



Education in a Perilous Age: A Case for Media Education as Foundational Learning

Martin Laba

Simon Fraser University, Canada

Abstract

Educational curricular design, content, and delivery must always address broader political, economic, and sociocultural currents of the time. Education must constantly vitalize ideas and projects of social change, and nourish students who above all, want to understand and commit to the idea that their studies are consequential in real world terms. Education's fundamental application and one of the most critical metrics of its efficacy and success is the quality and degree to which our students become civically engaged, to actualize the skills of citizenship they have acquired, and ultimately recognize themselves as "protagonists" in the culture of their own times. (Berman, 1988)[1] The achievement and sustainment of such ennobling goals are challenged mightily in the perilousness of the times--a perilousness captured in the abundant evidence presented in the annual Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023: "Navigating a Polarized World". (Edelman, 2023)[2] The report analyzes the erosion of trust in societal institutions, especially among the young, and compelling issues identified, include the collapse of economic optimism, prevailing anxieties (joblessness, inflation, and existential concerns around climate change, war, and food security), a media environment dominated by echo chambers, the instability of "truth", the troubling rise of autocrats, and more. It comes as a considerable revelation in the profile of trust that not government, not media, not non-government institutions, but business is the most trusted sector. A substantial global majority in the survey responded that they buy or advocate for brands based on beliefs and values, that brands have the power to create shared identity, and that business has a critical role to play in the information ecosystem. This is more than an invitation for media education—this is the imperative of media education. As branding and social purpose marketing/advertising have come to dominate the media universe of the young, and as young demographics seek definition of and solution to gripping social problems through brand identities, our ability to achieve the goals of an educational philosophy that prioritizes citizenship and works to renew trust in perilous times depends on our capacities to design and conduct comprehensive programs of media education. To this end, this paper maps the urgencies, the substance, and the directions of media education.

Keywords: *media education; social change*

1. Introduction

This paper is motivated by two urgencies around the core educational project of social change. First, the urgencies borne in the perilousness of an age dominated by disinformation, deep economic anxieties, existential unease and distress around war, climate change, AI, joblessness, the ascendancy of media (and especially social media) echo chambers, the degeneration of political discourse and civility, the rise of autocrats around the globe, and more. Second, the urgencies borne of the need to have students understand their education as consequential and ameliorative, particularly in an age of a prevailing lack of trust in societal institutions where young people struggle to find a sense of agency. That is, there is a critical need to design curricula that value and assert educational priorities and that inspire and guide students to become civically engaged and as stewards of democratic society. It is argued that an expansive and malleable media education is forcefully relevant to both urgencies defined here. The criticality of media education demands that it be regarded as an educational foundation across all curricula and disciplines.

2. Media Ed: Relevance and Resonance

The pedagogies that comprise media education define and support learning environments in which the subject matter is necessarily relevant to and resonant with students for whom media is their oxygen. The vastness, complexity and ubiquity of contemporary media have made media and experiences of mediation foundational to "almost every aspect of human interaction in most of the world."(Poyntz et



al., 2021)[3] Media education—or “media literacy”, a commonly used terminology in the early conceptualization of the field in the 1970s and one that has been revitalized in the 21st century—has long emphasized its project to understand media as a matter of achieving media literacies and communicative competencies, goals which have become infinitely more complex in the expansion and velocity of change in digital media and culture. The core literacies have become singularly wide-ranging than at any time throughout the history of media education; and these literacies have come to include media literacy, digital literacy, data and information literacy, algorithmic literacy, AI literacy, and likely many more concomitant with the pace and unceasing elaboration of technological change in communication media—applications, platforms, engagements and practices.

As Poyntz et al. argue, “The current media environment...can appear to be one part utopian science fiction and another dystopian mind management. (Poyntz, 2021)[4] Media education needs to contend with both. On the one hand, this “utopian” perspective, communication is unimpeded and instantaneous, and media environments have become accessible, open and participatory. Such optimistic perspectives suggest a democratized media environment of creativity, constructive play, and powerful tools and capacities of production. Media education then, demands, forges, and sustains new pedagogies that are truly “hands-on” and project-based, collaborative, and real world. The dystopian dimensions can be articulated in the observation of many educators that while our students have more information at their fingertips than at any other moment in the histories of media and communication technologies, they appear deficient in their abilities to curate spurious news sources from authoritative ones on social media; they are incurious about history and live in a perpetual present tense; they are unconcerned with privacy and with algorithmic manipulations; they are prone to coalesce into belief-based audiences fed and sustained by information echo chambers.

Space does not permit a comprehensive overview of the development and critical influences of media education, but in 21st century terms, two major developments accelerated the development of new concepts and pedagogical strategies around understanding media. First, the capacities of digital media in terms of globalization, speed, dissemination, access and influence, and second, the scope, depth, constancy, and intensity of emerging forms of technology-based consumerism among young people whose engagements with media have become a way of everyday social and cultural life. This scale and quality of mediatization of everyday life demanded new, robust, and critical educational research and pedagogies that were nimble, responsive, and anticipatory, and capable to addressing the dynamism and pace of technological change in the digital media age. Earlier approaches to media were focussed on a range of concerns, including protectionist or interventionist motivations that were intent on inoculating the young against assumed deleterious influences of media content; analysis of media as “texts”, deconstructed and theorized in terms of codes, symbols, formulae, and the like; media arts approaches that defined and emphasized empowerment of young people through the acquisition of production skills, a “hands-on” approach to analyzing media through “doing” media; and most relevant and influential, the “media literacy” approaches that emphasized representation, and in the case of Masterman’s seminal work, situated media education in broader principles democratizing the learning environment, dismantling the hierarchical structure in the classroom, collaborative and participatory practices, and an emphasis on student-centred, student-driven projects of media analysis. (Masterman, 1985)[5]

3. The Trust Deficit

In the erosion of trust in societal institutions education, and media education in particular, assumes a particular priority. Education is situated in and is obliged to address broader political, economic, and sociocultural currents of the times. The most important, discipline-transforming, epochal works in education (Arendt, 1958)[6]; Bentley (1998)[7]; Bourdieu, 1977[8] Dewey, (1916)[9]; Freire, 1968)[10]; Illich, 1971)[11]; Postman, 1995[12]; Rousseau, 1762)[13], for examples) have articulated and asserted the need for educational design, philosophy and practice to attend to the very societal conditions which structure and direct educational purpose and context. Directly stated, all educators no matter the discipline can ill afford to conduct their research, design their course content, develop their curricula, create their learning environments without a deep dive into prevailing political, economic and sociocultural currents, conditions, and controversies.

The “trust barometer”, a highly influential and authoritative global survey of trust in and credibility around broad societal sectors including government, media, business, and non-government organizations, offers a case in point. The “trust barometer” research has been conducted for over two



decades by the research institute of the international Edelman Communication. (Edelman, 2023)[14] The research proceeds as an online survey of a general population (using demographically representative samples reflective of the population) across 28 countries around the globe with over 32,000 respondents, 1150 respondents per country. The data analysis seeks to connect the complex formulation of personal attitudes to broader societal forces and identifiable trends in opinions, perspectives, priorities, and issues.

The 2023 and 2024 “trust barometer” research offers an account of the daunting challenges faced by educators who properly understand education as the antidote to these “erosions” of trust around the globe. The factors that have given rise to and sustained this crisis in trust are powerful determinants of fear and anxiety. They include: the collapse of economic optimism; personal anxieties around job loss and AI, inflation; existential fears around climate change, war and humanitarian catastrophes, food security, energy shortages; institutional and especially political leaders perceived as corrupt, thuggish, and dishonest; the global prevalence of income-based inequality; a belief that government is not competent to manage and regulate innovation in technology, energy, healthcare, for examples, and a lack of transparency and ethical frameworks for innovation; a trust in peer opinion over authoritative sources; and more. In all, government is regarded as far less capable and ethical than business and government and media are viewed as chief sources of misinformation and as engines that fuel distrust leading to deep division and polarization.

4. A Case for Media Education

The need for education to serve as an instigator of social change, to influence the public sphere and to elevate public discourse above rancor and division, has never been greater. Indeed, the project of media education/literacy (and the projects of digital, civic, data and information, algorithmic, and AI literacies) is especially critical. As Kellner and Share observe, as digital media and communication shape, organize, reinforce and perpetuate “information, ideas and values”, media education becomes teaching and learning toward the empowerment of students. (Kellner and Share, 2007)[15] The project of media education is to connect learning with real world, consequential participation in democratic society.

Perhaps unexpected in the “trust barometer” global report is the revelation that not government, not media, not non-government institutions, but business is the most trusted sector. A substantial global majority in the survey responded that they buy or advocate for brands based on beliefs and values, that brands have the power to create shared identity, and that business has a critical role to play in the information ecosystem. This is more than an invitation for media education—this is the imperative of media education. Branding and social purpose marketing/advertising have come to dominate the media universe of the young who seek definition of and solution to gripping social problems through brand identities. Media education is a pedagogically effective means through which we can meet our students on their own cultural ground. In the final analysis, our ability to achieve the goals of an educational philosophy that prioritizes citizenship and works to renew trust depends on our capacities to design and conduct programs of media education.

For young people, social purpose marketing establishes a connection to brands that appear to have staked out social responsibilities and moral territories. Indeed, as governments are seen to recede from their roles of acting on behalf of the public interest, social purpose branding has become a ground upon which young audiences/consumers engage with complex issues of the day. Consumer conscience is designed around brands that declare social concern and attach themselves to compelling causes and social issues. Arguably, advertising has long been one of the most powerful, pervasive, and culturally based vehicles for narrative; that is, promotional culture has become a site and means by which stories are told, cultural values created and asserted, ideologies developed and articulated, and where an awareness, even an understanding of social issues is formulated.

Who are seen by young people as the custodians of public interest and the voices of social responsibility and change? Not government, clearly operating in a trust deficit, but rather Nike, Guinness, the NBA, Starbucks, Gillette, Burger King, Anheiser-Bush, Microsoft, Unilever, Ford, Adidas, Veja, Patagonia, British Petroleum, Levi's, Johnson & Johnson, Google, Coca-Cola, Netflix, Spotify, Pfizer, TOMS, Disney, LEGO, and legions more. As studies have established, Millennials and Gen Z are demanding greater levels of corporate social responsibility. As a 2023 OnePoll survey revealed, 80% of these demographics are likely to base their purchases on brands with a clearly



articulated social mission or purpose. (Carbon Neutral Copy, 2023)[16] Seventy-four percent would boycott brands for crossing an ethical line. Young people want to see companies taking public positions on reducing carbon footprints, improving labour policies, implementing DEI, supporting LGBTQ+ rights, participating in fair trade, charitable global giving, community development, volunteerism, socially and environmentally sustainable investment, standing against on-the-job harassment, racism and discrimination, toxic masculinity, and much more. (see Digital Marketing Institute, 2004)[17]; (Emiliani, 2022)[18]

As photographer and filmmaker Oliviero Toscani, the provocateur behind the hugely controversial and global Benetton campaigns throughout the 1990s observed, “It’s interesting that provocation comes from a strange place, advertising...I find it strange that the voice of capitalism, the voice of consumerism provokes.” (Vaske, 1996)[19] Since Toscani’s campaigns, the apparent previous contradiction has become the logic of the digital media marketplace. For better or worse, contemporary branding represents social issues and their solutions, and Millennial and Gen Z demand what the industry calls “authentic” advertising (advertising with social issues) and purpose-driven brands. This is the precise and urgent subject matter of contemporary media education—a critical engagement with media environments in particular, an analysis of the robust trust quotient in business and brands (as evidenced in the “trust barometer”) and the ways in which branding has become for Millennials and Gen Z a credible and compelling source of awareness of and solution for gripping social issues of the day. And it is the role of media education to reinvigorate a sense of public commitment and public good and to reinvigorate a sense of personal and collective action and consequence in an age of the erosion of trust in societal institutions.

5. Conclusion

The evaporation of trust in institutions around the globe demands the urgency of educational intervention because education is an antidote to fear and distrust; to the sense especially amongst the young, that their economic futures have been foreclosed; to the turn toward populist movements, surgent nationalisms and authoritarian regimes; to a contested and acrimonious public sphere in which “falsehood” is routinely misconstrued as “fact” (Edelman, 2017)[20]; to a profusion of media echo chambers; and more. The argument here is that media education is precisely such an intervention that should be regarded as foundational in curricula because, as noted earlier, media for the young is the oxygen of their everyday lives. The educational focus on media is experienced by our students as supremely relevant and consequential. The “trust” in the perceived ameliorative capacities of business among the young should be understood in terms of where young people find both meaning and agency—and the answer is in the social media platforms and branded persuasions of promotional culture. This is not to suggest that our students eschew political action and demonstration—quite the opposite. There is a substantial global history of student protests around issues of war, discrimination, racism, authoritarianism, genocide, famine, climate change, and much more. However, the daily and ceaseless engagements with popular culture in the form of brands that stake out and amplify their commitments to social issues are determinative of media education’s cruciality.

Incumbent upon all educators, researchers and instructors, is the design and delivery of education that is truly “student-centred”, and to borrow from Marshall Ganz, (Ganz,2010)[21] educational design and delivery that arises out of the need for young people to have a critical eye, an understanding of the world’s pain, and a hopeful heart. “Hope” in Ganz’s insight, is the “experience of possibility”; and the “experience of possibility” is surely the *raison d’être* of education.

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