

Media as the Laborer's Curriculum: Engaging Students in Strong Democratic Relationships with Media

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This paper focuses on how media can be an extended "curriculum" before, during, and especially after the schooling experience. We use a Foucauldian lens of analysis focusing on power/knowledge relationships (Foucault, 1980), with a Freirean view on "desocialization" (Shor, 1992), as well as a Batesonian view of the use of language as being simultaneously a process of selection and de-selection (Bateson, 1972). With these as the tools for post-structural deconstruction of the mass media, especially the news media, we focus on the parallels between the mainstream curriculum indoctrinating students "to support the interests of the dominant segment of society, those people who have wealth and power" (Chomsky, 2000, p. 17) and the media's similar indoctrinating "curriculum" of people who are post-schooling (i.e. laborers, unemployed, immigrants, undocumented workers, high-school dropouts, post-higher education, etc.). These "curricula" further disengage students and post-schooled members of society from issues of social justice and ecojustice.

What is a "Laborer's Curriculum?"

The laborer's curriculum is comprised of the large meta-messages that are propagated and pushed onto people of a society via the many facets of media available to that society. In the early 21st century United States, the media (i.e. television, radio, internet, and print) pushes many messages including but not limited to:

- Consumeristic behaviors are patriotic and morally sound.
- The United States is the best country on the planet because it promotes freedom and democracy worldwide. Questioning this claim is unpatriotic.
- Pleasure is gained through consumerism and accessing technology
- The large masses are not supposed to be producers. They are consumers.
- Politics consists exclusively of a two-party system with an occasional third-party contender who is inevitably a spoiler.
- The only democratic responsibility we have is to vote.
- Success in life is achieved when pleasure is experienced.
- There are people who hate us, and it is a given that we should use military

action against them.

- “Good” and “evil” people exist in this world.
- Questioning the military-industrial complex is something that only political extremists do.
- All people in the United States and around the world should be able to speak English.
- Foreigners do not truly belong in the United States.
- You get what you deserve by working for it. This is what makes capitalism morally sound.
- Western worldviews are more advanced *and* more correct than any other worldviews.
- Although there may be problems, the larger social, economic, governmental, and military systems are fundamentally good and should be supported.
- The only way that things will work in our society is to have those in government make decisions for the people.
- The best forms of comedy are based primarily on stereotypes of gender roles, sex, mishaps, and cute animals.
- Women are subordinate to men.
- When women exert their power, they do so via consumeristic practices.
- Homosexuality is still weird, but we have to tolerate it.
- Female homosexuality can be entertaining if the two women conform to the current pop culture standards of beauty. Male homosexuality is still distasteful in any form.
- Humans have the right to manipulate nature for their own desires.
- Profit is more important than ecological sustainability.

These meta-messages serve to minimize critical questioning of power by conveying the current status quo as the norm. For those who might be inclined to question the status quo, news, situation comedies, movies, advertisements, provide a narrative that consistently acts to confuse the processes of critical questioning to a point where people are incapable of creating arguments outside of the media’s repetitious messaging. Additionally, these messages are often coupled with messages defining happiness in very narrow terms, almost always based on attainment of products. These are the messages of the mainstream curriculum designed by those in the dominant, elite positions namely heads of government and corporations.

We use the term “laborer’s curriculum” because ultimately this is about creating a docile mass of *worker-consumers* who support the global superstructure that keeps transnational corporations and their partners (i.e. governments with military support) in dominant positions of power and profit. So, although these meta-messages affect students and those who are unemployed, the larger intention is to create a huge body of people who actively support it through their own labor.

This laborer’s curriculum does, however, have a huge impact on students (or pre-laborers). The labor’s curriculum continually shapes their thinking in order to become a docile worker-consumer who perpetuates and supports the global superstructure which produces large amounts of profit for the minority dominant elites.

Mainstream Curriculum from Television News Outlets

Critical discourse analysis of news programming is unfortunately largely absent from educational studies. However, mainstream news outlets, especially the 24-hour cable news channels, provide a continuous discourse that narrowly defines democratic participation and what it means to be a well-informed “citizen.” If teachers use these news outlets to discuss the current conditions and thinking in society, teachers will be putting forth descriptions of a “weak democracy” grounded in neoliberal ideologies and impotent participation in community. Both of these conditions concentrate power and resources at the hands of the few in a society.

Mainstream news, which include the cable news outlets (FOX News, MSNBC, and CNN), as well as the major network news on NBC, ABC, CBS, and FOX minimizes democratic discourse for the purpose of “entertainment,” which comes in the form of discrimination, chaotic discourse, and a culture of violence. These undermine any democratic process that its audience may adhere to. To a lesser extent, newspapers highlight similar characteristics with little or no attention paid to individuals or groups who use a democratic discourse and action to promote social justice. Often, the media marginalizes those who participate in democratic action.

Ideally news should serve a purpose to inform a population so that they can engage in educated decision-making in order to create what would be a “stronger” democracy. In this paper, we argue that news media instead serves the purpose to minimize democratic participation. Those in the media are largely not consciously working to create this situation. Most see themselves and their work as serving a positive purpose, that is, helping the average person to be better informed.

Journalists as Teachers

Journalists, for example, view themselves as doing positive work to help better a society. The mainstream education that produces journalists does not focus on critical lenses of analysis. Thus, journalists rarely focus on social or ecological injustices that feminists, critical theorists, and eco-justice theorists identify daily. Not having an ability to develop critical lenses of analysis limits the type of questions that journalists are capable of asking. When given the opportunity to

question those in the dominant elite minority, their questions are often grounded in mainstream thinking (i.e. discourse that supports the continuation of the global profit-based superstructure). Yet, journalism is commonly seen as doing the people's bidding by being their watchdog. Without operationalized critical lenses of analysis journalists cannot be effective watchdogs of those in power.

Journalists may even view themselves as neutrally providing a curriculum (for workers or students). Journalists then present their "curriculum" as if it is important and sell the idea of why we need to care about it. This curriculum is formed by and constrained to a sociocultural context defined by corporation and business values from profit-driven motives. Similarly, teachers often operate with profit-driven motives because of the popular overriding assumptions that more education equals better prepared workers. Additionally, journalists use "models" to report the news and talk in ways that reverberate confidence and importance just as teachers do when delivering content. At the behest of authentic discourse, journalists use trendy superficial packaging (advertisement style computer graphic visuals with matching audio) to more strongly make their case for the curriculum, and similar movements in liberal/progressive educational theory suggest focusing on student-centered approaches that make the learning environment more enjoyable.

"Newsertainment" – The Evolution of For-Profit News

However, not all aspects of teaching and 24-hour news journalism are the same. News corporations, which are financially dependent on revenue from advertising, further encourage journalistic discourse, by making decisions based on ratings to issue news broadcasts that increasingly use "shock" packaging which includes attending to morbid curiosities, using inflammatory language, and emotionally-charged "reports." The content of these reports have opposing views, but rarely are they informed. Rather than constructive discourse, news content instead needs to have emotionality, often times with implicit or explicit violence. Emotionality may be the most important quality because it draws the audience in, makes them care about an event, person, etc. without providing a meaningful reason to care. For instance, does knowing about a child molester, murderer, or police car chase via the typical new reporting of fear-inducing visual imagery and emotionally hyped language help us operate better as a democracy? We argue that this communicative style, which is popular and seemingly normalized, dilutes the importance of understanding sociocultural issues present in communities and societies by reducing what is often poverty-related violence to a freak show of entertainment similar to a rated R movie. From a news corporation perspective, generating high ratings by covering community events as if they were short movies and creating profit for both media and consumer products via advertisements is justification enough.

The danger of such a mainstream media that defines news as obscure, violently-concentrated, chaotic, and with polarized discourse is that students cannot see democracy in action. The student-as-consumer becomes enslaved to corporate interests, for purposes of creating the "good worker" rather than the "critical

questioner.” Student government also becomes a primary source for this type of democratic inaction and is too often relegated to emotionally charged issues about social functions like school dances. Nor are potentially transformational current uses of agency fully developed. Instead they are used chaotically through individual and small group efforts, as opposed to large, systemic, organized efforts. Like our mainstream media does for many, students’ “influential school and media experiences are produced for them by an elite” (Shor 1992, p. 116), similar to Ivan Illich’s (1971) argument of TV being used in the mid 20th century to provide one way communication system from the elites to the masses in order to populate their “valued” messages, rather than encouraging production and dissemination of knowledge among people.

Pleasure Creates Docility

In addition to a news industry focused on maximizing its profit, which leads to a distortion of news and views of democratic participation, the laborer’s curriculum is heavily, if not more focused on creating pleasure. This type of pleasure is constantly available, very accessible, and normalized as a way of life. Yet, this narrow form of pleasure acts to keep the “bewildered herd” from actively participating in questioning those in power.

Pleasure has become very profitable, especially since the 1980s in the United States. The number of television channels has increased into the hundreds. Movie theaters no longer have 2 or 3 movies at a time, but often offer 10 or more movies every weekend. The internet is a huge mall of online shopping including music, television shows, movies, books, fashion, technology, tickets to shows and sporting events, and even food. The internet is also home to the largest collection of pornography. Every week “big box” retail chains like Walmart, Target, Best Buys, and Old Navy open new stores all over the country. The access to immediate pleasure is constantly growing.

However, this is a very limited view of pleasure. These forms of pleasure are almost exclusively relegated to *sensual pleasure* or the five senses, as well as sexual pleasure. However, we argue that happiness and pleasure are not necessarily the same experiences. Pleasure is short-term, rooted in moment-by-moment occurrences, and highly individualistic (in other words, isolated to individual experiences disconnected from others). Happiness is often broader, more long-term, and connected to deeper feelings of intimate, caring relationships and justice.

Corporations have found that pleasure is something that can earn them large amounts of profit. Corporations have saturated the marketplace with sensual pleasures. However, this seems to be creating a large mass of people who constantly feel like they have access to happiness. Yet, this is a false perception. Corporations cannot create products that create happiness as we have defined it. Corporations can only create products that create pleasure. This creates confusion because the masses may think that they feel happy, but those feelings are like that of consuming a very sugary dessert. At first, it may feel good because of the huge increase of sugar in the bloodstream, but then there is the inevitable crash that makes a person feel

tired and sluggish. However, with consumeristic pleasures, people do not have to limit themselves to one dessert. They can go from one television show right to the next one, from movie right to the next one, one song right to the next one, one store right to the next one, or one website right to the next one. The corporate-produced pleasures are seemingly endless.

An endless supply of pleasure has its consequences on democratic participation. When people do not feel like they are suffering, they are less inclined to actively participate in working to create change. The last five years have had some of the worst catastrophes with social and ecological injustices. The U.S. went into an illegal war with Iraq, the president and vice president committed dozens of impeachable crimes, the U.S. continued to nothing about global warming, Hurricane Katrina destroyed the Gulf Coast of the U.S. disproportionately affecting the poor and working class, as well as people of color and the elderly, the banks created enormous amounts of foreclosures on people's houses with predatory lending practices, and the U.S., European, and several Asian countries used their people's money to finance some of the world's largest banks. Yet, people in the U.S. remained democratically docile during this time period. In 2006, they voted in a Democrat majority into both houses of Congress to end the war in Iraq, but Congress did not do that. Again, the masses did not participate in ways to pressure Congress or the president. We argue that the masses, or the worker-consumers, did not engage democratically in any significant way because even though they saw these problems, they were too easily soothed by the corporate-produced pleasures, which saturate the marketplace. Despite the pain that they may have felt during those crises, they were able to find continual pleasure in the mass media and consumer culture that has taken a dominant role in the day-to-day experiences of the masses.

This process is negatively affecting our students' abilities to critically analyze their sociocultural contexts, the larger sociopolitical situations, and even issues in their own local communities. They fill their free time with music, television, movies, and internet-based media that larger portray pleasure as being exclusive to the individual. The discourse of the mainstream curricula of schools does very little to counteract these narratives of individuality, isolation, and competition. This corporate agenda of pleasure-for-profit has a stranglehold on the health, minds, and spirituality of our elementary and secondary students. It limits their abilities to contemplate their collective purposes, identify the roots of social and ecological injustices, explore their own imaginations, and act cooperatively to counteract hegemony.

Students as Active Democratic Participants

A student population unable to see democratic discourse and action is a population that does not have knowledge of democratic discourse or action. Mainstream media further encourages students and people who are post-schooling to build solitary careers where their only ambitions, are to contribute to the work force, their own incomes, buying power, and immediate family. "Public life, social justice, community, world peace, and the environment disappear as serious

concerns” (Shor, 1992, p. 118). In maintaining these isolated, rugged individualized lives, students give up their participation in democratic dialogue -- the creation and sharing of power. The private sphere dissolves their public sphere.

This paper would focus on the trappings of the news media and its promotion of internalized oppression that keeps student democratic action diluted and diminished. We argue that the media, especially the news media, acts as an extended curriculum to people in and out of school pushing a limited discourse and narrowing the view not only of democratic participation, but also promoting largely to feelings of not being able to create societal change, or surplus powerlessness (Lerner, 1986).

Ours is an intention to contribute to a discussion of critical media literacy and democratic participation in the schools (Goodman, 2003). We feel that in exploring the news as a “curriculum” provides a new vantage point to look at the landscape of the collective effects that media has in diluting democratic thinking and participation. We are able to see a perpetuation of thinking that distances people’s exchange of knowledge from one another.

Students engaging with media as a tool for democratic participation have great potential for increasing community involvement and building a stronger, more sustainable cultural commons (Bowers, 2006; Shiva, 2005). Like Illich’s proposition, there are sites where students can address the alienating dialogue that manufactures mass consent. “There is a culture of resistance in everyday life through which students and workers undermine authority...and negotiate for their needs” (Shor, 1992, p. 116), in contrast with mainstream media, the internet also provides a large and accessible site for democratic discourse. While TV broadcasts direct our attention and thoughts, the internet allows for decision, critical thought, and contributions. While it’s purpose is to inform in some capacity, it also can mobilize democratic participation to some degree, because students can actively seek out information or are referred to it by friends, family, colleagues, etc. In such a context, students would also be encouraged to produce (Goodman, 2003), rather than merely consume, media.

Through sites of agency, an ultimate goal of promoting critical media literacy and democratic participation would be to create “permanent desocialization.” Desocializing dialogue tries to make broad connections between individual experiences and social issues. “It questions the social behaviors and experiences in school and daily life that make us into the people we are. It involves critically examining learned behavior, received values, familiar language, habitual perceptions, existing knowledge and power relations, and traditional discourse in class and out” (Shor, 1992, p.114). In such a discourse, within sites of agency, students would have opportunity challenge the status quo, through a questioning of power and critically co-creating information. Students would foster social action by debunking myth of meritocracy and be active in social justice and ecojustice work. Students would also affirm ecological & spiritual balance, by maintaining (via daily habits of mind, body, & spirit) and increasing (via discourse and action) senses of wellness (Irwin, 1996).

Do Schools Need to Radically Change?

In many ways schools complement the laborer's curriculum. Established school curricula do not ask students to democratically engage in their communities or to create critical lenses of analysis. Teachers generally do not expect students to identify issues of injustice locally or globally, nor do they ask their students to analyze these issues. Schools generally promote a mindset of individualism and competition, not cooperation, nurturance, and collective action. In these ways schools are very much like the laborer's curriculum which promote ethnocentrism, Eurocentrism, "rugged individualism" (or an overly emphatic view of individuals succeeding by themselves), anthropocentrism (humans valued over nature), sexism, and heterosexism. These are the hidden curricula of many of the common subject areas in schools, and these are often the same implicit messages found in the laborer's curriculum. Together, mainstream school curricula and the laborer's curriculum social construct views of reality that are destructive to community and to nature.

Yet, schools can be sites where teachers and students work together to understand these issues more deeply. Teachers can help students counteract the laborer's curriculum through deconstruction and post-structural analyses that are present in feminist and critical theories. Teachers can help students develop critical lenses of analyses that expose abusive relationships that humans have with nature and how their anthropocentric mindset combined with a human/nature dualistic view promotes violence against nature and unsustainable living. Teachers can develop lessons and units around transformative contexts that focus on these issues of injustice. Teachers and students have an incredible potential for changing their discourse as well as their reasons for learning content.

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