Teaching about the mass media at school

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Media growth over the past few years has been formidable. All forms of media have increased their fare, and the turnover of transistor radios, video recorders, micro-computers, cassettes and magazines is constantly reaching new heights. Some say that this is only the beginning of the second media revolution. The prognoses suggest that within the turn of the millennium there will be forty television satellites in Europe alone. This expansion of the culture industry will in the long run broaden the media's capacity for influence, and lead to a greater internationalizing of its content. The pressure from the media-conveyed culture has led to a greater consumption among most age-groups, and to other changes in media habits.

The need for media upbringing seems to be more important than ever. Progress has destroyed monopolies, threatened ideologies, shaken patterns of authority, turned both young and old into involuntary media consumers, and created a magnetic field in the socializing process which was unknown to previous generations. Yet, if the individual citizen is still to be able to digest impressions from the messages of the media, he needs a basis for evaluation. This basis must come from upbringing. Such a pedagogic challenge must be taken up by cultural institutions as well as the authorities, but the major responsibility lies in the home. The latter is the consumer arena where the criteria for right and wrong in our relationship to the media are formed. The adult generation perhaps lack the requirements necessary for establishing criteria. They do not have any more of a conscious relationship to the media than do the younger generation. Many parents have fallen behind in current events and often see television and comics as the lesser of many evils to which children are exposed. Media politics at home give children a specific attitude towards the mass media. Already, the conflicts of authority seem obvious. What sort of magazines should be left lying about? Who decides whether or not the television should be turned off, or changed to another channel? How loud should the radio/stereo be when other family members wish to talk? Such questions sound trivial. But if parents do not have the authority to answer them, how can they bring up their children?

Schools' contribution to media education

Schools were for a long time passive in their relationship to the mass media. That is why they were at a disadvantage in terms of experience and authority in counselling parents about practical/pedagogical media questions. They still have a supplementary role to play, first in bringing up the topic at parent-teacher meetings and in other local forums, and, second, in consciousness-raising efforts with camera clubs, libraries, women's clubs, etc.

Both the school and the home can offer children clearing-up sessions; in other words, time for follow-up work in conjunction with media consumption. Children often retain a great deal

of undigested impressions from television, radio or comics, and it is therefore necessary to clear things up in which frightening or violent scenes are brought into the light; the inexplicable is explained, and one tries to draw moral conclusions. Such an exercise can only be accomplished by giving children information about the ideas behind the programme, explanation of foreign words and information about the special effects, such as lighting and camera angles. It is also favourable to create discussion situations concerning those experiences each individual receives from the programme and its message. Here, the teacher and student, parent and child can meet on common ground by talking about their own experiences so that the distance between the individual and the media is established, a distance which gives everyone the possibility to make independent decisions in relationship to them.

The schools' most important contribution to media education is nevertheless to offer pupils a systematic introduction to the world of the media. Up to the last few years, this possibility has only been partially implemented. Now one can see that more and more schools are attacking their educational assignments with vigour. They wish to give their pupils a set of facts, attitudes and abilities which are the prerequisites for facing and understanding products from the cultural industry. An adult audience that demands more from, and discerns more concerning, the mass media can progress only by use of such means.

Aims for media education

It is often emphasized in didactics that you must have clear goals in order to know not only where you are headed, but also the path you will follow. What is the point of studying mass communications? What should the aim of such work in school be? These questions must be answered based on the national scholastic tradition, the age-group involved and the school’s overall goals. It is always required that new subject areas help the school in realizing its general intentions. The study of curricula from many countries shows, nevertheless, that in spite of varying points of departure, there is a rather broad agreement on two points.1

THE CRITICAL IDEAL

The cultivation of a critical attitude towards the mass media is a goal that is formulated in many ways. The curriculum plan for Norwegian primary schools views such teaching as a necessity in order that the pupils can ‘develop their ability to form remonstrative attitudes towards suggestive influences, either these are from their nearest circle or from the mass media’.2 The idea here then is to lead pupils to a definable attitude of protection where they can question both media coverage and their own media habits. People of the 1980s are going to be overwhelmed by information and entertainment many hours a day. This current inevitably involves a false sense of proportion, hidden conflicts, and norms which do not fit very well with those that the school and the home try to espouse. Perhaps the most serious problem for many is that the media replace personal experiences and activities with second-hand consumer goods. The critical student reflects on roles, values and arguments in the media as a force of habit. Such a student has put a psychological distance between himself and the media, knowing that they are only surrogates. But this does not prevent identification with the leading character in a film, or participation in detective-inspired games. Living like superman, or thinking like the rock-music idol, however, provides no temptation. They can be enjoyed for what they are. In a sea of impressions, the critical student manages to resist the pressure to conform and remains able to form independent opinions on the material at hand.