

# Media messages...more than meets the eye?

by Tom Piotrowski

Today my wife and I visited with our sons' teachers for a scheduled conference. While talking with one of the teachers, my mind began to drift. I looked around the classroom and couldn't help but notice the dozens of images pinned on bulletin boards, hanging from the ceiling and tacked to the walls. It was a very busy and stimulating environment, and, as a former teacher, I recognized that all of the images were carefully selected to send and reinforce messages to my boys and their young peers. Many of the pictures were posted to expose the benefits of good behavior, good habits or positive attitudes. I confirmed to myself that I agreed with all the messages and was content this was a good environment for my son to be in on a daily basis.

Our kids are exposed to thousands of images every day from the various media they consume. I've often wondered - does society consider images young people consume less influential when posted or broadcast outside of the classroom? Which pictures are more powerful - the pictures in the classroom or those glowing off the TV, movie screen or pages of glossy magazines? Is the teacher waging a losing cause teaching with her pictures versus the powerful messages of today's media?

To cling to the answer that the media's impact is not a vital factor in the development of young hearts and minds is not only an irrelevant conclusion, it is irresponsible. Instead, research, experience and common sense can and ought to guide our response to the pervasive power of media to shape and mold young impressionable minds. We need to develop a sensitive response and proactive strategies for helping our young people navigate the treacherous waters of a media deluge that shows no signs of abating.

My son's teacher is using pictures to help her students learn skills of **recognition** and **response**. That type of learning never ceases no matter how old you are. Advertisers spend millions to find that one logo, slogan or jingle that is instantly memorable - something that causes you to reach into your wallet and spend money. Marketers certainly believe the media has the power to teach.

If our young people are spending more time with various media than they spend in an actual classroom, shouldn't we take great care to provide learning strategies to help them identify the form and function of media? Shouldn't we also be absolutely certain we are teaching them ways of filtering the messages beamed into their heads by the music, words and images of modern day media?

In 1981, Music Television (MTV) burst onto the media scene and all of the rules were changed. MTV not only changed music marketing, but it has changed the actual learning styles of its young viewers. There has never been any question about the power of music to communicate. From folk songs sung in taverns to anthems of the nations, music moves us to action and stirs emotional pools deep within our very souls. But the (sometimes magnificently crafted) visual narratives of MTV music videos provide carefully constructed messages for its audience. The experience of imagining pictures in your head while listening to a song is rare for the MTV generation. The images are already given. I remember listening to popular music as a young man, when I would climb a tree with a little transistor radio to escape my disapproving parents. I listened to words and sounds squeaking out of that fuzzy little speaker over and over again. But any images in my mind were mine alone.

Adults have problems even watching many MTV videos. The frenetic pace, odd construction and order of images leave many confused. Combined with the fast-paced sounds of some music, viewing can quickly become overwhelming. But young people, raised on a steady diet of this unusual fare consume hour after hour with ease. They pluck information out of the mix in a *non-linear* fashion. They take pieces in random order and construct meaning. This is contrary to a process like reading, where information is more *linear*.

Even solid learners can struggle in a traditional classroom if they are also heavy media users. The linear style used in much of conventional rote learning is alien to legions of young people whose antennas are accustomed to picking up the cluttered collages of music videos.

While Plato may not have had electronic media to contend with, there's a question he posed that could be a leading concept for a society concerned with the impact of media on its kids: "Then shall we simply allow our children to listen to any story anyone happens to make up, and so receive into their minds ideas often the very opposite of those we shall think they ought to have when they are grown up?" (*The Republic*). In truth, Plato would note a paradigm shift from a culture of print and the spoken word to one completely *dominated* by images.

So why has our country been so reticent to offset media consumption by teaching skills that guide the audience to be more critical consumers? We take great pains to teach about art, literature and the written word created through the ages, but when it comes to modern day images, stories and messages from the potent and omnipresent media, we have been ambivalent. Young people are left largely on their own to decipher the daily barrage.

It's not that the various media haven't been suspect. Just after the invention of radio - the medium of the imagination - philosopher Francis Beeding called the new wonder "a stench in the nostrils of God." From comic books and nickelodeons to video games, the media have been named as accomplices in the corruption of youth. In our lifetime, there will no doubt be technologies that will continue to emerge beyond our wildest imaginings, and they too will be subject to scrutiny.

The impact of media is critical, especially when it comes to the socialization of our children. Dr. Renee Hobbs writes that, "[Media] messages are representations of social reality, defined as perceptions about the contemporary world, which are shared among individuals. Messages also represent the social realities of times and places far removed, and help us make sense of the past, present and future. People need the ability to judge the accuracy of particular messages, which may or may not reflect social reality" (*Handbook of Research on Teaching Literacy Through the Communicative and Visual Arts*, 1998).

Author Joshua Meyrowitz in his book, *No Sense of Place*, says, "TV takes our kids across the globe before parents give them permission to cross the street. The membrane around the family sphere is much more permeable. Television destroyed the system that segregated adult from child knowledge and separated information into year-by-year slices for children of different ages without going through adult filters." The media dispense knowledge and behaviors, but cannot provide the social mechanisms inherent in the family or the classroom, where knowledge can be filtered and behaviors can be encouraged or discouraged. University of Colorado's Stuart Hoover says, "We should no longer view the task of media education as 'protection' against unwanted messages. Our goal must be to help people become competent, critical and literate in all media forms so that they can control the interpretation of what they see or hear rather than letting the interpretation control them" (*Curriculum/Technology Quarterly*, Spring 93).

Over the past decade, there's been a lot of discussion about how to best help teachers, parents and students be more critical consumers of the media. Quite logically, this response has been called "media literacy." Media scholar David Considine describes media literacy: "In an age when most Americans get most of their information from television, not textbooks, pictures not print, we need a wider definition of what it means to be literate. [Media literacy], then, is an expanded information and communications skill that is responsive to the changing nature of information in our society. Further, it moves from merely recognizing and comprehending information to the higher order critical thinking skill implicit in questioning, analyzing and evaluating that information" (*Telemedium*, Fall 95). Because the presence of media has become so accepted, we mistakenly presume that consumers of media are able to decode, deconstruct and digest media messages. Most of us received considerable teaching on how to interpret the written word, but we've had zero

preparation for "reading" media messages.

To become media literate - and to teach our kids media literacy skills - we must first understand several basic principles of media literacy. By learning to "deconstruct" or take apart media messages, we will be able to become critical consumers of the messages. The following are a few common ideas important to developing media literacy:

**Media is ever-present.** The media is so pervasive we often think the saturation leaves us unaffected. Media teacher Len Masterman notes that we are exposed to more mass media messages in one day than our grandparents were exposed to in a month. It's been estimated the average American sees 16,000 media messages a day. Today's children will probably watch 1,000 hours of television a year alone for the rest of their lives. Hundreds upon hundreds of studies have sought to explain the relation of media consumption to behavior with varying degrees of influence. One thing is certain: the media are everywhere and many places they should not be.

**Media use unique but identifiable techniques.** Each medium has its own particular way of sending messages or telling information. A newspaper editorial team strategically choose the stories and pictures that appear above the fold of the front page from millions of events around the world. A TV cameraman carefully composes a shot to communicate a familiar emotion or a film sequence is edited into a scene that with the use of symbols, special effects and techniques create a type of visual shorthand.

**Media create false constructs.** In the film *The Matrix*, the premise is that the world as we know it is actually a *construct* created by a super race of computers. In that construct, nothing is real, life is only what the computers say it is. The media try to do the same thing for us. Advertisers try to show us what life would be like if only we used their product. Sitcoms and soap operas create stories that seem to be real, but are they really? These constructs often display values, ideologies, points of view, stereotypes and, sometimes, outright illusions.

**Media is commercial in design.** All media are businesses and there is always a bottom line. Not only are the media interested in snaring the largest audience, more importantly, they are trying to grab the audience with the most money to spend. Even the news industry must take great care to attract the most viewers so they can sell their airtime to high-paying advertisers. What should the anchors look like? What 15-30 second stories will lure viewers? The commercial nature of the media affects the construct of the actual message.

One of my favorite works on media literacy is Art Silverblatt's *Media Literacy: Keys to Interpreting Media Messages*. In the book, Silverblatt suggests that our analysis of the media must take into consideration four major areas: The **process** or function of media; the historical and cultural **context** of media; the **framework** or content and construction of media; and **production values** or how each medium uniquely communicates.

In addition, he discusses the need to discover - and help our kids discover - the **world view** of each media piece we encounter. Silverblatt offers the following questions to pose to media presentations regarding representations of truth and world view:

**What culture or cultures populate this presentation's world?**

- 1) What kinds of people populate this world?
- 2) What is the ideology of this culture?

**Does this world present an optimistic or pessimistic view of life?**

- 1) Are the characters in the presentation happy?

2) Do the characters have the chance to be happy?

**Are people in control of their own destinies?**

- 1) Is there a supernatural presence in this world?
- 2) Are the characters under the influence of other people?

**What does it mean to be a success in this world?**

- 1) How does a person succeed in this world?
- 2) What kinds of behavior are rewarded in his world?

**What is the *hierarchy of values* that appears in this world?**

- 1) What embedded values can be found in the production?
- 2) What values are imbedded in the characters?
- 3) What values prevail through the resolution?

We certainly don't want to charge all the ills of the world to the media's account. Yet there are undeniable causal factors to be considered in the social development of young minds when it comes to the powerful images, sounds and stories of TV, music, film and video games. For example, much attention has been turned to the media in a society trying to explain the pervasiveness of youth violence. In a larger context, the world view - or perception - that we live in violent times is, at least, reinforced by the media. In the U.S., the media has created an agressculture; where the perception that we live in a cold-hearted, dangerous world has caused us to lock down our schools, arm ourselves with weapons, and suspiciously disregard our neighbors. The sports media have endorsed bad-boy ethics and the gladiator credo of "win at all costs." The soon-to-be released film remake of *Rollerball* is an accurate portrayal of a society that lusts after a cathartic release found in sports violence.

We can no longer afford to treat the media like a threatening influence. Instead, we need to recognize they are permanently woven into our social fabric - into the very system of our families, churches and schools. By doing so, we can then introduce strategies in the home, classroom and youth group that will provide the media a place of accommodation rather than dominance in developing young minds. We can start by developing good media habits and sensibilities early. Media use should be regulated like any other activity. Never let a young person choose media over a family function or responsibility, and never offer media as a first choice substitute activity for boredom or inactivity.

In addition, parents need to monitor their youngsters' media consumption and be available to pose questions about content while exposing that which is outright wrong. It's sad that busy parents need to move their children's media consumption up the list of parental priorities. It's wrong that parents are required to be more and more vigilant in the media culture of today. But until enough families return to the fundamental premise that the *family* needs to be the most important and influential place where young people are taught, we will continue to be subject to media that not only introduce, but celebrate ills of society. In this current era of family breakdown, the media have been raising the kids - and they've done an awful job.

So far in our country, schools and churches have largely failed to make the connection between media and youth culture and what is going on in the classrooms and pews. In our schools and churches, education incorporating media literacy skills offers the opportunity to provide authentic experiences in classrooms and youth group settings where skills of monitoring, observing, evaluating and classifying use media process to expand learning in exciting ways. The common experience youth have with the media can be meshed with traditional methodology to make for a dynamic learning environment.

Changing our society from simply a media saturated society into a "media-conscious" society is a challenge for families, schools, churches, government and the media industries themselves. We are talking about a

new literacy movement. The media have great potential and can be an ally. But if society does not begin to cultivate media-savvy environments in the home, church and school, the media will continue to expand their influence regardless of our desires and we will increasingly find ourselves at battle with an enemy. Media messages are all around us. They are teachers our kids spend time with everyday and everywhere. How will we respond?

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