1. When Media Education is State Policy

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ABSTRACT

One of the specific challenges faced by media education in Latin America is to narrow the divide and promote more equitable, fairer access to cultural and technological commodities among young people from the poorest families. Although the obstacles are more than a few and the challenges are by no means negligible, the first step toward facing them is to insert media education as a public policy, as State policy. Fortunately, we have always had teachers who have used the media and taught others to analyze, interpret and use them creatively. The idea, when media education becomes part of public policy, is to move beyond individual initiatives and turn these private efforts into a State commitment. This is the only way to overcome the huge obstacles and materialize the major challenges posed by media education in the 21st century.

KEY WORDS

Commitment, democracy, participation, public policy, multimedia generation, youth identity, school, folk culture, social inclusion.

1. A Commitment to Democracy

In 1982, during the Malvinas War between Argentina and the United Kingdom, the media in Buenos Aires, strictly controlled by the military government, fanned feelings of triumphant victory. «Argentineans, to victory» was the central motto in all television campaigns during the war. This motto replaced the previous «We Argentineans have rights and are humane» that had been emblazoned on screens since 1976 by initiative of the same dictatorship to neutralize rumours of the thousands of disappearances that began to spread abroad.

During the Malvinas War, the media campaign hinged upon three main themes: confidence in winning, rejection of all things English, and nationalistic sentiments. Throughout the conflict, TV broadcast only British casualties, while calling for leaving Shakespeare out of schools and the Beatles out of record shops. After 60 days of intensive battle, the same media announced that Argentina had lost the war.

Thousands of kilometres from the city of Buenos Aires, the British media were also covering the Malvinas War. In a matter of days, they had to persuade many people that it was worth giving their lives (or for others to give theirs) for the future of a few islands that they had only first heard of a few weeks before. Tremendous ideological work was required to mould public opinion and persuade them of the righteousness of the Government's cause (Masterman, 1993).

The experience of the Malvinas War, in both a democratic country and a dictatorship, confirms the need to develop critical understanding of the media that must unquestionably start in elementary school.

The media construct, expand and shrink the public domain. They influence the agenda of what society discusses. They add some topics and avoid or ignore others. However, even if a new issue can be put onto society's agenda, this does not mean that public space is expanded. Circulation of information can also contribute to de-politicizing the social and de-socializing the political (Landi, 1994).

Information for information's sake –in fact– is not enough. We value information that is inserted within political culture (in which the information has meaning) to inform participation and expansion of the public arena, without restrictions or privatizations. We are talking about media education that prepares people to avoid any curtailing of the public arena.

The possibility of participating is on the side of whoever can make use of media messages, because that person can analyze, interpret and evaluate them and because that person knows how to set strategies and make decisions on that basis. Media education must contribute to educating students' public awareness, so they learn to avoid any encroachment on their social participation and to use all possible channels to take part in decision-making on issues affecting their daily lives.

Teaching about the media during the Malvinas War (of course, unthinkable in Argentina's dictatorial context at the time) would have disclosed the scheming media manipulation that the entire society bewailed 60 days later.

Media education –especially in fledgling democracies such as in Latin America, but also in those with long-standing democratic traditions– is education for citizenship. And that is precisely why it would never have survived under an authoritarian regime. For that very reason, this education cannot be left out of a democratic society, either. Understanding how the media represent reality and tell us what is going on can put people in a better position to participate, act and make decisions.

Media education involves the world and its portrayals, the way the media construct meanings and legitimize discourses. Media education entices us to analyze the way that we as audiences re-signify them. Media education questions us constantly about the way we assign meaning to the world and the way the media assign meaning to it for us (Ferguson, 1994). Only by asking ourselves about the way the media produce meanings can we understand the way they influence our perceptions of reality and the way we can transform it.

In our commitment to democracy and expansion of the public arena, media education is justified, whether in wartime, under an authoritarian regime, or in any society's democratic life.

2. The Multimedia Generation

There is another reason underlying the need to implement media education worldwide: the new cultural and technological universe where children and young people live and the need for schooling to acknowledge responsibly this dynamic communicational environment.

Youth under 18 are the first generation who have been surrounded from birth by an extremely diversified media universe: radio (AM and FM), TV channels (broadcast and cable), video games, DVD, MP3, cell phones, I-Pods, Internet...

Any distinction between new and traditional media is meaningless for today's young people. It is the adults who notice these technological changes, the new lessons to be learned and the new social uses for the media they must undertake.

By contrast, young people have learned to use a TV remote control, a CD player and a PC all at once. Their talk with friends shifts smoothly from music on an FM station, to a TV series and a new software download from Internet (Morduchowicz, 2008).

In fact, in Latin America and worldwide, there are still major media divides between young people from poor backgrounds and from the middle-class. Teens from poorer families have much more restricted access to cultural and technological commodities than their wealthier peers. Anyway, cultural consumption is an essential part of youth identity for them all. The media and information technologies have become a place for today's youth –sometimes the only place– that speaks about them and to them.

Youth used to become emancipated by work, study and marriage. Now many prefer to break free through connectivity and consumption. These new ways to

leave home dovetail with the old ways, beckoning, from adolescence (age 12 and up), toward a horizon far from their parents (García-Canclini, 2006).

Today's children and teenagers, watching television, listening to music on their Walkman, and radio over Internet, play a video game, surf around cyber-space, and chat for hours with their friends, soaring through a dynamic universe of fragmentation, a mosaic world of unceasing stimuli, immediate and simultaneous (Ferrés, 2000).

Adolescents belong to a generation also called the «Multimedia Generation», not only because of the assortment of media at their disposal, but because they use them all at once (Morduchowicz, 2008).

While watching television, teens listen to music, surf the Web, talk on the telephone and do their homework. They do not concentrate on a single medium. A 2006 survey among Argentine youth, ages 11 to 17, by the Ministry of Education, showed only 20% of them using media one at a time. Time is shared among the media, never just with one –a feature defining this generation.

With Gütenberg, in the 15th century, we say that society moved from oral to written culture. In the 20th century, we took the giant step from the culture of words to images. Now, in the 21st century, we have taken the next step, from linear reading to simultaneous perception.

Today's adolescents live a different cultural experience from their elders, with new ways of perceiving, feeling, listening and seeing. These dimensions must not be skipped over in media education.

3. The Role of Schooling

Faced with this new cultural reality, there is no point in becoming alarmed or reacting defensively. What society and especially school must do is analyze the way to get closer to youth culture (or not).

If we agree that young people also build their cultural capital outside the classroom, and even in relatively autonomous settings, school can no longer be viewed as the only legitimate place to convey pre-established symbolic baggage (García-Canclini, 2006).

School, however, does not always seem to be catching on. So the result is that school culture remains out of touch with youth culture. Youth go around in a universe governed by different parameters from those legitimized by school culture.

From its beginnings, school –born with the printing press– has always been most closely linked to print culture. Schools have lived in a world ruled by the logic of books, linearity and sequential order.

School –since then and to this day– continues along the pathway of writing, words and textbooks. And schools have often ignored the cultures that have begun emerging and coexisting with them outside the classroom, movies; television and

new technologies. This traditional concept of schools has widened the divide between the culture from which students learn and the culture from which teachers give class. In general terms, schools as institutions are standing aside as socio-cultural processes configure youth identities and schools continue thinking about «youth» as the ideal young person portrayed in textbooks, who must progress step by step and learn certain behaviours (Martín Barbero, 2002).

School dodges its confrontation with the audiovisual culture by reducing it to its moral effects, resorting to a discourse that laments the way some media –especially television and video games– soak up children's free time, manipulate their naivety and idealism, shoot them full of superficiality and complacency, and make them reluctant to undertake any serious task. Obsessed with the evil power of the media, educators ultimately lose sight of the complexity of young people's world (Martín Barbero, 2003).

If youth identities are defined not only by the books they read but by the TV programmes they watch, the multimedia texts they surf, the songs they stream, the movies they choose and the comics they prefer, then schools must approach these consumer commodities, and acknowledge that adolescents use different languages and write in different ways.

Popular culture is one of the few spaces that youth see as belonging to them, feeling that it speaks to them and about them. Pop culture helps them understand who they are, how the society they live in works, and how they are defined socially.

The challenge for today's schools is to recognize that knowledge is spread and circulates in new ways. Two changes have been keys to this process: «de-centering» and «de-timing» (Martín-Barbero, 2003):

• De-centering means that knowledge is no longer the exclusive domain of books and schools, but is also beginning to circulate through other spheres, such as the media.

• De-timing means that knowledge has also slipped free of the timeframes socially legitimized for distributing and acquiring knowledge. Time for learning has until now been circumscribed within an age range. Now, although school-age has not gone away, its existence is shifting. What we learn at school must fit in with learning that does not come from a given place, learning freed of the boundaries marked by age, becoming ongoing. This learning transcends the schoolroom, lives at all times and spreads lifelong.

The great challenge for today's educational system is to train children and youth to access and use the multiple ways of writing and thinking that lead to the decisions affecting them at work, at home, in politics and economics.

Living in a multicultural society not only means different ethnic groups and traditions, but the coexistence of different languages, oral, textual, audiovisual and hypertextual culture (Martín-Barbero, 2002). School must become the center where these cultures flow together, to know, analyze, explore and use them creatively.

4. Why Incorporate Media Education?

There are more than a few reasons to integrate this teaching into schooling. The following ones may be the most important reasons:

• There is a great flood of information that children receive outside school, much of it from the media. Schools should be where all this information flows together, albeit often contradictory and confusing at times for students.

• The media and technologies grant access to contexts and realities that we would otherwise miss out on. The media, and more recently Internet, propose new concepts of time and space, which schools must teach kids to understand.

• The media and technologies construct a picture of the world on the basis of which each of us builds our own. It is important for schools to teach students to critically analyze the way media represent reality, so students are better prepared to build their own images, representations and opinions.

• For many children and young people, pop culture gives them meaning to construct their identity. They learn to talk about themselves in relation to others. If school is to get closer to them, to narrow the gap between school and youth culture, it must integrate pop culture, which wields such weight in constructing their identity.

• In Latin American societies, access to the media and technologies is quite uneven and the digital divide is very deep. Schools can (and must) achieve a better distribution of information and knowledge, above all, among those with the least access to them.

• Information for information's sake is not enough. Only schools can turn information into knowledge. Teaching to read, interpret, analyze, evaluate messages broadcast by the media is a task that, for many students, only the educational system can handle.

• We live in a multicultural society, because we live alongside various languages and cultures. Young people must learn to read a hard-copy text (books, newspapers, magazines) but also to make use of the multiple languages circulating socially: visual, audiovisual and hypertext language.

• Media education, finally, reinforces students' social and civic education. Teaching them how to read (in the broadest sense of «reading») the media and technologies in school, and reflecting critically will help educate well-informed students, sensitive to social issues, critical of the information and messages they receive, self-reliant in the decisions they make in a participatory manner.

5. State Policy, With Multiple Stakeholders

With these principles and foundational tenets, the Argentine Ministry of Education has decided to insert this area as public policy and create the «School and Media» Programme. This Programme was initially created in the Ministry of Education for the City of Buenos Aires (which has its own jurisdiction) in 1984. The decision was taken precisely because democracy had been regained in 1983 and children, who had lived their whole lives under a rigid military dictatorship, had to be taught the meaning of freedom of speech, the free press and the right to information.

In 2000, the «School and Media» Programme –solidly inserted into schools in Buenos Aires– was launched nationwide. Almost twenty years since the return of democracy, we could set specific goals, without forgetting, of course, that strengthening democracy would always remain the framework for all our initiatives. The following

goals were proposed for the «School and Media» Programme by the Argentine Ministry of Education:

- Promote media education nationwide, in all the country's primary and secondary schools.

- Strengthen students' cultural capital, especially those from the economically least-privileged households.

- Improve the way children and youth are portrayed in the media.

- Make students visible in different ways, helping them make their voices heard.

- Sensitize parents to the topic and offer them tools to orient children in their relationship with the media.

To meet these goals, the Programme is coordinated nationally and in each of the country's 24 provinces. The structure of «School and Media» has another two fundamental stakeholders.

The first stakeholder is made of the media associations, the groups gathering television stations, newspapers, movie theatres and magazines nationwide. We are convinced that it will be hard to promote media education without the media. It will be impossible to transform the way youth are portrayed in the media without the media. It will be difficult to give youth a new image without the media. Precisely for this reason, Argentina's Ministry of Education is working jointly and systematically with all media associations to launch its different initiatives and actions for schools and the community at large.

The second important stakeholder in this Programme is private companies. Some of the companies accompanying the different initiatives belong to the world of the media and communications (Telecom, Microsoft). Others are in unrelated areas (Coca Cola, Adidas, etc.). However, they all share a single characteristic: they advertise in the media and therefore are interested not only in improving the quality of contents, but in promoting critical watchers and readers among the new generations.

There were two reasons to incorporate companies in this Programme. First, most of the proposals and actions promoted require a special, often high budget. Involving companies makes it possible to produce TV programmes, short movies, radio shows, and workbooks for parents and magazines for students –and all that at no cost to the government and no charge to the community. However, the budget is not the only reason for this decision.

Incorporating private companies into this Programme follows the need to include and commit these companies to media education. Most of these companies –as previously mentioned– advertise on the television, radio, magazines, movies and newspapers. They create advertising campaigns to promote their products, often targeting children and adolescents. So, involving companies in a joint project with the national Ministry of Education and maintaining an ongoing dialogue about how young people are portrayed in the media is important in its own right, making them stakeholders in pursuing these projects. The companies themselves are ready to sponsor these proposals, which also entail significant media visibility.

One last observation about the way the Ministry of Education contacts and commits the media asssociations and private companies. Contact is made by the «School and Media» Programme that looks first for the media associations most likely to be natural «partners» for these actions. We are sure that media education must engage the media themselves in systematic debates about these issues.

Once the associations are in, the «School and Media» Director contacts each company, one by one, to invite them to take part in some of the different initiatives being promoted. As of 2008, over 15 top companies (national and multinational) have sponsored the media projects. Finally, it is important to emphasize that no company or media association intervenes in the goals, contents or design of the initiatives, which are exclusively prepared under Ministry of Education responsibility.

6. The Initiatives: From Sensitization to Action

The proposals promoted by the «School and Media» Programme can be grouped by the goals they pursue:

- Teacher training actions: courses, on-site workshops and training materials production (hard-copy and on-line).

- Special initiatives for schools: events, contests and festivals promoting analysis and use of the media.

- Actions especially for students: proposals geared toward students and involving them.

- Projects to sensitize the community: actions for families to help them understand the relationship between children and media.

- «School, camera… action» Festival. Every year, since 2000, secondary-school students (ages 13 to 15) are invited to write a story about a topic. A panel of well-known script-writers and movie producers selects three stories to produce as short films. A prestigious Argentine movie director shoots the short films, and the adolescents take part in the production. The three short films are shown for three weeks in every movie theatre in Argentina, before the regular movie. This way, thousands of movie-goers can see short films conceived and written by public-school students. This enables the youngsters to tell their own stories, with their own voice and their own opinions. The Festival is sponsored by the Argentine Association of Cinema and the Federation of Motion Picture Producers. Private companies finance the film production.

- «Journalists for a day» Contest. Every year –since 1997 in Buenos Aires and since 2000 nationwide– students about to finish high-school (ages 16 and 17) write up a journalistic investigative article on a topic of their choice. Editors of newspapers from all over the country select the articles they want to publish. One Sunday in November, every newspaper in Argentina devotes one or two pages to the students' investigations. They are printed just as they wrote them, with the same sources, unchanged. This way, millions of newspaper readers all over the country get to read investigative articles conceived and written by public-school students. This is another way to give youth a different kind of visibility and, above all, to challenge the portrayals of youth that newspapers normally bandy about. It is one thing for adults to write

about teen pregnancy, but quite another when the youth themselves write it. «Journalists for a day» is sponsored by the Newspaper Association.

• «First High School Magazine». Since 2008, «School and Media» has published «RE», using a prefix that many teenagers use here to stress an idea: re cool, re good, etc. It is also the first syllable of «REvista REsumen» (Summary Magazine), which is the essential idea: a media summary. This is the first magazine, distributed at no charge, for high-school students nearing graduation. The monthly magazine gathers news, articles and interviews that have come out in Argentine newspapers and magazines during the preceding month. Sponsored by the Associations of Magazines and Newspapers, each article is reproduced verbatim, citing the source, author and Website that first published it. This not only promotes reading, but teenagers nationwide discover newspapers and magazines they had been unaware of before. The monthly, 24-page color magazine is sponsored by different private companies so copies can circulate free of charge among over 40,000 students.

• «TV in the Family». This is a workbook for parents, so they can orient their children's TV watching. The workbook has twenty questions expressing adults' common concerns about the relationship between children and television. The answers also include advice and recommendations. This workbook –published once in 2006 and again («TV in the Family 2») in 2007– is distributed as a Sunday supplement at no extra cost with the largest-circulating newspaper in Buenos Aires. The workbook has been promoted by a public-service campaign on TV, with the slogan: «You can choose what your children watch. You can choose to watch TV with them». The workbook is sponsored by the newspaper, which includes the supplement free of charge. A number of private companies share in funding it.

• «Internet in the Family». This is a workbook for parents, so they can orient their children's Web surfing. The workbook gathers advice and recommendations for safe, protected use of Internet. The workbook came out once in 2008, circulating free of charge one Sunday with the newspapers in Buenos Aires. This workbook was backed by a public-service campaign on TV, with the slogan «When kids surf the Web, you are the best one to guide their course». The workbook is sponsored by the newspaper, which includes the supplement free of charge. A number of private companies share in funding it.

• «Cinema Week for High-school Students». This initiative strives to narrow the major cultural gaps affecting young people from poor background, most of whom can't afford to go to the movies. Exclusion from culture is just another manifestation of the cultural exclusion affecting lower-income adolescents. Therefore, sponsored by the Chamber of Movie Theatres of Argentina, we have launched «Cinema Week for High-School Students», so those from poor families attending public high schools can go to the movies for one week free of charge. The theatres are open, free of charge, for the adolescents. A selection of movies especially chosen by the «School and Media» Programme, with input from movie-makers, enables over 30 thousand youth to discover the big screen through films they would not usually see (Argentine, Latin American, European and North American). This initiative is sponsored by the

movie theatres . A private enterprise then brings out over 10 thousand programmes with the contents of the movies to be seen and activities for class, for use in schools.

7. Research: The Cultural Identity of Adolescents

Research has been an important aspect of the State media education Programme. For instance, the Programme conducted the first National Survey of Cultural Consumption by Adolescents. The idea was to get an overview of youth media and technology consumption, use, practices, values and meanings. This research has been fundamental to inform new action development and new priority-setting in public policy. The study was prepared by the School and Media Programme. The questionnaire design drew from a similar survey conducted in the United Kingdom and France by Sonia Livingstone and Dominique Pasquier, respectively. The School and Media Programme worked closely with the two researchers to assemble the questionnaire and prepare conclusions. A summary of the research is available on the Programme's Website: www.me.gov.ar/escuelaymedios.

This research has been fundamental to inform public policy design in this field. For example, one of the study's most striking findings was that 4 out of 10 adolescents had not gone to the movie theatre even once the preceding year (2005-06), mostly for economic reasons. So, the «School and Media» Programme took action the following year, with «Cinema Week for High-School Students». This was geared to address a cultural deficit affecting large strata of Argentina's population as clearly revealed by the research.

Similarly, low rates of reading among Argentine adolescents, found by this study, gave rise to the free magazine for high-school readers, «RE», Research has been the key to designing new initiatives by the Ministry of Education.

8. The Obstacles, the Challenges

Again, schooling began with Gütenberg and has therefore always been closer to print culture than to images. Pictures and visual culture have generally been under-estimated.

So, it comes as no surprise that one of the main obstacles to systematic insertion of media education may be to break through many teachers' negative associations with screens. The challenge stands, to narrow the gap still separating youth culture from school culture, by incorporating other languages, other ways of writing, other texts.

However, this is certainly not the only problem. As a public policy, media education must be built into initial teacher training, so that, when teachers start in their classrooms, they get there with some degree of preparation. Basic training of teachers in media education remains pending practically worldwide.

Latin America also has yet another serious difficulty: Latin America's societies are highly fragmented, unequal and inequitable. Access to cultural commodities is

very uneven. While a minority has access to all sources, media and technologies, most have access only to open broadcast TV, radio and perhaps the newspaper. They don't have a DVD player, they don't go to the movies, they never saw a play and have no home Internet connection. The divides in Latin America are not only digital, but cultural, and also involve the traditional media.

These gaps are not negligible, because they hinder young people's construction of cultural capital. Exclusion from cinema reinforces social exclusion, shrinking adolescents' cultural capital and thereby contracting their educational, workplace and societal insertion opportunities (Morduchowicz, 2004).

One of the specific challenges faced by media education in Latin America is to narrow these gaps and promote more equitable, fairer access to cultural and technological commodities among youth from the poorest families.

Although the obstacles are more than a few and the challenges are by no means negligible, the first step toward facing them is to insert media education as a public policy, as State policy. Fortunately, we have always had teachers who have used the media and taught others to analyze, interpret and use them creatively. The idea, when media education becomes part of public policy, is to move beyond individual initiative and turn these private efforts into a State commitment.

This is the only way to overcome the huge obstacles and materialize the major challenges posed by media education in the 21st century.

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