MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE: Re-Imagining the American Dream

Elizabeth Thoman

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When I first received the invitation to be here today, I wondered why science teachers would be interested in media literacy. But as I've studied your materials, I have learned that we have a lot in common. Indeed there is much to share and to learn from one another. In order to establish some common ground, let me mention some shared goals I think we can start with.

First, I believe that all of us here today agree that the purpose of education is to empower students to navigate in a world that is evolving almost faster than they are growing up. They do not need more facts about science or about media but rather they need critical thinking skills based on an ethical values base that promotes wholeness -- for themselves and for their society.

A second common thread is that both of our movements agree that the societal issues our students will face as adults are complex and interrelated. There are no easy answers to the problem of toxic wastes or the disappearance of the rainforest. So too with the media. When it comes to values in the media, what is important is not knowing all the answers, but raising the right questions.

Thirdly, both of our organizations focus on the impact of technology, which I describe as the power of humankind to tap the forces of nature to serve human ends. While I do believe it is significant to grapple with technological issues like gene-splicing or nuclear power, I challenge you not to overlook the one area of technology that touches kids and all of us most directly everyday: the technology behind consumer electronics. From Nintendo to big-screen TV, from boom boxes to VCRs, kids know, love and use consumer electronics. And the confusion between what is real life and what is mediated reality is getting more and more fuzzy all the time.

How we can work together to address some of these issues is our task today. But before we can do that we need to review how consumer technology evolved over the years, creating what I call the “image culture.”

Like most middle-class children growing up in the 1950’s, I grew up looking up for the American Dream.

In those very early days of TV -- if you can believe! -- there were no cartoons. There was the Mickey Mouse Club, and Howdy-Doody of course. And Kukla, Fran and Ollie. But one program I also distinctly remember watching on Saturday afternoons -- with some awe, I might add -- was Industry on Parade. I felt so proud week after week to see tail-finned cars rolling off assembly lines, massive dams taming mighty rivers and sleek chrome appliances that would make life more convenient for all of us.

I also remember hearing the mellifluous voice of Ronald Reagan announce on GE Theatre: “Progress is our most important product.” Of course, only now do I realize that the big box with the little screen in our living room was not just entertaining me. At a deeper level, it was stimulating an “image” in my head of how the world should work. Without knowing it I learned three things by the time I was 12:

1. that anything new was better than something old;
2. that science and technology were the greatest of all human achievements, and
3. that in the near future — and certainly by the time I grew up — the wonderful power of technology would make it possible for everyone to live and work in a world free of war, poverty, drudgery or ignorance.
I believed it because I could see it -- right there on television.

The idea of “progress.”

The American Dream, however, was around long before television. Some believe the idea of “progress” goes back before the Greeks when humankind first conceived of time as linear rather than cyclical. Certainly the Jewish-Christian heritage of a Messiah leading us to a Promised Land inspired millions to strive for a better world for generations to follow.

Indeed, it was the search for the “City on the Hill” that brought the Puritans to the colonies and two centuries later sent covered wagons across the prairies. In 1835, Alexis deTocqueville observed that Americans “never stop thinking of the good things they have not got,” creating a “restlessness in the midst of prosperity” that drives them ever onward.

Even the Constitution, remember, only promises the pursuit of happiness. It doesn’t guarantee that any of us will actually achieve it!

I believe that it is this eternal search for something more-than-what-we’ve-got-now that is at the heart of the consumer culture we struggle with today. It may also be the key to an issue I share with all of you -- humankind’s ambivalence about the use of technology. For so many people technology (and that certainly includes television today) is like the old commercial for Listerine: “I hate it but I love it.”

I start with this childhood reflection because over the past few years I’ve been doing some work on what I call the “image culture” and how its pervasiveness today challenges the traditional formative institutions of family, school, religion and public life. While I recognize your agenda may not (at least yet!) specifically include mass media technology, I’d like to trace in more detail how this image culture came to be and then share, through a couple of video presentations what we’re learning to do about it.

Creating Images

Although many would start with Guttenburg and the global paradigm shift from an oral to a print culture, I want to begin with the invention of the camera in the mid-nineteenth century. As early as 1859 Oliver Wendell Holmes described photography as the most remarkable achievement of his time because it allowed human beings to separate an experience or a texture or an emotion or a likeness from a particular time and place — and still remain real, visible and permanent. He described it as a “conquest over matter” and predicted that it would alter the physics of perception, that it would change forever the way people would see and understand the world around them. He wrote that the “image would become more important than the object itself and would in fact make the object disposable.”

In his wonderful book, All Consuming Images, contemporary advertising critic Stuart Ewen describes today’s photography as “skinning” the world of its visible images and then marketing those images inexpensively to the public.

But photography (later the phonograph and then the motion picture camera) was only one of many 19th century transformations that paved the way to our present image culture.

As the wheels of industrialization began to mass produce more and more consumer goods, they also increased the leisure time available to use the goods and the disposable income required to buy them. Soon the well-being of the economy itself became co-dependent on an ever-expanding cornucopia of products, goods and services. The Sears-Roebuck catalog and the department store emerged to showcase America’s new abundance and by the turn of the century, as media critic Todd Gitlin notes, “production, packaging, marketing, advertising and sales became functionally inseparable.”

Advertising also served as a “consumer classroom” for the waves of immigrants that came to America as well as for the thousands of rural folk drawn to the city by visions of wealth. Advertising was seen as a way of educating the masses to the cycle of the marketplace and to the imperatives of factory work and mechanized labor. The Boston department store magnate, Edward A. Filene even stated that advertising would show the unruly classes “how to behave like human beings in the machine age.” It made perfect sense, actually. In a work world where skill meant less and less, what took on greater importance? -- obedience and appearance. Think about it -- in a city full of strangers, advertising offered instructions on how to dress, how to behave, how to appear to others in order not to be rejected.

Granted that the American “standard of living” brought an end to drudgery (for some), but it also demanded a price: consumerism. Divorced from craft, work simply became the means to acquire the money to buy the goods and the lifestyle that would bring (hopefully) social acceptance, respect, even prestige. “Ads spoke less and less about the quality of the products being sold,” notes Stuart Ewen, “and more about the lives of the people being addressed.”

In 1934, when the Federal Communications Commission approved advertising as the economic basis of the country’s fledgling radio broadcasting system, the die was cast. Even though early
broadcasters pledged to provide free time for educational programs, for coverage of religion and for news (creating the famous phrase: the "public interest, convenience and necessity"), it wasn't long before the industry realized that time was money -- and every minute counted. Since free enterprise dictates that it is better to make money than to lose it, the American commercial broadcasting system was born.

But was not until the 1950s that the image culture came into full flower. The reason? Television.

Television was invented in the 1930s, but for many years no one thought it had any practical use. Everyone had a radio, even two or three, which brought news and sports and great entertainment right into your living room. Plus if you tired of the antics of Fibber McGee and Molly or the adventures of Sargent Preston of the Yukon, you could always go to the movies, which most people did at least once a week.

So who needed television? No one, really. What needed television, in 1950, was the economy. The post-war economy needed television to deliver first to America -- and then to the rest of the world -- the vision, the image, of life in a consumer society. We didn't object because we thought it was well, just "progress."

What price progress?

As we learned to sell, so did we learn to buy. As our own best customers, the magic box sold us the images of a consumer culture. We learned to measure the value and values of our lives against the sensuous images of "the good life" as they flickered across the screen.

Perhaps some of you saw a feature film a few years ago, titled Avalon. It follows the story of a Baltimore family from the day the grandfather immigrated to America in 1914 through contemporary times. It is a poignant portrait of how, for so many families, the American Dream got coopted by the consumer society.

A most telling scene takes place in the late 1940s. The war is over and the two brothers have invested their life savings to start an appliance store. One day, they bring home the family's first TV set. Three generations of the Krichinsky squeeze together in front of their new television and stare vacantly at a black and white test pattern. "Just wait," one of the children says, "something will happen."

Kalle Lasn, a co-founder of Adbusters magazine in Canada, explains what did happen, and continues to happen even today each time we turn on our sets:

"In the privacy of our living rooms we made a devil's bargain with the advertising industry: Give us an endless flow of free programs and we'll let you spend 12 minutes of every hour promoting consumption. For a long time, it seemed to work. The ads grated on our nerves but it was a small price to pay for 'free' television."

"What we didn't realize when we made our pact with the advertisers was that their agenda would eventually become the heart and soul of television. We have allowed the most powerful communications tool ever invented to become the command center of a consumer society defining our lives and culture the way family, community and spiritual values once did."

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Now this does not mean that when we see a new toilet paper commercial we're destined to rush down to the store to get its wonderful, new or improved brand. What happens is that commercials have a cumulative effect.

As adman Stephen Garey noted in a recent issue of Media&Values, when an ad for toilet paper is combined with other TV commercials, magazine ads, radio spots and billboards for detergents and designer jeans, new cars and cigarettes and soft drinks and cereals and computers, the collective effect is that it teaches us simply to buy. And to feel somehow dissatisfied and inadequate unless we have the newest, the latest, the best.

Just like our relatives at the turn of the century, we learn quickly to yearn for "what we have not got" and to take our identity from what we own or what we can purchase rather than from who we are or how we interact with others. Through consuming things, through buying more and more, we continue the quest for meaning which earlier generations sought in other ways -- conquering the oceans, settling the land, building the modern society, even searching for transcendence through religious belief and action.

With few places on earth left to conquer today, the one endless expanse of exploration open to us is the local shopping mall.

Thus the modern dilemma: while few of us would turn in our automatic washing machines for a scrub board or exchange our computers for a sliderule, neither can we expect the images of the past to provide the vision for the future. We must recognize the trade-offs we have made and take responsibility for the society we have created.
As we all recognize more and more each day and as Charles Abaté wrote so eloquently in "The Technological Time Bomb" in a recent issue of your Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society, the myth of "progress" is stuttering to a stop.

While not denying the contributions of capitalism in creating the economic climate needed for centuries of human growth, economically we simply can no longer sustain unlimited exploitation in the name of "progress." Environmental concerns urge us to cease our wasteful consumption. Technological disasters like Chernobyl and the Challenger raise hard questions about the long term social impact of technological innovation. The loss of whole communities to the ravages of drugs, crime and homelessness threatens the very principles which allow any humane society to flourish.

Even democracy is in danger. Social critics point out that for our foremothers and fathers in the early days of the United States, "democracy" meant the free, open and vigorous discussion of ideas and public policies. Today in the consumer age, the idea of democracy has been reduced to the freedom to choose among a plethora of available commodities. And despite promises last year that things would be different, the winning political candidates were still "packaged" for sale to the highest number of voters through sound bites and political advertising.

Clearly there is an increasing gap between the flickering images of the media and the reality of our day-to-day lives. Reality has fallen out from under the image but still the image culture continues. What can we do?

Birth of a movement

Well, until recently, few of us questioned the increasing dominance of mass media in our lives. Those who did were inclined to focus on what I call "content issues" like the amount of sex and violence in programs. Others simply urged families to turn the TV off. But the fact is, though you can turn off the set, unless you move to a mountaintop, you cannot escape today's media culture. Media no longer just influence our culture. They are our culture.

Media's pivotal role in our global culture is why media censorship of TV or music lyrics or Hollywood movies will never work. What's needed, instead, is a major rethinking of media's role in all of our lives—a rethinking that recognizes this shift from a print culture to an image culture that has been evolving for the past 150 years.

For 500 years, we have valued the ability to read print in order to participate fully as informed citizens and educated adults in society. Today the family, the school, and all community institutions, especially the Church, share the responsibility of preparing young people for living in a world of powerful images, words and sounds. Educational methods must be evolved and practical resources for parents, teachers and families must be created and made accessible at the local level. A new vision of education in a mass media world is needed.

I call it "media literacy."

What is media literacy? Just what it sounds like -- the ability to interpret the symbols and meanings of the hundreds, even thousands of messages we get everyday through television, radio, newspapers and magazine, even advertising. It's the ability to choose and select, the ability to challenge and question, the ability be conscious about what's going on around you and not just be passive couch potatoes.

In today's culture, the crisis of the human spirit is the crisis of knowing what things to pay attention to. What we pay attention to and how we attend to them is ultimately what shapes our hearts.

In summary, the images of our culture create the myths in our heads which shape the values we use to make choices day in and day out.

In the Gospels, Jesus challenged his followers to sort out the wheat from the chaff. Today he might ask us to learn how to critically watch television as children are learning to do in Canada, England, Australia and many other countries where educators take television, media and popular culture seriously and have accepted the challenge to instill the principles of media literacy into all aspects of values and character formation.

In the U.S., however, which exports much of the world's media from "Rambo" movies to music videos, there has been very little media education activity inside or outside American schools. There is no national policy on media literacy and what little has taken place has been developed piecemeal by local coalitions or individual teachers. The U.S. needs leadership on the national level to catch up with the rest of the world in this increasingly important educational arena. And that is just the purpose of our Center for Media and Values:

- to develop a new way of thinking about the influence and impact of technology and media in our time.
- to create new curriculum resources for educating adults and young people to become more knowledgeable and selective media users.
• to build a network of dedicated and effective teachers and leaders;
• to articulate a vision and a practical program for media literacy in the 1990's.

The goal of media literacy education, whether for young people or senior citizens, is not to stop the flow of media in our lives. That’s impossible!

We cannot change the FACT that people watch TV but we can change the WAY they watch it.

We can do that by using good group process methods which empower individuals of any and all ages to make choices based on conscious values and critical evaluation. At the Center we have adapted Paolo Friere's 4-step pedagogy with which many of you will be familiar. Beginning with each person's personal experience of watching, reading or listening, the process moves from Awareness to critical Analysis to ethical or theological Reflection and on to personal or community Action. With guided practice, adults, youth and even young children can learn skills to decode the mass media's messages, to weigh their meaning and to make media choices based on religious or ethical values.

Key Concepts of Media Literacy

Building on work done in England and more recently in Canada, we've also developed what we call the Four Principles of Media Literacy which provide the framework around which to organize learning programs in media literacy.

The basic principle underlying media literacy education is that viewers, readers and listeners negotiate the meaning of any “text” depending on their age, sex, ethnic background or personal history. In other words, no two people see the same TV show or hear the same rap record. Indeed, we each create the meaning of a media experience as we experience it.

This two-way relationship turns the tables on the common assumption that media are merely mindless entertainment. We all participate actively in the media “wrestling match.” But for those not trained in media literacy the contest is unconscious and therefore unequal.

With skilled practice, students can filter and change what the media present by questioning, challenging and contradicting -- or supporting and reinforcing -- what they see and hear. The key words are active engagement and critical reflection.

In addition, the field has also identified four principles of media literacy that make up a framework for any media literacy course of studies. Although a dissertation could be written about each one, let me review them briefly.

I. Media Construct Reality.

Another way of saying it is that all media are constructions, whether we're talking about the nightly news or a billboard on the street. In the process some words are written or spoken and other words are edited out; some footage gets into a new movie, 10 times as much gets left on the “cutting room floor.”

But this is more than a physical process. What happens is that whatever is created then becomes a version of reality for the rest of us. We don't see or hear what was rejected. We only see, hear or read what was accepted.

Helping people understand how media is put together and how the media shape what we know and understand about the world we live in is an important way of helping them navigate their lives in a “global and technological society.”

II. Media Use Identifiable Techniques:

One way to see how media makers construct reality is to take apart the world they create by identifying the camera angles, music, special effects and splashy layouts that heighten our response and grab our attention.

There are some obvious techniques: lighting to highlight a certain part of the scene; zooming in to add impact; scary music for horror films. Each medium, whether electronic or print, has its own production codes but these codes often slip by without our noticing them, even when we know they are there.

By tuning in to these techniques, we can “deconstruct” media; that is, take apart the reality constructed for us, so that we begin to see the hows and whys of media. In the process, we enhance appreciation for clever techniques and become less susceptible to their manipulative use.

III. Media Are Businesses with Commercial Interests

In 1991, corporations spent $130 billion dollars in advertising. That’s the equivalent of $6/per week for every man, woman and child in the U.S. There are two major implications to this in terms of media literacy.

One is how we deal with the commercials themselves, especially for young people who became
the hottest “target market” for advertisers when companies realized that kids under 4-12 control over $8 billion of their own money. Media Literacy provides a grounding to help students gain a better perspective on what's really important and how to make decisions about the thousands of commercial messages directed at them each day.

The second implication of the commercial nature of mass media is deeper. You've heard the phrase “This program is brought to you by XYZ sponsor.” Well that's not true. What's really happening is you are brought to the sponsor by the program.

The heart of commercialism of mass media is not to get us to buy a new model car or even to try a specific kind of breakfast cereal. The heart of the commercialism is the selling of time (or space) to advertisers. We might call it the “renting of eyeballs.” The programs on television are not there just to entertain us. They are there to insure that a certain number of viewers will be present when the commercial comes on. Companies buy time based on the number of people they expect to be watching.

But it can't just be anybody. Companies want only certain kinds of people who have the both the income and ability to spend that income on their kind of product. Program content is designed to make sure the right people are watching when the commercials appear.

IV. Media Contain Ideologies/Value Messages

There is no such thing as value-free media. All media — TV, movies, news, sports, game shows, videogames, even supposedly “objective” newspapers — contain points of view.

How do we learn to recognize what that point of view is? How do we learn to see it, to break it down and separate out the dramatic elements of, say, a typical romantic plot: girl meets boy, they quarrel, they get back together again.

How do we learn to separate the legitimate pleasure of being entertained from the subtle sexism that can be communicated if the female acts weak and defenseless? If the male is portrayed as strong and aggressive? If their interaction reinforces the patriarchal point of view that males are more important than anybody else and women are unstable?

We must get beyond the illusion that media somehow ought to be “value free.” It cannot and never will be. Our job as educators is to teach critical thinking and critical reading of all media so that people, young and old, can recognize what values are embedded — and accept or reject them.

Window of Opportunity

Today's media environment offers a window of opportunity for the introduction of media literacy not only in our schools but throughout society. Already over 30% of the viewing audience has discovered other alternatives to network broadcasting. Nearly 70% of homes have VCR's and over 50% have dozens of viewing options available through cable. Leisure time is on the rise and “quality of life” issues are a major concern for young couples and the social system (schools, churches, health care, governments) that serves them.

Educating young people to select their media choices, teaching people of all ages to evaluate media's underlying values and, in general, promoting a media “consciousness” is the challenge for educators, activists and service providers who recognize that for our society to flourish into the next century, we must turn the closed, one way system of commercial mass media into a two-way process of discussion, reflection and action with each other and with the media itself.

It's time to begin.

What you can you do? Let me mention three simple ideas:

1. Begin media literacy immediately in your own home and with your family.

A first step is to stop taking media's presence for granted and simply try to recognize the flood of media that inundates our lives. One approach is what Buddhism calls mindfulness: being aware, carefully examining, asking questions, consciousness. Theologian Michael Warren calls it “cultural agency.” What do we mean?

• Being conscious allows us to appreciate the pleasure of a new CD album and then later turning it off to read a bedtime story to a child.

• Being conscious means enjoying a new TV sitcom while challenging the commercials that bait me to buy.

• Being conscious allows us to turn even weekend sports into an inter-generational get-together.

2. Learn more about media literacy education and explore how it to connect it with your own agenda of STS.

Media literacy is not so much a new subject to be taught as a skill, an attitude, new way of thinking about the media world we live in. In education, we talk about teaching "across the curriculum" and "infusing" new
concepts into established subject areas like language arts and social studies and yes, even math and science. Since you are already committed to wholistic education, we in the media literacy movement welcome you to the field and invite you to begin to integrate media literacy concepts in your science classrooms.

3. **Promote media literacy in schools, churches/synagogues, Scout troops, adult education centers, senior citizen programs.**

   Media literacy is not just for kids in classrooms. It's for everyone from 1 to 100! We all need to become more knowledgeable citizens of the media age because that's where we're going to live in the twenty-first century.

   **The Parable of the Egg**

   Let me conclude with a story. It's a parable really - about an ancient tribe that awoke one morning to discover an immense egg sitting in the center of their village. Since no one knew where the egg had come from, the people assumed it was a gift from the goddess, a gift with cosmic significance.

   There was much excitement and lively conversation as the villagers gathered around the egg, admiring its beauty, its perfect shape, its wondrous size. Then, much to their surprise, the egg began to rumble, to sway and to crack.

   The sound of the rumbling egg evoked several different responses. Some of the people were terrified. Many ran away and hid. Others demanded that the tribal leaders do something to prevent the egg from cracking further.

   A few people, however, watched the egg with great interest and anticipation. “Don't run away,” they shouted to the frightened ones. “Stay close. When it cracks open, it might reveal a wonderful surprise!”

   What we are faced with, of course, in the last decade of this millenium, is the awe-inspiring gift that has been laid among us -- the technology of mass communications and media. Some people have decided that its presence is threatening and dangerous. Indeed, the rumblings from the mass media can be ominous. There are many concerns. But there could also be marvelous possibilities contained within its shell.

   Mass media and television can play a significant, positive, essential role in encouraging understanding among nations and to take better care of our earthly home. We know of no other medium that can bring the world together instantly. Pictures, images, articles and videos can serve as lively and effective teaching tools. Tools which have emerged from this cosmic gift which has been laid among us. But today the urgency of the environment and the very survival of democracy beckons us to move closer to our media egg instead of running away, seeking its destruction or trying to ignore its presence. I believe that if media and technology are creating a crisis among us, it is not a crisis of the technology but a crisis of character.

   In the history of humankind we have often been surprised and challenged by cosmic eggs, by discoveries and inventions and new ways of thinking. Many more will appear in the future. Although we may wonder -- or worry -- what is inside, what is inside is really not what's important. What is important is how we react.

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Learn more about media literacy!

The Center for Media and Values is a national membership organization established to promote media literacy education in the U.S. Its magazine, *Media&Values* was acclaimed by the *London Sunday Telegraph* as “the smartest magazine about the media in the U.S.” They also publish a growing collection of Media Literacy Workshop Kits™ -- educational resource packages containing lesson plans, handout masters and background information (some also include videotapes) on a continuing series of topics related to media in our society. Some of these topics include:

- *Break the Lies that Bind* / sexism in the media,
- *News for the ’90s* / how to watch the news,
- *Parenting in a TV Age,* / a parent education course
- *Selling Addiction* / deconstructing alcohol and tobacco ads,
- *Living in the Image Culture* / a primer on popular culture
- *Citizenship in a Media Age* / media and politics
- *Images of Conflict* / learning from media coverage of the Gulf War.

Membership is $30 for individuals (magazine only) or $95 for schools and organizations (magazine + workshop kits). To join or to request a complete catalog contact the Center for Media and Values at 1962 S. Shenandoah St., Los Angeles, CA 90034; 310-559-2944 or send a fax: 310-559-9396.