



## Dangerous Times: Media Education for Civic Engagement

Martin Laba<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*As Orwellian terminologies become a part of prevailing political discourse, the need for robust media education has never been more urgent and consequential. If we fully address the implications in phrases such as “post-truth”, or “alternative facts”, and if we also fully comprehend the erosion of democratic values in the rise of aggrieved nativist populism, then media education can be regarded as nothing less than custodian of the foundations and progress of pluralistic democratic society. It is critical that media education be designed in ways that continually reconstruct learning environments as models of democratization and civic participation. Media education then, is meant to be socially transformative, an aspiration and purpose articulated and demonstrated in the theoretical and methodological antecedents of contemporary media education. Yet, media education is not bound by a set of canons. Indeed, media education defies canonization because it changes with the dynamism of media technologies and environments; that is, in the accelerated pace of technological change, in the networked expansion of media and popular cultures, in globalized economic and cultural flows, in the alarms around privacy and surveillance, in the profusion of clickbait and fake news, and in the extraordinary influence of social media that can be both narcissistic time-suck and lubricant for social movements. This paper urges pedagogical approaches that instigate civic engagement, and that are situated in, and driven by understandings of digital media environments. It argues for pedagogies that are “horizontal”—collaborative and participatory and that demonstrate media as forceful instruments of social change. Media education directed to civic engagement is a powerful corrective in an era of “post-truth”.*

*Keywords: media education and social change; pedagogy for civic engagement; democratizing learning environments; digital media and culture.*

### 1. Introduction: The Dystopias

A recent feature on issues of media, politics and seminal literary works of dystopian vision offers foundation and urgency for the notion of the transformative potential of media education. (Postman, 2017) [1] Andrew Postman’s reflection on his father, Neil Postman’s prescient and provocative analysis in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, (Postman, 1985) [2] is a corrective in the understanding of both Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell, 1950; 2008) [3] and Huxley’s *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932; 1998) [4] in current and unfolding political discourses and socio-political dynamics. Neil Postman was emphatic in his distinction between the dystopias of Orwell and Huxley. Orwell’s concern of course, was with the totalitarian imperative of information deprivation through absolute governmental domination, coercion, and thuggery, while Huxley envisioned a prevailing political and social environment in which we are swamped in the profusion of information to the extent that we are reduced to passive and narcissistic consumers of trivia. Access to, and understanding the “truth” is the core struggle. For Orwell, the truth is concealed necessarily in the containment of the dangers of information, and for Huxley, the truth is “drowned in a sea of irrelevance”. (Postman, 2017).

Both dystopias are resonant in prevailing media and political environments. To be sure, terminologies and concepts that appear lifted directly out of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, have become a part of political discourse as contradiction and doublespeak, opacity and obfuscation have become normalized. As well, it is irrefutable that the ongoing, accelerated, networked expansion of digital media and communications has produced social and cultural environments of narcissism and distraction, speed and impatience, surface skimming over deep engagement. If Orwell was concerned about what would be done to us in conditions of information control and deprivation, Huxley was concerned about what we do to ourselves in conditions of information surfeit. Both are critical, real-world conditions that demand courses of media education

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<sup>1</sup> School of Communication, Simon Fraser University (Canada)



action. If we fully address the contemporary resonances in these dystopias, and if we also fully comprehend the erosion of democratic values in the rise of aggrieved nativist populism, then media education can be regarded as nothing less than custodian of the foundations and progress of pluralistic democratic society.

## 2. Erosion of Trust

Consider the provocative results of a recent survey by a leading global communication and marketing firm, Edelman, which ultimately offer a sense of urgency for a rigorous, robust, and expansive project of media education. The annual “Trust Barometer Survey” (2017) [5] is a gauge of the issue of “trust” in global institutions. Over 33,000 people in 28 countries were surveyed worldwide, and the results were described in the survey as a “global trust crisis”. Over half of the respondents (53%) expressed a view that “the system”—represented in four major sectors of government, non-government organizations and institutions, media, and business—has failed them, and is unfair, corrupt, and serves only to erode hope for the future. Nineteen of the 28 countries surveyed had majorities that distrusted the four institutions, with government and media ranking lowest in trustworthiness (government at 41% trustworthiness, with 21 of 28 countries distrusting their governments, and media at 43% trustworthiness, with 23 or 28 countries distrusting the media).

Where do current and emergent nativist populist movements gain fuel and sustenance, but in a lack of trust, and as the report suggests, in “economic and societal fears”? From globalization to the accelerated pace of technological innovation, from a fear of immigration to a fear of automation and outsourcing, and more, all are seen by mass populations around the world as socio-economic trends against which there is no buffer or protection. Indeed, 2/3 of the countries surveyed are ranked as “distrusters”, and significantly less than half trust in mainstream institutions.

While all of these four institutions are critical to the advancement and projects of educational revision, the central concern here is with the media. The survey establishes that media are increasingly seen as agenda-laden, biased, and untrustworthy. Two interrelated results pertaining to the media are key—search engines versus human editors, and the media “echo chamber”. First, the majority of respondents (59%) trust search engines over human editors, commercially driven algorithmic results in information searches over journalistic professionalism and expertise. In the populist turn, as *Globe and Mail* columnist Elizabeth Renzetti has opined, “It’s an odd place in which we find ourselves, actively scorning people not for their ignorance, but for their specialized knowledge.” (Renzetti, 2017) [6] Renzetti refers to Tom Nichols’ argument in *The Death of Expertise*, in which notes the connection between a growing rejection of expertise and “an insistence that strongly held opinions are indistinguishable from facts.” (Nichols, 2017) [7].

Second, and related as well to the perceived authority of digital media and communication platforms and environments, is the media echo chamber. As the survey Chief Content Strategist, Steve Rubel observed, “The emergence of the echo chamber is directly correlated to the dawn of the age of technological platforms.” (2017) [6] As social media especially enables people to connect expansively and deeply with peers, opposing viewpoints, or perspectives that do not support a person’s position, are tuned out, or ignored completely. “Experts”, from editors and journalists, from analysts and academics, are tuned out as the peer, and not the “elite expert”, is regarded as more credible and ultimately, more influential.

Clearly, the erosion of trust is determinative in broader social and political currents, and a forceful signal of dangerous times. One of the most significant and consequential evidences of this research is the yawning gap between “informed publics” and “mass population”. The “informed public” is demographically defined in terms of age (25-64), post-secondary educated, top 25% of household income, and significantly engaged with media especially in areas and issues of public affairs. Informed publics seek out and analyze, curate, and determine the legitimacy of their sources, and reach conclusions and/or take action based on informed and one can say, educated engagement with the media; and this public trusts institutions substantially more than the “mass population”. There is a compelling conclusion to draw; that is, we need to educate our way out of the precarious mess that is the global erosion of trust. In the centre of this project must be media education.



### 3. Education + Media

The need for robust media education has never been more urgent. If we fully address the broader political and societal implications in phrases such as “post-truth”, or “alternative facts”, and if we also fully comprehend the erosion of democratic values in the rise of aggrieved nativist populism, then media education can be regarded as nothing less than custodian of the foundations and progress of pluralistic democratic society. The principles and practices of education around the media need to embrace and drive responsibilities of civic purpose. This “media education for citizenship” concept is forcefully inspired by Freire’s expansive and compelling vision of “critical pedagogy” (Freire, 2000) [8] and education’s civic and moral project of democratic social change; that is, education connected centrally to a larger project of social transformation and political agency.

Theoretical and applied approaches in critical and transformative media education have eschewed the more traditional models and practices of media education, including protectionist, media arts, and media literacy (Kellner and Share, 2008) [9]. Protectionist models have been particularly influential, and have proceeded from a premise of the manipulative and generally deleterious influences of media on impressionable and malleable audiences (especially youth). Media arts have been focussed on important technical and aesthetic development and acquisition of production skills, but have lacked an overarching critical substance and purpose in terms of a broader project of democratic communication. Finally, media literacy, accurately characterized as a grassroots educational movement focussed particularly on elementary and secondary students, understands its work in terms of the analysis of representation in which media are approached as a diverse and dynamic range of texts to be decoded (Masterman, 1989) [10].

Media literacy’s commitment to democratizing the learning environment and challenging the hierarchical classroom is an important principle of inclusive and horizontal education. Indeed, Masterman (1989) emphasized participation, collaboration, co-creation, and change as principles of doing media education. However, proponents of critical media education have challenged the premise that new digital media can be approached with the same conceptual models used in the analysis of traditional mass media. Ferguson (1998) [11], Giroux (2001) [12], Jenkins (2006) [13], Kellner and Share (2008), and others have argued that media education in the digital age must address the radical social and economic transformations of a digitized networked world. With an agenda of social justice and engagements with issues of ideology and power, media education is meant to be designed and revised in ways that continually reconstruction learning environments as models of democratization and civic participation. Today, media education’s relevance is demonstrated in the dynamism and acceleration of technological change, the networked expansion of media and popular cultures, globalized economic and cultural currents, and more.

### 4. A Signature of Digital Media

Dangerous times demand that emerging media education approaches need to instigate civic engagement and purpose, and need to be situated in, and driven by a comprehensive grasp of digital media environments. As media education addresses accelerating digital media and popular cultures, its approaches must be “horizontal”, collaborative and participatory, in multidirectional and non-authoritarian learning environments. There needs to be a consonance between media education and actual media environments. That is, as “horizontal communication” is signature of the digital age in terms of an extraordinary global expansion of horizontal networks of communication (Castells, 2005) [14], there has been a decisive transformation from verticality in communication from single and powerful sources disseminated across mass audiences engaged in passive media consumption, to the ubiquity and accessibility of digital technologies, and to communication received in highly active social media environments.

Media education may not be wholly curative in these times, but it is consequentially interventionist. Our pedagogies must model civic engagement, and media education is neither an inoculation against purported ill effects, nor a mere practice of decoding media “texts”. Rather, it is the activation of students in, and for the digital age, informed, self-determining, participating, and committed fully to the eradication of “post-truth”.



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