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Media and Man – On Whose Terms? Aspects of Media Education

The purpose of this article is to briefly analyse the differences between the "mainstream" media education and the telelogically defined media education. The former tends to focus on analysing the messages of mass communication, while the latter is more interested in the educational applications of modern information and communication technologies, open and distance learning and virtual pedagogy. The article also argues that media education is going through a period of transformation as some of its foci are changing and some of its emphases are being restructured. A number of central principles of media education are described, with a view to an information-based communication society.

Keywords: Media education; modern information and communication technologies; information and communication society.

0. INTRODUCTION

In this article, a brief outline will be presented, starting from the "mainstream" definition of media education and advancing towards a more telelogically defined concept. The purpose of the article is not to try to cover the whole history of the concept in question; rather, to give some background to the new approach that embraces a differently balanced interpretation of media education.

1. "MAINSTREAM" MEDIA EDUCATION

In the traditional "mainstream" definition of media education (e.g., Machado 1996, 70), two major components are mass communication and pedagogy. Mass communication refers to mass media. Mass media refer to any channels of communication produced by a few

for consumption by many people, especially the press, television and radio. As the messages go through the channels, they are "mediatised", i.e., they mirror some of the features embedded in the media themselves. An item of news when seen on television is bound to differ from the same piece of news when read in a daily paper. Sometimes the messages get distorted through excessive mediation. When people receive mass media messages, they usually have no opportunity for immediate feedback with the producers of the messages (an electronic glossary of media terms).

In this interpretation, pedagogy is used to refer rather vaguely to education and to educational sciences. Media education in this framework had a major role to bring up citizens that had adequate media literacy, i.e., the skill and willingness to understand the messages of the mass media. What media education had as one of its major roles was to reduce uncritical attitudes to what was printed, heard or seen in the mass media. Media education was regarded as a normative domain of knowledge, whose task was to give guidelines and instructions of how to deal with the information the mass media provided to the general public.

In this traditional "mainstream" sense, **media education** was one of the terms, often the preferred one in Europe, referring to the same concept of a critical but understanding attitude towards the media. Some other terms used in the same context are **media literacy**, media studies, media knowledge, media in education, teaching **through media**, **teaching about media**. The general content of these concepts can be epitomised in media education having been "developed from systematic studies of mass media's significance for human development in relation to individual and contextual conditions" (Machado 1996, 186). Media literacy is generally defined as the ability to read, analyse, assess and produce communication in a variety of media forms (television, print, radio, computers, etc.) **Mass communication research** was, on the other hand, one of the key terms used when research issues were being talked about.

Considine (1995, 35) summarises the accepted North American definition of media literacy as an ability "to access, analyze, evaluate, and create information in a variety of media formats including print and nonprint". And he continues:

" the evolution of media literacy, or media education, as it is best known in Australia and Europe, shows a movement away from simple elements of aesthetics and appreciation to a much greater concern about ideology, power, social relations, and the way knowledge is constructed, carried, and conveyed by media representations. When media literacy asks, How do media operate?"

Whose interests do the media operate in? and How is meaning created by the media?, higher order thinking skills must be activated. In so doing, the pedagogical process, including the relationship between student and teacher, is altered." (Considine 1995, 35)

While analysing the progress of media education, Considine (1995, 32) criticises the fact that while schools continued to purchase video recorders, computers, and other visual technologies, "little was being done to address the way these technologies functioned as *surrogate teachers beyond the classroom*." Considine argues that these new technologies represent a new curriculum that requires new competences and a new definition of how and where learning takes place and he concludes that teachers and their students should "recognize and reconcile the mixed messages young people receive *when the curriculum of the living room contradicts or challenges* the curriculum of the classroom" (Considine 1995, 32).

One strong stream in traditional mass media used to be the so-called critical viewing skills curricula, which started to wane in the early 1980s in the States and more or less simultaneously in Europe. However, other "genres" (special kinds of media content) appeared, such as 'infotainment' (information + entertainment). Media education started to be linked in the public's mind with the recreational technology of television, which was not accepted by more serious-minded researchers. At the same time the teacher's role started to change. Masterman (1989) analyses this stage as follows:

"First of all, it pushed the whole question of aesthetic and moral values—the whole question of how good or bad a film or television program was—away from the centrally dominant position it had always held in media education. And, secondly, it severely undermined the hierarchical role of the teacher as the accredited expert and purveyor of approved knowledge within the classroom. The teacher was no longer the arbiter of taste, but a partner or co-investigator in what was now a much more open ended process." (Masterman 1989, 13)

The importance of media education, or media literacy, is underscored when we look at statements like: "At the heart of the media literacy movement is the fundamental realization that most Americans now get most of their information from television and the mass media, not textbooks." (Considine 1995, 41) or "America thinks it is a meritocracy, but in fact it has become a mediocracy ruled by those who know how to manipulate symbols, information, and the media" (Walcott 1992, 6). It must be underlined that in the 1980s, along with traditional media education focusing on TV and mass media, a new

brand of education was in its infancy, i.e., educational computing. However, as Tyner (1996) summarises it, the "back to the basics" movement in education subsequently nudged computer literacy to the sidelines and it took several years for educational computing to rise again to the centre stage (for a more thorough analysis, cf. Tella 1997).

The traditional view on media education was never very homogenous; rather, different foci dominated in different countries. There was also a growing tendency to find new approaches although originally most research owed a lot to the North-American tradition (e.g., Machado 1996, 71). In France, for instance, there has been a strong tendency to find new perspectives from semiotics and sociologically focused research. Vitalis (1994) summarises some of the tendencies as follows:

"L'importance accordée depuis le début des années 1980, aux notions d'usage et d'usager dans les études sur les médias et les nouveaux systèmes de communication, a permis de rompre avec une conception par trop étreinée d'un récepteur passif soumis aux manipulations et aux diktats de l'offre. Déjà, à propos de la propagande, Jacques Ellul avait attiré l'attention sur le rôle essentiel du propagandé pour expliquer la dynamique et l'ampleur du phénomène. A partir d'une personnalité propre, d'un groupe d'appartenance et d'une culture spécifique, le récepteur de messages se révèle être un individu capable de filtrer et de recomposer ce qui lui est donné à lire, à voir ou à entendre. Les procédures et les modalités de l'appropriation, du détournement, du piratage ou du rejet ont été très largement explorées aussi bien ce qui concerne les médias classiques que les nouvelles technologies comme la télématique." (Vitalis 1994, 7)

What Vitalis (1994) underlines is the fact that an individual has become more central and more active in analysing the meaning-carrying media and their messages. He also equals, to some extent at least, the classical media with modern technologies, like telematics. My interpretation is that he also points to the proactive role of consumers while facing modern technology.

Reilly (1996, 218) is probably right in arguing along the lines of Vygotsky that the tools we use shape both what we do and how we come to understand the world around us. This is a cautious way of putting what the common-sense "bullet theory" states more categorically, that media can touch people and change them directly. At any rate, it follows that technological developments should be mirrored in the research being conducted on the media themselves. In the area of media education, a distinct shift has taken place from traditional mass media towards modern information and communication technologies (MICT) as well as open and distance learning (ODL) tools and techniques. The World Wide Web (WWW) is a good example of a different kind of learning and working environment that should be seriously considered. Consequently, we argue that the traditional "mainstream" concept of media education is no longer enough; a different

approach should be implemented, focusing more specifically on MICT, ODL and all the telematic tools now accessible. The following chapter will analyse this kind of situation.

2. TELELOGICALLY DEFINED MEDIA EDUCATION

In the following, media education is defined from a telelogic point of view. The shift from "mainstream" mass media focused media education towards telelogically defined media education can be seen as a concrete example of *Metanoia* as defined by Senge (1990), as a shift of mind to indicate that a change is not uncalled for. The unprecedented rapidity of progress in technology has made this shift almost inevitable. Media in this definition refer to digitalised or digital media ("new media" in Viestintäalan koulutuksen kehittämistarpeet), such as provided by telematic tools and modern information and communication technologies. Video, TV, and radio are not neglected as such, but the main emphasis is, no doubt, on modern media which are more likely to enable telelogic communication in addition to computer-mediated human communication. In the following, a more thorough analysis will be made of the present situation.

According to this new definition, media education belongs to the systematic study of education, especially focusing on educational applications provided by modern information and communication technologies, the virtual school and the virtual university in an open multimedia-based learning environment. This environment is also characterised by such epithets as networked, cooperative, and virtual. The main task of this kind of media education is to look after changes occurring in learning environments from the point of view of the teaching/learning process. Besides this, its role is to conduct research on and develop teaching, working and studying practices as well as the salient characteristics of various media.

The "mainstream" media education placed emphasis on mass media and communication education. Telelogically emphasised media education directs the interest towards the analysis of the tools and strategies made possible or facilitated by modern information and communication technologies as well as towards pedagogical or educational applications of these tools and software. An important aspect of this concerns the user's interactional media relation to himself, to his neighbourhood (otherness) and to the media themselves and through their mediation towards the basic character of the message and communication as such.

Some of the main areas of interest in media education will then be virtual pedagogy, modern information and communication technologies (MICT), distance education or rather open and distance learning (ODL) through both educational research and through cross-scientific research and developmental work. Understanding ODL methodology, and mastering its tools and technologies, is part of the aims of media education. On the whole, the high importance and the pivotal position of ODL have been recognised at different levels of the Finnish educational system. It is also generally acknowledged that ODL is likely to fruitfully permeate various layers of secondary and university level education, at once underpinning and affecting the restructuring of schools. A number of other sciences could also be cited in this context, e.g. semiotics, art and design, which are of interest to media educators.

If this kind of definition is approved, then some of the central principles in media education would necessarily include

- life-long learning
- increasing the level of teachers' professional expertise
- extensive command of different telematic and electronic means of communications guiding the learning process
- integrating information retrieval skills with knowledge mastery skills together with social interaction and communication
- synergetic proficiency and knowledge of skills and media based on flexi-mode and distance education
- didactically meaningful and pragmatically relevant development of knowledge work grounded mainly on telematics and telematic applications
- systematic research and developmental work focused on media education and its subareas
- evaluation of media education and its achievements
- deeper comprehension of Finnish knowledge work and knowledge-based learning systems as components of the educational system.

A special strategy to develop media education would consist of research-based activities concentrating on the information society (information and communication society; interaction society; service-based society; comprehension society; postmodern or postindustrial society) in which the significance and relevance of media education is investigated through the three main research areas, i.e., basic research, comparative

research, and evaluative research. This strategic starting point is motivated by, among other things, the fact that at present most domains of knowledge and science have extensive recourse to information and communication technologies as an integral part of their research processes. In addition, there are official initiatives in Finland (e.g., Viestintäalan koulutuksen kehittämistarpeet 1997, 4) in order to develop media education by reinforcing integration between communication sectors and education sectors.

To sum up, the modern interpretation of media education arises from several scientific, pragmatic and theoretical backgrounds as presented in Figure 1. Pedagogy in this respect could be labelled 'virtual pedagogy' as its role is also to analyse the various virtual applications and "smart" products that technology has brought with it. In Figure 1, didactics (in the European sense) is substituted for education or educational sciences. In this context, didactics is taken as a science of teaching, looking deeply into various ways of developing teaching. Communication refers to mass communication but it is being replaced to a growing extent by small-group or focused-group communication, such as email, computer conferencing, mail lists, newsgroups, and desktop videoconferencing. It is true, on the other hand, that conventional mass media are progressing in the same direction by paying more attention to the feedback from their consumers and enhancing the interactive elements in their services, the distance between organisational communication and person-to-person or human-to-human communication is fading or at least diminishing. MICT and ODL are two major components in this telelogic interpretation but as they are being described in detail elsewhere (cf. Tella 1997), no further analysis will be made here.

Figure 1. A Present View on the Relations of Media Education between Theoretical and Practical Contexts.

One more component, whose role is relatively important, includes learning and cognitive psychology. This is the component that underlines the role of learning while didactics emphasises teaching. A well balanced interaction between the two is most beneficial to media education. Even if media education benefits from these domains of knowledge or areas of science, its own autonomous role is also gaining ground as its importance is being recognised by more and more areas of society, economy and science.

In short, media education is going through a period of transformation as some of its foci are changing and the emphases are being restructured. The complexities are well

illustrated if we take advantage of the WWW, one of the telematic tools, and look for media education on all available sites. One such search by Lycos found 50,731 relevant documents from a total of 60,434,860 indexed Web pages. In order to illustrate the multifaceted character of media education, we cite part of Kathleen Tyner's story of the Media Education Elephant:

"The Rajah spoke, 'The elephant is a big animal. Each man touched only one part. You must put all the parts together to find out what an elephant is like.'

Media educators in the United States are a fractious bunch. One teacher's definition of media education is another's heresy. Like the blind men and the elephant, teachers often practice one small aspect of media education and conclude that they have the whole picture. When the nature and quality of these media education efforts are scrutinized, they fall under one of several broad and overlapping categories: protectionism, technology education, media arts education, and democratic education. The barriers to media education in the United States are still formidable, but there are indications that educators working under these arbitrary categories are beginning to intellectually cross-pollinate in order to position media education as an important cornerstone for teaching students democratic citizenship skills in a complex, technological world." (Tyner 1996)

One can also recognise a noticeable conflict between the traditional view of media education and the teleologically defined media education. However, the latter is not purely concerned with computer technology as computer science is. Some of the conflicting elements can be seen in the following extract by Tyner (1996) in that it acknowledges the emergence of computers in teaching programmes, but at the same time it advertises something that leans on the classical interpretation:

"Technology programs in the U.S. are currently computer-centered, although video is an up-and-coming contender. They are highly profiled and valued in U.S. public schools. Educators who teach in them and who control their budgets automatically accrue higher status than their low-tech, penniless colleagues. When international visitors ask to observe media education in the United States, they are shown—with great pride—the latest in high-tech electronics. No wonder international media educators come away with the impression that the U.S. does not have the vaguest notion about the principles of media education! And no wonder U.S. technology education experts do not know what else international media literacy experts could possibly expect from them." (Tyner 1996)

Another fundamental distinction between traditional media education and the modern one is that the former leant heavily on trying to understand the messages of mass media, some of which had to be seen through various "gatekeepers", i.e., those in control of the flow of free information. Many would argue that typical gatekeepers include newspaper

publishers, TV programme producers, broadcasting executives, etc. Therefore the main target of traditional mass media was something that had to take this into account. As for the teleologically defined media education, the problem is different though not at all less serious. The free flow of information on the Internet, for instance, necessitates a different kind of caution on the part of the recipient of the messages or from the user surfing on the WWW. The responsibility of media educators is equally important albeit of a different genre. The "new" media education has also to encounter new kinds of problems connected to networking and hypertextual learning environments that offer new challenges to both teacher and student.

What distinguishes the kind of computer-centred media education Tyner advertises from the media education characterised earlier in this article, is the crucial element of pedagogy, didactics and, in general, the emphasis on educational applications. Besides, the important aspect of communication should also be taken as an asset in modern media education. Basically, media education opens new opportunities to teachers comfortable enough with a student-centred, open-ended learning environment.

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