



Robert Ferguson

21.2.2006

### Media Education and the Practice of Democracy

[This paper is designed to stimulate discussion.]

They do say that all ideas have their time, and in media education it seems that it is the time for democracy<sup>1</sup>. Books and papers begin to appear and there are conferences with democracy in their titles to replace a focus on the postmodern, or identity. There seems to be a general consensus that democracy is a <good thing>. But, as with most other significant terms which hold centre stage for a while, they need to be interrogated with some care. For some more critical educators democracy takes its place alongside Gandhi's comment when asked about Western Civilisation – he said it would be a good idea. The <practice> of democracy takes on a poignant, ironic, desperate or cynical cloak in the light of recent world events and the rise of terrorism as a political weapon. It depends where you stand. Democracy is not something that thrills the hearts and minds of the vast majority of citizens who live in nations who declare themselves to be democratic. Apathy and cynicism work together against democratic growth. But so do governments whose declared democratic aims pay scant attention to the people they are supposed to represent. And then there are the <democratic> exercises which supposedly involve the people in a conversation (<we are listening> they say) which results in the status quo being implemented by politicians with morally superior physiognomies. After all, they say, we did ask your opinions. We did ask you to participate. And so democracy staggers from crisis to disaster, where the strongest

solidarity likely to be encountered may well be amongst those who have experienced traumatic shock, or those who never had much faith in the democratic system anyway. This is not a happy scenario and it is one where democrats (and I am one) could find themselves driven towards helpless silence. This in the face of government and politics which grind stubbornly along despite majority opposition and still call themselves <the people's government>. The general tenor of these comments may suggest, indeed I hope they do suggest, that the role of democracy in education needs to be reappraised and reinvigorated. It also suggests that democracy allows us to be angry educators rather than always and only ready to sing, with relative complacency, the praises of <free elections>. The rationale for championing democracies has been that <free elections> do not occur in so many places which we dislike. But pointing to nations that are not democratic will never be a defence against inadequate, unrepresentative or even corrupt democratic rule. Democracy, like education, requires commitment from citizens and their ability to lose arguments as well as win them. Above all, informed argument and constant debate are the lifeblood of a healthy democracy. Which is why both education and the media are of crucial importance for democratic development. It is towards a discussion of these issues that this paper will move.

We live in an era when a great deal is made of the *free* world and when an American President can scribble on one of the most public private notes in history – <Let FreeDom Reign> [sic]. In the UK at the moment we can choose to spend our critical energies discussing who should be evicted from the Big Brother House, or watching the wall which the Israelis are building in Palestine, or the tears of those occupiers who finally have to leave their illegally constructed habitations, or we can look with our voyeuristic gaze at the now haggard and somewhat hollow defiance of Saddam Hussein. During the summer we have, in no order of priority, Wimbledon, Trooping the Colour, documentaries on face transplants, redecorating rooms, buying houses, populist archaeological digs, and so it goes. I could also go to the computer, the Internet, my Game Boy or any one of a host of electronic devices which connect me with layer upon layer of signification. I can experience pain, pleasure, mystery, investigative challenges, excitement, and access to mountains of information. And all of this cornucopia of choice is a media choice – a choice of which medium (mostly television, but the computer is catching up), which channel, which time, which viewing condition. So much freedom, so many media. What

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper appeared in *Telemidium* Volume 51, Number 2 – Fall 2004

should the media educator do? And why bring democracy into it? Before addressing these issues there are two other crucial issues which must be recognised. The first is the unemotional identification of contradictions with which interest in and belief about democracy has to deal. A quotation here is appropriate:

In a world in which few enjoy unimaginable wealth, two hundred million children under five are underweight because of lack of food. A hundred million children die each year from hunger-related disease. A hundred million children are living or working on the streets. Three hundred thousand were conscripted as soldiers during the 1990s, and six million were injured in armed conflicts. Eight hundred million people go to bed hungry each night.

Recognition of the kind of world in which we live is crucial for both teachers and students. How the world is re-presented in the classroom is beyond the scope of this paper. But it can be done with dignity and restraint in the first instance. The second crucial issue is that of terror – whether induced by humans or by nature or the two working together. We now have terror in London. It had reached many other parts of the world before us and it is by no means over. In Iraq it is a bloody and terrifying norm. It is a terror which is both materially real (as are the eight hundred million hungry) and endlessly mediated. Stories are told, retold, constructed, construed. Data is provided, debated, warped, re-presented. People die and their deaths become media stories. It is the way of things. For those of us who live in democracies, these are issues which are, like it or not, our business. As educators (and I am not inclined to put media in front of educator this time) in democracies, the representations of the media are also our business.

The best place to start, as far as I am concerned, is with a brief restatement of my understanding of the place and purpose of media education. Media education is an educational process which can inform the way we think about our world and the people in it, and the ways in which we act within it and upon it. It is also about the ways in which a wide range of texts and meanings are produced and the ways in which texts are used, consumed, rejected, embraced and questioned by all kinds of people including you and me. It is also about understanding our pleasures and questioning them, about understanding the distribution of power in our societies, and

questioning it – and about who owns what in the media world and the world more widely, and questioning it. Media education is not medium specific – though it involves the study of specific media. There is more, but that will do as a contextualising moment.

It will be clear, I hope, that I am arguing for a media education which is based upon a pedagogy of questioning. I would say a pedagogy of interrogation if it did not carry with it such unpleasant connotations which have little to do with the original concept. Questioning should never be confused, in education, with carping on about something. Questioning requires us all to ask why things are as they are, and to decide how we should or will, or will refuse to relate to the way things are.

There is one other important point to make before coming a little closer to questions of democracy. It is concerned with the need to refuse distinctions between protective and celebratory models of media education, and the need to refuse debates couched in terms of postmodern celebrationists versus pessimistic dinosaurs (usually of an allegedly marxist variety). I say *refuse* because media education is not about refuting positions which have never been other than unproductively divisive. Such positions have impeded a productive and open media education through the use of a manichean (if not binary) division of our understandings of a host of concepts. These include culture, pleasure, power and politics. Democratising media education must, at the very least, refuse to close any investigations into these fields. Media education has to be an activity and a process which is concerned with studying and understanding the ways in which the significations of media, like the social world in which we live, are full of tensions and contradictions.

Democracy in media education is, in part at least, about engaging with the mess of contradictions which are thrown up by the practices of and references to democracy on a local, national and global level. For too many of us, the invocation of the term democracy is a way of suggesting that all is well in an imperfect world. It is used as a descriptive term in the media in relation to our own nations (if we consider ourselves democracies) and in relation to other nations where there might be some doubt as to the quality of their behaviour in specific instances. But unacceptable, immoral and downright brutish behaviour is also a part of our democratic milieu. This is certainly the case as we watch, listen to or read about allegations of torture, rape or pillage undertaken by those who are, when it comes down to it, all democrats.

It is the challenge of media education to take up representations which are concerned with democracy – whether in the form of analyses which are clinically precise, or practices which challenge democrats (in the school or the political establishment) to practice what they preach.

There is not space here to go into much detail about how the media educator might approach this task. I want only to highlight two important issues. First, media education is not all doom and gloom. It is (still) possible to face the realities of the world and maintain a sense of humour. Second, media education *is* about serious challenges which require the development of courage, interest and intellectual skills. Many media educators reject doom and gloom and with it any political involvement at all. But if we want to be concerned with democracy we will have to be concerned with politics and the political. This requires media educators and their students to become involved in a multitude of ways. A good place to start would be to compare and contrast the aspirations of democracies with the realities of daily existence within them. (One cannot but think of New Orleans in this context.) This can be done through the study *and* production of media messages. This study should always include the media of at least one other country than our own. There have already been a number of projects which have encouraged children from different countries and regions to communicate with each other. They are often concerned with establishing modes of communication which encourage friendship and mutual respect. This is to be both welcomed and encouraged. The tests for the democratic teacher and student may, however, become more demanding than these opening communicative gambits. Children and, as importantly, adults do need to communicate. But there is a sense in which many of the international communications projects undertaken with young people remain in the phatic domain. That is, they are designed to share feelings or establish a mood of sociability rather than to communicate information or debate ideas. I must stress that the phatic communication is not a negative attribute of media or communication projects. It is simply insufficient if we are to engage seriously with questions of democracy.

Studying the media of other countries is both a challenge and an opportunity. If those countries (the majority) do not write or broadcast in English, there is still a great deal which can be done in media studies which is of importance. The recognition of television and press genres is something which can be studied very well at the level of design, layout and specific modes of signification. The study of newsreaders and their

respective presentational styles is also a valuable analytical exercise. There is also the obvious and crucial motivation to ask some questions about the language of the presentation. In other words, there is a real chance to motivate language study, and in contexts where it is clear that the language in question is a living cultural reality. Motivation to understand is, we all know, a real impetus for learning. The consideration of television and other media coverage from a range of countries is a way of stimulating learning, and an even better way of consolidating learning for those who are already studying a specific language. I make no apology for trying to highlight the <benefits> of certain approaches to media education. We live in a climate where educational and other authorities want to know if they are getting value for money. But I also make no apology for saying that these justifications are as nothing compared with importance of engaging with the processes, possibilities and problems of democracies in action. Such an engagement will require enquiry, commitment and action. Children, young people and students all need to develop their analytical skills at the level of reception *and* production. We have to encourage democracy through critical thinking and critical practice. The folk singer Woody Guthrie once wrote a children's song which began with the line <Why can't a cow have kittens, why oh why oh why?> The answer in the song came back as <because, because, because – Goodnight, Goodnight!> Students formulating questions as media producers and analysts will make the teacher, parent, or politician likely to offer <because> responses. Difficult questions can often result in answers of the <well it has always been like that> variety. Fostering the growth of democratic participation, however, requires us to generate meaningful and sustainable discourses which give to <because> an endless depth and dynamic complexity. This means that there will be a great deal of pressure on the educator, whether in the home or the school, to build confidence on the part of those asking questions. It is a multi-staged process, whereby the early activity of questioning is encouraged but usually dependent upon the teacher or sometimes the parent figure. Education for democracy, however, requires that the formulation of questions and the response to those questions has to become, over time, the responsibility of the student. This should not be read as a renunciation of the responsibilities of the teacher or parent. Quite the reverse. The teacher, particularly, has the responsibility of building confidence, of providing skills, of extending the horizons and the capacities of young people. The media educator in a democracy has to develop a range of analytical approaches to the media,

and be prepared to introduce debates and controversies into the interpretations of the media messages.

The pedagogical problems which the media educator has to face are certainly not new, even if the media in question may be. Pedagogy which is designed to encourage analytical rigour alongside creative expression has always given educators a headache. And so it should. Analytical rigour without creativity results in scholasticism. Some people wrongly think that is education. Creativity without analytical and theoretical endeavour leads to self-delusion and the encouragement of cant (with a C). Some people wrongly think that is education. A pedagogy which embraces both analysis and creativity will be a pedagogy which exists in a state of productive tension. Creativity and analysis cannot be complacent companions, because each will always doubt the other. And so they should. Media education happens to provide the ideal pedagogic context for the exploration of both these crucial educational domains. The next question to address is how and why we should best bring together creativity and analysis with the practice of democracy. I will begin with the question <how?>

The practice of democracy is something which can take many forms. At its most general and least challenging it is that which is invoked in the name of upholding our national values, assuming that we come from a democracy. This means that the teacher or educator is able/allowed to consider the ways in which democracy works and the media educator may look at media examples of how this happens. In the UK it might include a viewing of the Parliament Channel, or the examination of election coverage if and when one comes along. It may be linked to questions of citizenship and, in effect, how we may learn to become good citizens. Democracy may also be considered by the viewing of a wide range of media examples which consider the *representation of* democratic practices. There is, for instance, a concept of industrial democracy such as that seen in the movie *Norma Rae*, or there is the concept of democracy as exercised by the granting of free speech, often represented in movies which sentimentalise the democratic process and tend to star James Stewart or Gary Cooper. One can think of many examples. There are also examples of democracy being regarded as of little consequence. Consider the words of one of the protestors (or rioters depending on your viewpoint) in Los Angeles in 1992. He appeared in the Oprah Winfrey Show. As a young African American he was a participant in the events in Los Angeles. He did not please Oprah Winfrey by admitting that he had been a part of what happened, and that he had been

looting. He says to her: <Well you have to understand what happened and why we did it.> Winfrey replies <Yeh, I'm trying.> There is something of perplexity and a hint of impatience in that response, and it might be argued that Winfrey was speaking for all those who are affronted by and fearful of social unrest. The young man speaks of wanting self-satisfaction:

The reason we did it was because we needed self-satisfaction. We had none. We had no satisfaction in what happened to Rodney King. We had no satisfaction in what happened to Latisha Harlins. We've never had satisfaction. Four hundred and twenty-five years of being unsatisfied – what am I to do? What am I to do? I'm looking at the news and they are telling me that my life is not worth a nickel. They telling me they can beat me, they can do whatever they want to me whenever they feel like it. And I'm supposed to accept this and say, well we just go vote, and make it better. It hasn't been better. We've been voting for years and it's not, it's not changed. Every time they get the vote to me, the President's already elected, even before we cast our vote.

It is my opinion that this is a remarkable and perceptive piece of analysis. It passes Oprah Winfrey by as she asks simply <Are you registered to vote?> The man answers yes and says once more that repeats the suggestion that when he comes to vote the President is already on television making his <winning speech.> Winfrey drops the subject and goes straight back to the issues that are more important for the television programme than whether democracy is working for this community in Los Angeles. She says <OK so you were out there looting. Did you get stuff?>

I choose this example because it illustrates the importance of studying issues as issues (which of course exist only for the purposes of analysis) *and* as issues represented. There is democracy as a political system of government, and then there is democracy as it is discussed, presented, represented on the media. Media education has to engage in the study of the issue and its mediation.

Now let's move from Los Angeles to Louisville and New Orleans. Those of us who do not live in the Southern United States of America had reportage and representation to tell us about what happened there when hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. It may have horrified us once more, but it also raised issues which are very much concerned with democracy and

democratic ideals. For the student of the media there is much to consider.



In 1937 there were floods in Louisville Kentucky. The photographer Margaret Bourke-White took a photograph, reproduced here, of a breadline after these floods. It is an image which, apart from its intrinsic value as fine photography, is a semiotic feast. This has been noted by many educators. Media educators need to study the image, *and* the ways in which the image is re-introduced to the students in forms such as the one below. It has been reproduced as an educational resource produced by the Whitney Museum of American Art and is clearly designed to stimulate discussion and understanding. The image is certainly evocative, but what it means and to whom it makes its meaning is something which needs careful and patient articulation. And even more of a challenge would be to go beyond basic semiotics and ask what such an image means *in a democracy*, and one of the world's richest democracies. Once we begin such study we realise that this work combines semiotics with history, and provides possible links in terms of historical trends, democratic ideals and modes of representation.

The Whitney Museum asks some pertinent questions. These questions are designed for grades 6–12. They are open ended and valid questions. If we think of the Los Angeles example cited earlier, however, we might be forgiven for being a little more blunt. Supposing we ask: Why are the people in the car all white and the people in the breadline all black? Why does the slogan near the image of the car say: <There is no way like the American Way>? What should we make of that slogan in relation to our

## LEARNING @WHITNEY

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

GALLERY  
LESSONS  
RESOURCES  
ABOUT THIS SITE  
HELP

Margaret Bourke-White

SEARCH

PRINT

Move your cursor over the image to explore more.

**Explore the Image**

What do you notice first about this photograph?  
 What do you think the people in the photograph are doing?  
 What message does the advertisement communicate to you?  
 Compare the similarities and differences between the people in the advertisement and the people below.  
 What do you notice?

ABOUT THE ART

This work of art can be used with the following lessons:

**The Struggle for African-American Rights Grades 6-12**  
**What is American? Grades 6-12**

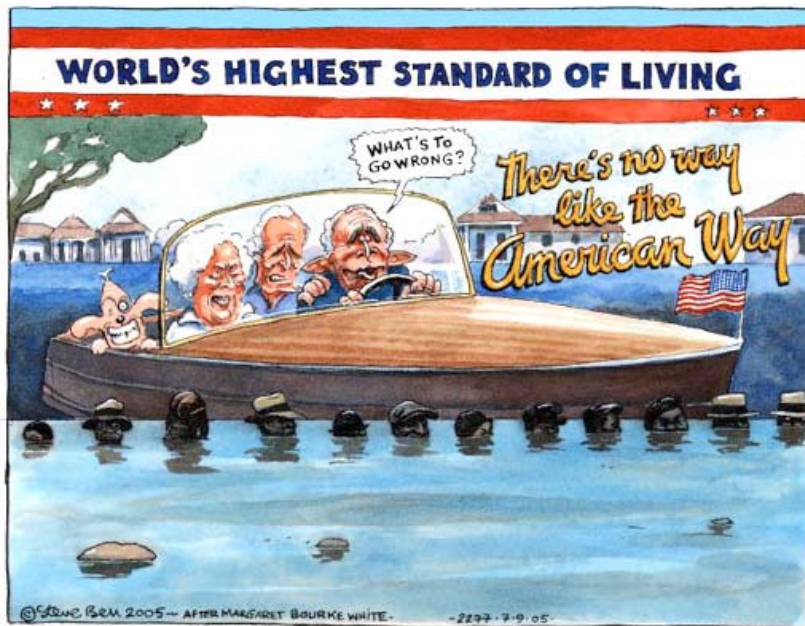
BACK TO TOP

© 2004 Whitney Museum of American Art

own lives? How would a person from the Middle East read that slogan? What has that slogan to do with democracy? Answering or addressing such questions would demand educational engagement which goes well beyond the images and the educational resource discussed. It will ensure that the educational processes of media education challenge and do not stagnate in a sterile semiotic analysis. Semiosis is a process and it needs to be

discussed as such. Semiotics can too easily become mechanical and unproductive in the classroom. Engaging with semiosis will involve the students in exchanges about meaning making and the consequences of meaning making. More needs to be said, but this is for another time.

I hope you will agree that this kind of questioning is likely to bring a sense of urgency to a media studies lesson. I hope you will also agree that the questions generated can be as frustrating as the Woody Guthrie questions mentioned earlier. But here the answer has to be more than simply <because, because, because>. The Hurricane Katrina stimulated the British political cartoonist Steve Bell to produce the image below:



Bell acknowledges the Bourke-White image. His version has been changed to show us the Bush family and Prime Minister Blair. This time the queue of African Americans is a row of heads in the fetid water. There is a scarcely suppressed fury in the image, as opposed to the silent irony of the original photograph. Media analysis would require the reinvigoration of semiotics as a means of identifying power struggles and the significance of ideological relationships. But we need to learn some politics and history to

unravel the possible meanings in these messages. Media Education and democracy require an extension of intellectual and strategic vistas. We need to learn to think and to do. The first practical activity that media education in a democracy might undertake would be to identify, describe and then analyse the nature of contradiction in media representations of the lives of ordinary people. The examples offered here are designed to provide a glimpse of what might be possible. There is much that can and should be done.

Democracy requires analyses which develop from the grass roots level. Analysing media messages and producing media messages have to grow from the bottom upwards as skills, as democratic rights, and (unfashionable though this may be), as a democratic duties.

We have to be clear that engaging in analysis is not a prescriptive activity, nor does it lead to unanimity of interpretation. The study of the media is something which requires debate and disagreement, not for their own sakes, but because the world and its mediations are much too complex to be reduced to single readings or interpretations.

Perhaps it may take a little while, but there will be educators with the strength and students with the determination to take democracy seriously. Until then, could it be that media education will skate about on the surface of daily existence in repetitive and increasingly vacuous circles? We need to learn the sobering lesson from Terry Eagleton when he reminds us that Carnival and death are never very far from each other.<sup>2</sup> And we need to learn that it is possible to laugh in the face of all this, as long as our education tempers that mirth with serious action in the name of democracy. Media Education needs to study, analyse, and begin to practise a little democracy.

This is *not* all that media education does or will do, but it is an aspect of media education that is in danger of disappearing. A commitment to democracy has to become a core principle of media education. Conventional media education concepts can work just as well in second place.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton (2005), *Holy Terror*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.