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*Robert Ferguson*

## **Democracy and Media Literacy**

One of the first things I noticed when the programme for this event arrived was that I was going to be talking about Media Literacy and Democracy. When I looked at my notes for the first draft, I discovered that I had given them the heading 'Democracy and Media Literacy.' It is a worthy subject, in itself, to spend some time trying to work out which of the two do, or should, come first. Can you have media literacy without democracy, or democracy without media literacy? In the recent past the mention of democracy and media literacy would not necessarily have turned many heads in the fields of either education or the media. Both might have been thought of as mildly interesting topics, but hardly worth more than a passing nod. Well times change. Those of us who have argued for many years for the importance of media education need to be united with those who are just coming to the field and recognising its significance.

Related to this there is the question of citizenship education and approaches to democracy. This too has been thought of by many as worthy but relatively inconsequential. Citizenship education was something that you did to teach good manners and a number of other well meaning but lightweight topics to apathetic or recalcitrant youth. It is time for any of us who were tempted to think that way to do some serious rethinking.

*"Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."*

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*Reinhold Niebuhr*

*“Democracy encourages the majority to decide things about which the majority is blissfully ignorant.” John Simon*

*“If you want to understand democracy, spend less time in the library with Plato and more time on the buses with people.” Simeon Strunsky*

*“If voting changed anything, they’d abolish it.” Anonymous*

*“Smart-assed quotations about democracy are cheap and easy. The practice of democracy is expensive, hard, and requires the process of education.” Robert Ferguson*

I wanted to begin with these five quotations, because I think they typify for me some of the problems associated with a practice which is fraught with contradictions and tensions. Perhaps it is one of the important characteristics of a successful democracy that it should be uncomfortable. This should be particularly the case for those in power in a democracy. Indeed, one might go as far as to suggest that it is the responsibility of all citizens in a democracy to participate in this uncomfortableness and to work for productive change. Complacency, apathy and cynicism are the enemies of democracy. Scepticism and the will to action are its friends.

Why is all this important in the context of today’s meeting here at the Open Channel? There are many answers to this question, and some of them will be apparent as we see the work produced by the young people who have been part of the project. In order to address the range of issues before us I will take them one at a time. This is convenient for the presentation, for we all know that in the material world things have a nasty habit of happening in bunches and of overlapping. I will begin, however, with the concepts of literacy and media literacy, then move on to a discussion of democracy and finally try to make some sense of the two in relation to approaches to media education and pedagogy. This is a tall task, but I am concerned here with a modest mapping of a field that still needs considerable research and development.

## Thinking about literacies

The concept of literacy has an interesting history. Many years ago there were the eminent thinkers who were worried about the spread of literacy. Plato is the most often cited. Clearly there was likely to be a problem, they thought, if the common people learned to read and write. This point has been noted also by many contemporary educators. But what exactly would the problem be? Could it have something to do with the telling suggestion that people might develop 'ideas above their station' if they could read and write? Those who worried that education would change people were right to feel that way, though usually wrong in their motivation. The aim to retain power is a great spur to the encouragement of ignorance in others. Nevertheless literacy developed into a concept which allowed that it might be a good idea if some people could read and write. But this was, in the main, a functional notion of literacy. It seldom had much to do with the reading and writing of those who would be running the show. They (the leaders) could develop their concept of literacy into a subtle, well-honed instrument for understanding, analysing, describing, and creating meaning.

The ordinary person was expected to develop a form of literacy that enabled them to write a letter of application, to enter records in books, all according to conventional rules of spelling and grammar. Sometimes the ordinary person might also read a newspaper. The more advanced were encouraged to read highly selected works from the 'masters.' In all this there was seldom any notion of critical thinking, of analysis and above all of any possibility of exercising autonomous critical judgement. Of course things progressed over time and it seemed that literacy could become, for some, more than a mechanical skill. But forms of literacy which allowed a little more freedom of subject matter were closely watched. For those involved in cultural studies or the social sciences or the study of history this became increasingly apparent. Literacy usually meant the skills necessary in order for us to interpret the world in the ways our masters or mistresses thought best. The acquired understandings of the world which our literacy offered, often turned out to be rather narrow minded or chauvinist or sexist or racist. They were also based, very often, on narrow conceptions of aesthetic matters. In saying all this I am referring primarily to the impact of literacy in the middle and lower echelons of social, educational and political life.

It was the literacy taught to those called the ordinary people. All this changed when some organisations concerned with workers decided that literacy was linked with knowledge. Long before Michel Foucault came on the scene, some organisations went as far as carving in stone above the entry to their education centres, 'Knowledge is Power.' Then there was the literacy associated with Liberation Theologists or those like Paulo Freire, who pointed out that underdevelopment was a transitive verb - someone had to do it to someone else. When literacy took a turn towards action in the material world, rather than being a means of drilling the compliant, it became a very different concept indeed. Literacy could then become a means to several possible ends. These included the capacity to read and understand, but also the capacity to act in and on the world. Whenever literacy has become a concept allied to forms of intellectual or other liberations, it has always been guided back to a more benign form. It may be reduced to a genteel policing activity, where little Joanna or Johnny are encouraged to write neatly so that they can get a good job. Or it may enter a field of apolitical creativity where words are the means to spin dreams. I must say I prefer the latter if I have to choose, but neither approach is educationally or socially adequate for a healthy democracy. This much we can already observe in the world, according to Strunsky, associated with spending more time on the buses.

I want to make just a few more observations about developments in the concept of literacy, and in doing so to move towards identifying aspects of multimodal communication and media literacy. The reason for doing this is that both these concepts, still in their relative infancy, require serious consideration by all educators. For those interested in media education and democracy they are of central significance. The term multimodal has been associated recently with the work of a colleague at the Institute of Education, Gunther Kress and his writing partner Theo van Leeuwen. As the subtitle to their recent book suggests, they are concerned with the modes and media of contemporary communication. (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) Recognising that communication takes place in more than one mode most of the time is not entirely new. Those who study film or television have long been aware that they had to approach spoken words, images, sounds, music, as part of a complex package in what might have appeared to be the simplest media communication. The coming of the computer and the development of multimedia programmes have made it abundantly clear that communication is moving very

far away from only the written word. But what is perhaps a novel development is the manner in which the screens we read for much of our lives are changing. They now carry the written word, convey the spoken word, play us melodies or cacophonies, show us slow motion or time-lapse photography, and split the screen into two or three or four designated areas from which we have to choose what to read, watch or listen to first. Indeed we are often developing our capacities to take in several messages at the same time. For the more traditional literacy teacher this can sound somewhere between absurd and insane. The security of learning to read and write seems under threat. The even greater security of being able to teach reading and writing is, it seems, being eroded or removed from the teacher. I am deliberately overstating the case, but I do think there are many, and not only professional educators, who feel this way. So how should we address the situation and how develop our understanding of media literacy?

First I should say that things are just not as bad as those who see the media, especially television, as evil, would have us believe. But we are certainly living in a period of significant transition in the ways in which communication occurs. Whether it is with our mobile phones or our palmtops or laptops, changes are taking place. Some written communication is becoming telegraphic, abbreviated. But we should remember that this is the case only for specific generic forms of communication. The written word still holds considerable sway and there are many millions of people on this planet for whom a computer is the tool of the rich, the dominator, the 'other.' The issue in our new communication age is that the written word seldom comes to us on its own. It is usually accompanied by images and increasingly by images and sounds. How on earth does anyone become literate in all these things at once? This is a vitally important question, which it is the business of media education to address. I have raised it today only to indicate that our very concept of literacy needs some serious reappraisal. The key point I wish to emphasise is that we need to conceptualise literacy as both a process and a tool. Our understanding of literacy has to move beyond the narrow, nervous definitions to which so many governments adhere. Literacy is about more than policing what I will call the 'unreader' and 'unwriter'. Literacy is about more than the written word. It is, in short about multi modality. But recognising that communication is multimodal is only a beginning.

We have to ask, as well, just what kind of literacy we expect in our school students, in young people, in citizens and future citizens. There is, of course, the possibility of erecting a new multimodal literacy which is just as deadening as that which has been associated with some conventional reading and writing. We could end up teaching anything from the meaning of a shot to the principles of continuity editing in such a way as to alienate young people from the media they at present enjoy and, yes, learn so much from. If we use a concept of literacy which works on a kind of deficit model – trying to give people what they regrettably do not have – this will not work. Let me put it as plainly as I can. *Literacy needs to be a by-product of the educational process, not its main goal.* I will return to this point when I talk about pedagogy at the end of this paper.

By way of a brief interlude, I want to show you a three minute film. It is a Western called Traveller's Rest, made by a group of eleven year old children in a North London school many years ago. The film is composed entirely of paintings and inter-titles. All were produced by the children. The narrative was devised by the children. Every image you see in the short film is a complete image. The close ups are complete paintings. Let me show it now and then make one or two further observations.



Media education allows us to develop complex and rewarding forms of literacy. It also allows us to create (or is it produce?) as part of the learning process. For me, this short montage of children's paintings is a means of drawing upon the existing knowledge of children, then allowing them to re-present their knowledge. In the process they extend and enrich both what they know and what they can do. They struggle with a close up image,

and will always have respect, I believe, for the possible uses to which the close up might be put. They struggle, with varying degrees of success, with hand drawn lettering. They have to consider where to put the words on the screen. Design becomes part of their process of being literate. They discover, or better, they formalise what they had already discovered, in terms of narrative structures. They have an inkling of what Vladimir Propp offered in his morphology of the folk tale. They know that in westerns there are recurrent patterns and tropes. They 'know' that there are theories of narrative which suggest that one begins with a state of relative equilibrium, that the equilibrium is disturbed and that eventually a new equilibrium is established. They have never formalised this knowledge, but they can express it in a mode which is appropriate for their stage of thinking and expression. And it happens to be both demanding and enjoyable. They paint as they had not painted before. The reason for this is that they do not think they are painting, they think they are making a western. They structure their narrative with consummate skill, because they do not think they are involved in a 'narrative structure' exercise. They are involved in a process for which they are acquiring the necessary tools. This is their first encounter of this kind and they are not yet 12 years old. So there is time for their knowledge and skills to develop, and possibly to find formal expression. In the meantime they are passing a critical eye over the structure of the western. They produce their own version and it has the weight of Ecclesiastes, but with a quiet humour. One might almost claim that it has a maturity and wisdom beyond that which is usually expected of eleven year olds. And the film was produced through a process which was, in a way, democratic. I say this because it is the case, but also because it moves me along to the next section of this presentation, which is concerned with democracy.

## **Democracy, media literacy and media education**

If media literacy is related to understandings of democracy, we have to ask some serious questions about the nature of that relationship. Are we concerned with education about democracy or education for democracy? Are we able to practice any principles of democracy in any part of our engagement with media education and media literacy or is it necessary to adopt undemocratic methodologies to attain democratic goals? Such questions have been at the core of many seminars and debates in educational circles for a long time, but they were often, as they say, merely academic. The key realisation we

have to arrive at is that such matters are much more than academic. The attitude towards an understanding of democracy in our young people is likely to be of central importance for the future of our societies. At the moment the belief in democracy is hardly a burning issue in many quarters. There is much evidence of apathy or even downright hostility to the practices of what we call democratic government. It is easy for teachers who believe in the democratic process to find the nearest soapbox (usually in the classroom), climb on it and berate their audience (the children) for their apathy and ignorance. This may work wonders for the teacher, but it tends to confirm in the children their antipathy to the whole issue.

There is also the possibility that we may wish to demonstrate the value of democracy by simulating situations in which the democratic process occurs. So we hold elections in our schools, elections to elect students for non-existent roles. So we can elect one of our number as Prime Minister, voting on the basis of the policies and promises he or she makes when campaigning in the classroom. If we are media educators we may decide to video the whole process. Some educational value may be identified here - in the fact that re-presenting even a fictional election does begin to demonstrate some of the decision-making processes which media producers have to go through. There is much to be learned from re-assembling from pre-shot material a view of someone else's arguments. The problem with this is that it is time-consuming and not always easy to involve many children at the same time. But I want to argue that we need to develop multiple strategies to link media production and analysis to the democratic process. This is not the time or place to attempt the construction of an appropriate curriculum, but I do want to try to highlight some of the issues which I think all those in the media and media educators need to face.

Our focus, for the moment, is on the relationship between media literacy and democracy. Let me put some points to you in the form of a short list of questions, on which I will offer a brief commentary. My suggestion is that we should be involved, in our schools and in our studios in drawing up such lists, questions and commentaries. The lists and the questions may well form the basis for our engagement in the field. Posing such questions is also something which should, in schools at least, involve the children. It is something which we should do together with them rather than for them.

- Should we concentrate on developing the children's understanding of the way the media produce their messages – whether it be television or the press etc.?
- Should we attempt to simulate the experience of working in the media – there have been some quite successful news simulation packs used in the UK?
- Should we attempt to develop analytical skills in children by teaching them basic semiotics - questions of denotation and connotation. If they were more advanced we could move into the realms of Barthesian myth.
- Should we encourage children to examine different forms of democracy and the way in which democracy is represented in the media?
- How critical can we be and still believe in democracy?
- How much can we teach about democracy and the media without becoming involved in other curriculum subjects such as history?
- What would be an appropriate pedagogy for approaching media literacy and issues of 'democracy'?

I have raised seven questions here, and I am sure there are many, many more that could be formulated. The questions, of course, represent my points of entry into the subject. They are, in effect, loaded questions, but I would argue that they should be loaded, and furthermore that formulating loaded questions is a way of formulating critical discourses. Let me briefly go over each question and make one or two comments.

The first question refers to whether or not students should study the ways in which media produce their messages. This is not particularly new to any media educator. Media literacy certainly requires us to be able to recognise how a message is structured. We can learn, over time, to ask more questions about a given message, such as who made it, why they made it the way they did, and who their intended audience might be. If we come to be a little more critical, we might ask whether the message works in anyone's interest or to the detriment of anyone's interest. By the time we get to these kinds of questions, we are just about ready to consider the ways in which democracy works - or doesn't work. Of course, the way in which we can turn these musings into something concrete is to look at a specific headline or story in a newspaper, or to take a particular story in the television news and see how it is put together.

Our questions, then, stop being an abstract exercise and may take on an urgency because they refer to our lived experience, to the very material world in which we live.

My second question asked whether we should simulate the way the media work. The answer to this question is likely to be a qualified 'yes'. Qualified because it is not so easy to simulate everything in the media. We can, however, simulate a news programme, if we have the equipment and the will. We can discover in a modest way the pressures under which those in the media have to take decisions and decide what is newsworthy.

What we will learn about the media if we simulate their practices is that they are not particularly democratic! In saying this I do not seek to offend any broadcasters who may be present, quite the reverse. When working with students on virtually any production, I have found that they are willing to renounce democracy after a while, in the name of simply getting something done. They find that most production processes that involve the delivery of a pre-scripted or structured message are intensely authoritarian. It is not an accident that we have directors, producers and floor managers. There is something almost military about certain forms of media production. Discovering this can help us to become media literate in a particular and critical way. We can learn that the media in a democracy have to work in ways which are often the antithesis of the system they are there to champion.

My third question asked whether we should be teaching semiotics to children. Once again my answer would be a qualified 'yes'. Semiotics is, or wants to be, a science of signs. This is not the time or place to go into it in any detail. I would only note that teaching semiotics is something which we are still learning about. We have, many of us, made some mistakes in that we have turned what was an exciting and critical activity into a mechanical and boring one for the children. Semiotics is something which allows us to question the ways in which meanings are made and the ways in which we and others make sense of such messages. It does not matter whether we are studying the news, soap operas, advertisements or any number of different media. If we turn it into an arid set of skills it does not inspire our students. It might be better if we reconsidered semiotics as a way of questioning the power interests and relationships within democracies. If we did

this we would not be telling our students simply that they are lucky to live in democracies, or that they have to become serious and responsible citizens because we adults say so, instead we would be turning to questions of power, influence and signification. We would be asking how democratic institutions and democratic decisions are represented in the media. Such an approach wants to establish why we are told that the world is the way it is. It would also want to know if there are ways in which we can check the representations we see and hear against something else. Perhaps, flying in the face of postmodern doubt, we might ask about returning to the referent. That means we would have to check what we are told in the media against every other means we have of making sense of the world. It would mean that we would be likely to become *involved*.

My fourth question asked whether we should examine different forms of democracy and how they are represented in the media. Here my answer is an unequivocal yes. We need to be studying the ways in which political parties, elections, politicians and a host of political issues are reported on in the media. We need to consider the ways in which democracy in the trades unions takes place - and is represented. We need to consider carefully the ways in which democracy takes its place in the family, the school, the church - and how it is represented in the media. Remember that this would include reference to dramatisation as well as news and documentary. The challenge we face is how to do this in a way which involves the children in a process, an investigation in which they are players, not merely observers.

My fifth question relates to media literacy and the rest of the curriculum. We are considering here media literacy and democracy. I want to argue that there is no way that you can approach issues of democracy without getting involved in history. It does not matter which country you live in, questions of history will be crucial if you are going to attempt to understand the nature and purpose of your own and other people's democracies. Media literacy and democracy are hollow concepts without history.

Finally, and here I am moving towards the close of this presentation, I asked what might be an appropriate pedagogy for all this. In other words, how do you teach about democracy and combine it with the development of media literacy? This is really too much to address in one short presentation, so I am going to offer just one out of many possible answers here. My answer is to develop strategies where what you are teaching is not

immediately apparent! This would seem to fly in the face of those who say that we must have objectives and be able to predict our learning outcomes. But it is, I assure you, a strategy which pays dividends and ensures that education is a continuous process rather than a mechanical accumulation of information and skills.

There is a need, if we wish to understand democracy, to understand what the rules of democracy might be. And we need to ask who writes the rules of democracy and in whose interests they are designed to operate. But we also need to consider a host of other questions which might make democracy an important issue for our children. We can do this both through the media we study and the messages we create, but the topic is either potentially boring (too many rulebooks, laws and political broadcasts) or potentially irrelevant (teachers pontificating about things which they say young people should know to become better people).

A way to avoid this unproductive situation is to learn to think, to analyse and to make messages with more creativity. We have to bring the academic and intellectual tools of media education back to life - to restore their relevance.

One way of doing this is to consider topics by approaching them obliquely - not preaching but inquiring. Let me give you just one example as a way of drawing to a close. I am going to show you one more short film. This one was made by an adult and involves the technique of pixilation - animating people. It operates almost as a parable rather than an ordinary narrative. I want to show it to you before I say any more. It is called 'Neighbours' and it was made by Norman McLaren. In concluding this presentation, I do not intend to offer commentary on what you have just seen, I simply intend to restate what I consider to be some key points which are relevant for the development of media literacy and the question of democracy. I want to suggest that we need, in our schools, to reintroduce the concept of investigation in media education. We need to produce fearless investigators. We need to provide them with the tools and confidence to undertake their work. We need, therefore, to enable our students to formulate questions about what they study. We need to use the concept of multimodal communication as our guide for one important reason. In multimodal communication there are many things going on at once. Children are capable of coping with a multiplicity of communicative modalities. They can relate with relative ease to multimodal communication. We need to adopt what might be called a multimodal

approach to our teaching in this field. We need several disciplines to grow together if our concept of media literacy is to be relevant in our democracies. History is crucial here, as are the skills more conventionally associated with media education.

Why should we bother with all this? Because working through media literacy and democracy is a means to generate thought, creativity and responsible action. This is something about which much more needs to be said. But time today has run out. We need to act as educators before time runs out more generally...

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