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Report on “New Directions in Media Education”

Toulouse, France

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Overview of the Conference

In the summer of 1990, 180 delegates from 40 countries convened in Toulouse, France for an international colloquy on the future of media education worldwide. The conference was sponsored by UNESCO, the British Film Institute, and CLEMI (Centre de Liaison de L'Enseignement et des Moyens D'Information).

Most participants were media education teachers or national staff officials from European countries where media education is an established and well-developed field in both secondary and elementary public school systems. A number from Europe and Australia teach media studies theory or practice at teacher-training colleges. 24 participants from Third World countries were funded by UNESCO to attend.

U.S. delegates included Ralph Amelio, a high school film teacher from Chicago, Debbie Demick, a PhD candidate in education at U. of Arizona, Bob Muffaletto, active in International Visual Literacy Asso; Kathleen Tyner, exec. director, Strategies for Media Literacy, San Francisco and Elizabeth Thoman, executive. director, Center for Media and Values, Los Angeles. We were not an "official" team or delegation but rather five individuals whose familiarity with the idea of media literacy stimulated them to make the trip and spend the time.

Without a doubt the conference was an unprecedented opportunity to learn about the development of media literacy around the world and its nature and status in different countries. Coming just as media literacy was beginning to burst forth on the US educational scene, it provided an invaluable overview of both the theory and practice of media literacy. The following notes capture the most significant learnings and provide a

platform for reflections on how the Los Angeles-based Center for Media and Values (later to become the Center for Media Literacy) might develop a plan of action for building media literacy in the US.

Key Learnings

1. **Definition of terms:**

There is still much discussion on whether the correct term is "media education," "media awareness," or "media literacy." It feels like "media literacy" will win out because of the mental association with "literacy" meaning the ability to "read" and process information in order to participate fully in society. However "media education" is firmly entrenched in England, Australia and other countries pioneering the field. The term "media studies" is also used, particularly in Australia. But whatever it is called, the concept of "media literacy" incorporates both knowledge of the structure, economy and function of mass media systems in society as well as the analytical skills to "read" both the aesthetic and ideological content of mass media messages.

2. **Urgency:**

In the past 50 years, modern society has passed from an age of linguistic literacy to an age of electronic literacy. Therefore media literacy is not a luxury but a necessity in contemporary times.

Indeed, how can anyone become a fully functioning citizen in a democratic society if he/she is manipulated by commercial media? What is at stake really is the future of democracy.

3. **Methodology:**

In the past 20-30 years, we have grown in our understanding of how mass media works in society and how people interact and process media messages.

- a. In the 50's-60's we understood the viewer as a "tabula rasa" — a blank slate on which mass media could write its powerful messages. The educational agenda, therefore, was inoculation — "in order to protect both our children and the continuity of our cultural values from the worst excesses of the media." The tools were discrimination (of "good" media from "bad" media) and aesthetic appreciation (of the "good.")
- b. In the 70's/early 80's the field moved from aesthetic questions toward ideological ones: How and in whose interest do the media operate? How are they organized? How do they produce meaning? How do they represent "reality?" And whose "reality?" The development of a critically informed intelligence became the key objective rather than nurturing a finely-honed aesthetic judgment.

- c. In the 90's we now understand that media viewers are also producers of meaning. We are constantly trying to "make sense" of the many media messages we encounter everyday. There is a constant interaction between the text of the message, the context of the media event and the viewer's background, past experience, value system, etc. The educational goal is now empowerment of the viewer to process the messages of the mass media and produce meanings that are both personally and societally relevant.

Therefore, media literacy involves more than just radio/TV/film/print content. Because of the symbiotic relationship between mass media and the consumer economy, media literacy is really about our economic/political/cultural reality which includes mass marketing, advertising, "popular culture" and the whole manufacture and management of information whether done by networks and advertising agencies or, increasingly, by national governments, special interest groups and institutions of every size and shade of opinion.

There is not just "one way" to watch TV (or even read a newspaper); each person must be fully empowered to watch their "own" way — a way that benefits and empowers them to be fully functioning citizens of society.

Furthermore, audience education means not just learning to choose among available choices but, if need be, to create their own version of reality (democratization of media), if and when the available mediated re-presentations do not reflect their experience of the world.

4. Elements Required for Development of Media Education in any country:

- o establishment of curriculum guidelines (nationally or regionally) by appropriate educational authorities.
- o teacher training programs at the university level. This is not a degree program in journalism or broadcasting (which are primarily career oriented) but rather degree programs in education with a specific specialization or major in "media studies."
- o teacher support — in-service educational programs, summer "refresher courses," national organizations (similar, e.g. to National Council for Teachers of English), etc. through which teachers grow and develop in their chosen specialization — and through which the specialization itself evolves and develops through feedback by grassroots teachers.

- educational resources for teaching — writing, testing and publishing of the textbooks, lesson plans, activity sheets, videos or other A-V materials, posters, supplemental booklets, etc. needed for teaching — developed in collaboration with all of the above.

Unless a country has all four elements in place, ongoing, and in sync with each other, it will not be able to successfully implement media education for all of its citizens.

5. Training for media education:

- In truth, media awareness should be integrated into all aspects of education, formal and informal. So all persons involved in any kind of "teaching" — including day-care providers, religious educators, youth directors and perhaps even social workers and counselors, need to take some courses in media studies in order to integrate media criticism and consciousness into their work. Experienced teachers may need opportunities for summer study and for new approaches needed to best teach today's media-wise students.
- Teachers who specialize in what might be called "media studies" need a specific stream of training that involves:
 1. Study of the various theories of media education.
 2. History and key concepts of media education.
 3. History of key forms: TV, film, radio, newspaper, etc.
 4. Basic production in both print and electronic media
 5. Practicum in teaching skills for media studies matched to the appropriate developmental level of the grade to be taught.

5. There appear to be four levels of media education around the world:

- a. Countries where media education has a firm foothold. That is, all four of the above elements are in place and working. Example: England, Scotland, Australia, most European countries and the province of Ontario, Canada.
- b. Countries where media education is uneven. For example, there may be a national curriculum but not any textbooks or teaching materials being published. Or there may be teachers interested but no policy or curriculum frameworks for teaching. Example: Austria, Ireland, Italy, some developing countries, such as India and the Philippines.
- c. Countries where media education is relegated to non-school situations — by design or by neglect of the public school system. Usually other institutions try

to fill the gap as best they can, particularly for their own constituency — e.g. churches, youth programs, women's groups, trade unions. Example: United States. Also many Third World countries .

- d. Countries where recent political and social change has opened up new opportunities/needs for media education. Example: Soviet Union and Eastern block countries which are just now de-controlling their mass media systems paving the way for market-driven communications systems.

Implications/Applications for the US and for the Center for Media and Values:

1. The Toulouse Conference was confirmation that
 - o The movement for media education is an urgent need world-wide;
 - o Most other countries (especially English-speaking ones) are ahead of the U.S. in both public policy and implementation;
 - o The U.S. needs to get its act together before it can contribute much in the world forum.
 - o There is tremendous potential for organization(s) taking leadership in this area.
 - o No one organization can do it all. Groups that develop need to specialize in one aspect or another. There's plenty of work to do; no need to compete or duplicate effort.

2. The following insights should govern future activities:
 - o Most highly developed models/methods for media education (Europe particularly) seem to be organized primarily for implementation in the elementary or secondary school classroom. There is some talk about media education in other settings (trade unions, women's groups, youth programs, etc.) but few really organized efforts.
 - o The U.S. has a unique educational structure compared to many other countries. Our education system is controlled at the state level (and there are 50 autonomous states) rather than nationally. So implementing a national curriculum (as Scotland or Denmark did) is impossible here. There are influential states (e.g. California) but effective widespread implementation of media education in the public school system is going to take a long, long time.
 - o However, the U.S. does have a tremendous heritage of community, parental and family involvement at the local level through religion, youth programs,

community centers, etc. that seems inconceivable to Europeans particularly. (The churches there, of course, are mostly museums.) The U.S. could perhaps best contribute to media education in the world by pioneering methods of media awareness education that are parent-centered and family-based. The concept of "parenting" and even the need to attend "parenting classes" or to participate in "parent support groups" is also primarily a U.S. phenomenon. Basing media literacy as a "parenting skill" is not only unique in the world, but ultimately influences the locus — the home — where informed media choices must take place anyway.

- Given this situation the U.S. and the Third World (especially where churches are involved in base communities using "group media" and political/economic consciousness-raising) may have more in common than the U.S. does with the school-based programs in Europe/Canada/Australia.

3. Needs and Possible Directions for CMV's future work and contribution to the field:

- Get some models going of good media awareness education — in churches, in youth programs, in parenting groups. Concentrate on getting innovative materials "out there" and nurturing a network of people using them effectively.
- Develop effective publicity channels for communicating the growth of the Center in parallel with the development of the media education field — e.g. our own membership newsletter, syndicated columns, talk show interviews, etc. Need to build teams of knowledgeable speakers and writers in the field — volunteers and/or freelancers.
- Provide resources/leadership for national policy conference/consultation on media education for the U.S. in the decade of the 1990's. (This is already initiated for some time in 1991 in collaboration with the Aspen Institute.)
- Publish/publicize theories and methods from other countries — e.g. work of Len Masterman in England whose theories build on Friere's empowerment model and echo the editorial philosophy of Media&Values. Linking up with Masterman broadens, deepens — and validates — directions CMV has already started.
- Resource U.S. opinion leaders in education, social services, religion, foundations — through info packs, reprints, perhaps a special issue of Media&Values .
- Such an issue could also serve as a cornerstone of a "start-up" kit for starting a program of media education in a school, church, etc. Indeed is it time for

an editorial shift to more consciously promote media literacy and/or resource teachers with more activity-centered articles?

- The Center's library/reference center needs to collect and display textbooks, learning packets and other teaching materials from around the world — for reference ourselves, for others who come to the Center or to take to display at meetings/seminars/conferences. Contacts made in Toulouse and materials gathered there have already expanded our collection significantly.
- Possibly some of these materials are adaptable to the U.S. — e.g. Canadian texts/teaching guides might be quite usable with only a few changes. We need to explore our capacity as a "center" which can provide editorial expertise in all subject matters related to media education/literacy.
- The Center might consider expanding its mail order capability to handle other books and resources that we consider key — e.g. Masterman's Teaching the Media. The Center could be a "one-stop" marketplace for all the important material related to media literacy.
- Find ways to involve the media industry itself in this challenging task — not just through funding but through their enormous creative talent for storytelling and persuasion. Link into the idealism of talented individuals who were originally drawn to media careers precisely because they recognized the potential and power of the media to "change the world."