or homophobic language and imagery oppress and subordinate others. If students begin from a theoretically grounded understanding that inequalities and oppressive discourses (including mass cultural texts) are always socially constructed, then they will have the analytic tools to reconstruct in their own productions more inclusive, less denigrating meaning systems. (p. 625)

On the other hand, educators need to be skeptical of some critical pedagogy theorists who forget that teachers need to interrogate their own practices and that students sometimes play a role in challenging their teachers' oppressive worldviews (Ellsworth, 1989).

In this special issue, Kline, Stewart, and Murphy argue that media education is crucial to fighting what is often seen as an epidemic of childhood obesity. Through a pedagogical approach they call "cultural judo" (p. 141), they believe media education can encourage youth to tune out of media and engage in more physically active forms of play, as well as providing the skills to critique media. Poyntz (this issue) argues that media education should go beyond the dichotomy of *protection* from potential negative media influences versus *preparation* for understanding and participation in the media culture, and instead pursue both aims. He argues youth need to be deeply engaged in the process of media education and that teachers need to take an active role in pointing them towards making space for collective and critical change. Orlowski (this issue) maintains that media education ought not throw away the concept

of ideology but, instead, use it as a tool to analyze media messages and their influence on the quality of public discourse. Mackenzie (this issue) explores what media educators in three contrasting high school settings set as curricular objectives as compared to how students take up what is intended to be taught.

In the remainder of this essay, we take up two key aspects of media education in more depth: the analysis of socially constructed pop culture and mass media texts (highlighting their potential as pedagogical resources) and the production of multi-media texts, particularly by youth.

"NEWS IS NEUTRAL, POP CULTURE IS EVIL"

In everyday conversations, we often get the sense that people discuss the news as though it were facts, neutrally transmitted by the mainstream media (or else disregarded as propaganda), while pop culture gets singled out either for derision or as something evil that must be guarded against. Indeed, since the 1900s people have decried the negative influence of pop culture on children and youth (for a recent review, see Dolby, 2003). For example, educators often peg discussions of current events on newspaper articles—accepted largely at face value as fact based—while viewing Pokémon cards and Beyblades as a nuisance or the animated TV show *The Simpsons* as encouraging everything from foul language and disrespect to nihilism.

The premise of this special issue, by contrast, is that journalistic news accounts and pop culture are both highly socially constructed. The news is constructed by journalists and other professionals for particular reasons, to inform people about what is happening in various communities (local, regional, national, global) with respect to political, economic, and socio-cultural issues—but with commercial interests also in mind. The news is selected and shaped to fit a particular format, framed within a particular perspective, and designed to appeal to particular audiences. Increasingly, the ratio of information to entertainment has been shifting and the lines between them blurring (Gans, 2003). News outlets are experimenting with formats and modes of address that de-centre authority from the traditional news anchor and experts whose sources and viewpoints previously went unquestioned,

thus positioning viewers as less deferential and more active meaning makers (e.g., on alternative formats in children's news, see Buckingham, 2000). Whether in a news format or an entertainment format, pressing social and political issues can be spotlighted for audience reflection. News and pop culture are both infused with possibilities for resistance as well as conformity and accommodation.

Critically Engaging, But Not Celebrating, Pop Culture

Pop culture exists today as "a kind of bizarre alternative curriculum" (Masterman, 2001, p. 55), and educators who refuse to consider it as a resource in their official or established curriculum miss opportunities to connect with young people's lives and enhance critical literacy. Pop culture can be mined for critical reading even when it is being cross-marketed to sell products. Because it is a prime arena where "ideas circulate and identities are produced" (Dimitriadis & McCarthy, 1999, p. 3), it should be an object of critical engagement but not valorization (see also Buckingham, 2003; Dimitriadis, 2004; Dolby, 2003; Dyson, 2003; Luke, 1996, 1999; Willis, 2003).

To take the example of *The Simpsons* again: the show offers ironic social critique as part of the entertainment, even as the characters of Bart and Homer are used to sell everything from ice cream to t-shirts. A recurring theme of the show is the satire of top-down authority relations that prevail between school adults and children in conventional schooling (for examples and detailed discussion, see Reeves, 2000).[2] To raise questions about such issues as power and control, including the possibility of student participation in decision making, may seem counterproductive to educators. As Schutz (2004) reminds us, "The primary institution in most children's lives *is* the school, and schools have little incentive to encourage their charges to resist them" (p. 20). Yet if we want schools to prepare young people for participatory democracy, raising such questions seems highly appropriate. And *The Simpsons* provides rich fodder for other relevant topics as well, such as power dynamics based on gender, race, class, age, religion, sexuality; corporate ethics; family life; nuclear energy; government corruption; and workplace democracy, to name just some of the most obvious.

To cite another example: Catherine Ashcraft (2003) critically analyzes the popular teen-cult movie *American Pie*, both for its re-inscription of dominant discourses of sexuality but also its possibilities for alternative identities and transformative discourses. She argues the film offers educators and youth a valuable resource for sexuality education. In this special issue, various contributors demonstrate how popular culture texts (and the cultural practices of youth that are linked to pop culture) can be excavated as rich pedagogical resources. For example, Mackie and Norton examine the conflicting readings of race and national histories prompted by the viewing of the popular film *Pearl Harbor* (2001) in Mackie's postsecondary English language classroom, while Poyntz explores the documentary film *The Take* (2004) as an example of critical media praxis. Sanford and Madill demonstrate how boys use video games to take on new identities that can sometimes challenge stereotypes and at other times entrench them. This points to how video games might be examined in classrooms to explore and critique the construction of virtual identities. Blair's analysis of Mattel's Art Teacher Barbie points to how educators might engage students in exploring how corporate monies are used to support the arts in schools while simultaneously constraining imagination about who teaches art and what it is. Indeed, the media texts of popular culture that people

are exposed to daily, year after year, are the very texts that help shape their understandings of social inequalities and equalities, differentially valued cultural resources and identities, and differential access to various forms of social power. Everyday media texts are therefore eminently suitable for teaching about social justice in contemporary cultural contexts. (Luke, 1999, p. 624)

Challenging Corporate News Media, Muscling into the Mainstream

Just as popular culture representations are socially constructed and thus open to critique and reappropriation, so, too, are journalistic news accounts, as mentioned earlier. Yet in contrast to pop culture, the news is considered nonfiction, and in theory the best news journalists strive to enhance political understanding by providing readers with "reliable reporting that tells them what is true when that is knowable, and pushes as close to truth as possible when it is not" (Cunningham, 2003, para. 9).

In an era where spin doctors, media advisors, pollsters, and public relation experts are prevalent and on the increase, we need journalists with expertise who can sort through competing (albeit socially contextualized) truth claims, weigh evidence, make informed judgments, and "adjudicate factual disputes" (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, p. 165). This is crucial because, despite its faults, "news journalism remains the primary means of access to the public sphere of political debate and activity" (Buckingham, 2000, p. 218).

All the more worrisome, then, to consider how dramatically news has changed over the last decade (Beers, this issue; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005). Since the arrival of satellite and digital communications technologies and CNN's 24-hour news, the news cycle has become shorter and shorter. Generalist opinion rather than investigative journalism (which is more time consuming, expensive, and likely to focus on a more sustained critique of the powerful in society) or what Gans (2003) calls "explanatory journalism" (p. 99) takes up the bulk of space. Frequently the same company owns TV, radio, newspapers, and portals (Bagdikian, 2004). Corporate offices decide that newsrooms can be cut back because one reporter can cover, say, the education beat for all the company's various outlets. Media corporations market the news as a neutral vehicle of updated information and pursue stories about celebrities in an effort to increase their market share.

Given the current media landscape, therefore, it is imperative that educational researchers, media educators, independent media producers, and others challenge corporate news media as well as strategize about how to get multiple resistant analyses and viewpoints into mainstream circulation. In this special issue, Ungerleider analyzes the potential of government influencing the corporate media by providing education-related news in a timely manner in the format needed. He acknowledges this strategy is limited, given the neoliberal bias of the media, but that it can still result in the media altering frames—or at least providing an additional frame to the dominant one. Kelly, too, argues it can be worthwhile to engage with the mainstream news media, but she also demonstrates how engagement can unwittingly serve to reinforce harmful representations of youth. Stack looks at how the mainstream media coverage of the results of the OECD's Programme in International

Student Assessment privileges elite views, entrenches regional stereotypes, and minimizes issues of racism and poverty.

In addition to challenging the mainstream, therefore, we need to look at alternative media outlets, which can provide counter-narratives and (with a substantial enough audience base) can put pressure on mainstream, corporate media to diversify their content. Supporting independent media production—by children and youth as well as by adults—requires not just the traditional mainstays of video and newsletters, but the integration of new information computer technologies (ICTs). We ignore these new forms of communicating at our peril, given their growing importance in society (see Beers, this issue; Luke, 2002).

YOUTH MEDIA PRODUCTION

Although still controversial (see Hobbs, 1998, pp. 20-21), youth media production has become another mainstay of media education programs and media literacy more generally (for examples in this issue, see Leard & Lashua; Poyntz; Riecken & colleagues). Video production started in the 1960s as a tool of political activism. In the late 1970s media activism and education converged with the aim of the "cultural undoping" of students (Goldfarb, 2002, p. 68). These programs mainly ran out of video and community centres and were affiliated with left-wing social movements. The 1990s saw video production used for everything from political activism to improving the self-esteem of at-risk students.

The new millennium has seen a rapid increase in access to digital technologies; children and youth are the most prolific users of new media, notwithstanding legitimate concern about the "digital divide" (e.g., Kline, 2003, pp. 183-186). Similar to other eras where new technologies have been introduced (Postman, 1995), this development has provoked alarm among some adults who fear that the time youth spend with computers is isolating, anti-social, and—to quote the title of a recent *Maclean's* magazine story—making "our kids stupid" (Ferguson, 2005). Youth, however, also spend time creating media and sharing media texts with each other. Niesyto, Buckingham, and Fisherkeller (2003) found that youth are keenly interested to share their work and have a conversation about it with their peers. Kelly, Pomerantz, and

Currie (in press) found that youth make plans online as part of socializing offline. Wilson (this issue) argues that online communication can lead to or facilitate activism on and offline.

A central question in developing healthy, democratic counterpublics is how to produce the next generation of independent media producers who are guided by a desire to work in the public interest. Beers (this issue) points to the need to facilitate the ability of youth to have a conversation about what they produce.

Goldfarb (2002) argues that creating youth countercultures requires institutional support in terms of space, equipment, and human support. There is much hope for the increase in youth productions and how this could promote social change. We agree the increase is positive, but we also need to explore how youth and adults could build movements for social change by creating media together. How might schools and communities be positively influenced—even transformed—if youth and adults together created media aimed at social change (Stack, 2005)?

CONCLUSION

Never before has so much power to tell stories from the local to the international level been vested in so few hands. Simultaneously, there have never been so many opportunities for people to engage in creating their own digital media. Nevertheless, opportunities to share and disseminate viewpoints alternative to dominant narratives are unequally distributed, and for this reason educators and their students ought to engage and challenge mainstream media as well as pursue opportunities to create alternative stories. The media are the primary vehicle through which we come to know ourselves and others. They are so embedded in our daily lives that their power is naturalized. We can be skeptical, but even in our skepticism we are engaging in a process of comparing media narratives rather than being independent of them.

Education plays a central role in providing people with the ability to denaturalize everyday media narratives. This special issue illuminates the ways in which media narratives about schools, young people, teachers, and educational problems are socially constructed as well as analyzes and illustrates strategies for engaging with the media system, critiquing it, and creating counter-narratives.

NOTES

[1] Some look to the Internet and new information computer technologies as forces enabling greater democracy or transforming democracy (for a discussion, see Bohman, 2004). But others say the new technologies are going the way of other media, becoming quickly commercialized, with corporate-owned portals receiving the most traffic (McChesney, 2000, chap. 3). As Beers (this issue) argues, both arguments have merit, but the nature of the Internet does offer specific advantages to people wanting to create, disseminate, or interact with independent media aimed at democratizing public discourse. Wilson (this issue) discusses how educational researchers might examine collective resistance by youth in the context of online and offline relationships.

[2] To be sure, as Kenway and Bullen (2001) argue, entertainment (and advertising) aimed at children often constructs teachers (and other adults, such as parents) as "dull or too earnest, usually disapproving, slightly ridiculous, unworthy of emulation and as being subjected to well-justified rebellion and rejection" (p. 73). Thus, *The Simpsons* is in line with consumer culture's invitation to children and youth "to regard adults as their negative 'other' and to regard education as oppositional to their pleasures" (p. 74). In addition, this opposition may be coded as largely masculine (think: the underachieving Bart Simpson) and school conformity as feminine (think: Bart's overachieving sister, Lisa).

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