3. Why is Cleaver especially concerned about the impact on children of Internet pornography? Why is pornography on the Internet more dangerous to children than other types of pornographic material?
4. What specific suggestions does Cleaver have for regulating Internet pornography? Do her ideas seem clear and feasible to you?

Ideas for Writing

1. Cleaver asks us to "start considering what kind of society we'll have when the next generation learns about human sexuality from what the Internet teaches." Write an essay in response to Cleaver's claim that the Internet today significantly affects children's ideas of sexuality and gender role.
2. An alternative to Cleaver's proposal for restricting Internet pornography through government control would be to have parents monitor more closely their children's Internet use and to discuss sexual issues more openly with them. Write an essay in which you discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, indicating which would seem to be more effective.

Media, Literacy, and Democratic Citizenship

JEFFREY SCHEUER

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In a sound bite society, we cannot be critical thinkers without also being critical viewers; the application of critical skills to mass media is therefore an essential counterpart of critical thinking. Media literacy has been defined as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in various media."[9] Neil Postman uses the term "media ecology" to describe "how the media control the form, distribution, and direction of information, and how such control affects people's cognitive habits, political beliefs, and social relations." Like verbal literacy and critical thinking, it has several important aims: to teach young viewers how to distinguish reality from fantasy and artifice; to examine the distinct codes and cues of visual images, words, music, etc.; to distinguish and decipher commercial, political, and other types of messages; to detect the cynical and the trivial; and in general, to understand how television and other media frame and package information and entertainment, and their influence on viewers, consumers, and citizens.

Students who spend more time watching television than in classrooms, and who have viewed an average of 18,000 TV murders by the time they graduate from high school, must learn to resist television's power to isolate, manipulate, deceive, simplify, palliate, and disguise. They must learn to detect submerged meanings, assess motives, and deconstruct narratives—the very skills we teach them to apply to literature and writing in general. As the boundary between factual messages and advertising is increasingly blurred by "infomercials," "advertorials," and commercialized news, and as corporate advertising creeps insidiously into the school environment, students need to know how to evaluate commercial and political advertising, how news is shaped for a mass audience, and how truth, accuracy, balance, and context are compromised by other interests and imperatives. Moreover, just as literacy involves writing as well as reading, media literacy should include experience in producing and critiquing audiovisual messages. All curriculum development should promote critical thinking; media literacy in particular should be mandatory in the American school curriculum, as it is in Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere.

Media literacy cannot focus on television to the exclusion of film, video, radio, music, or the Internet. It must encompass study of the exploding media universe, and its increasingly tenuous relationship to genuine knowledge. (Instead of allocating scarce educational dollars to hardwire American classrooms to the Internet, on the simple assumption that knowledge equates with access to facts, we might better devote those resources to raising the pay and competency standards of teachers.) Nor does critical viewing imply that TV is an evil or all-powerful medium, that it does not gratify legitimate needs and desires, or that children do not bring to it critical faculties of their own. Media literacy should explore TV's positive as well as its negative potentials and the controversies surrounding them. The purpose of critical viewing is not to shield people from television, but to enable them to use and enjoy it intelligently, while recognizing the legitimacy of its sedative and entertaining functions.

Yet, like critical thinking generally, media literacy has an unavoidable ideological dimension. Critical viewing is subversive because, like critical thinking generally, it imparts mental skills which dispositionally favor a more complex view, not just of how television frames and filters reality, but of television itself as a social organism, and of society as a whole. It is subversive because it transfers some of the power over the message and its interpretation from the mediators (typically commercial enterprises) to the audience—democratic citizens. It is inherently skeptical, egalitarian, and anticommercial. It posits motives, causes, and contextual factors that interested parties would prefer to ignore. Thus, media literacy is bound to offend conservatives who would deny its relevance to informed citizenship. Like the Wizard of Oz, media corporations and advertisers will inevitably oppose (or in more sinister cases, co-opt and corrupt) efforts to look behind the curtain and reveal how they manipulate.

5 But there is also an important, if limited, political counterclaim to be made here. Media literacy is not simply "proliberal" or "anticonservative." In principle, it should appeal to dignified conservatives who value individual opportunity and citizenship over corporate hegemony. Open societies must tolerate many moral complexities and ostensible contradictions, including some things that warrant critical scrutiny, or even condemnation, but not wholesale proscription. On paramount issues such as the value of informed democratic citizenship, which at least partly transcend ideology, thoughtful conservatives will side with liber-

als. In this sense, the critical thinking and viewing agenda is not just a liberal one but a broader democratic one.

CRITICAL DIALOGUE AND DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

Certain progressive goals in the twenty-first century relate to more nebulous aspects of the American political-media culture. For example, that culture would survive if it tolerated more open discussion of class. Progressives have a particular stake in ending this taboo because their views on the subject of class are at greater variance with the status quo. Class mobility exists in America, up to a point, as does stratification, with intertwining racial, ethnic, educational, and economic barriers. The existence of such barriers in a market-driven society—and the acceptable range, and the costs of eliminating or reducing them—are not just valid but crucial matters of debate. In a more mobile and egalitarian society there would be less to differ about; then, we could all become conservatives. As it is, we dream two American Dreams: in the rosier conservative one, we are a society without obvious or eradicable barriers to class mobility; in the liberal one, it is not so simple.

More broadly, a culture of critical thinking and viewing would demand higher standards for media, government, and citizens alike. For instance, it would demand greater journalistic accountability both ethically and intellectually, on matters such as integrity and fairness, concealed bias, diligence, accuracy, and news judgement. News producers and consumers alike should understand how television drives, alters, and distorts events—and how covering them differently, or not at all, might serve or disserve a wider public interest. This cannot be done by the media alone, or on a judicial model of self-appointed news councils. An excellent place to begin, with strong public support, would be to make a clear distinction between the private and public lives of public figures. It isn't so difficult. Journalists can learn to just say no.

A more media-literate nation would not tolerate news media that accept evasive answers from politicians or shrink from offending them with a follow-up question, or buckle under corporate threats of litigation should inconvenient facts be exposed to consumers. It would not brook the barring of reporters from a battlefield where Americans are fighting, or countenance contempt for the press on the part of public officials, which is properly regarded as contempt for the people. When a president plays on public mistrust of the media by treating reporters like a pack of baying dogs, or deflecting their questions amid the whir of a waiting helicopter, we should have the critical sense to be affronted at this insult to democracy.

A media-literate audience would be more critical, not less, of individual news media—but not reflexively critical. Instead of carping about media negativism, it would insist on getting the bad news as well as the good: "My country right or wrong," said Carl Schurz, "when right to be kept right; when wrong to be put right."

10 As it is, Americans' mistrust of the media, as of politicians, is often uncritical: not based on performance, or on democratic criteria, but questioning the very legitimacy of those institutions. This is not just a failure to recognize the abundant examples of journalistic excellence, but indifference to the functions of news media in a democracy. Such broad based delegitimation of the media (and of Congress) is not just a vague threat to a democratic culture; it's a deep flaw in the fabric. Like government, the Media R Us; we elect them, from the choices available, every time we buy a periodical or tune into a broadcast. And we elect them for terms of our own choosing, lasting minutes or seconds.

In the human mind, neuroses arise as conflicts within the self that affect our perceptions and relationships. Likewise, in the public mind certain uncritical myths, perpetuated by the media and politicians, function as collective neuroses that distort our perceptions and behavior and the very climate of debate. While typically containing grains of truth that strike deep emotional chords in the national psyche, they also represent failures of critical thinking, and the failure to acknowledge our collective capacity and responsibility for political action or inaction.

Among the salient examples of such neuroses are indiscriminate hostility toward political incumbents and toward the media—institutions which are currently perceived more as alien forces than as imperfect mirrors of society. The anti-incumbent neurosis ignores the fact that we freely re-elect some 98 percent of officeholders, as well as the main reason for high incumbency rates: the system of political finance. Thus, Republican enthusiasm for term limits was cured by the reality therapy of electoral success in 1994.

Public mistrust of the news media reflects a similar pattern. Many news outlets (like many politicians) are shallow, sensational, dishonest, inaccurate, or scurrilous. We should be more critical of the media for specific failures and lapses, such as self-censorship or allowing corporate influence on news decisions; but less critical of the media for performing their function as surrogate messengers and watchdogs. A blind mistrust of either sector is a civic neurosis. Politics is sometimes futile, and politicians and the media are sometimes corrupt; but to hold these beliefs reflexively only reveals the low self-esteem of American democracy. In fact, it matters very much how the news is reported, whom we elect to represent us, and how those representatives conduct our business. It matters because lives, freedoms, and billions of dollars are at stake, including our own.

A more critical attitude here requires that we make a series of elementary, but routinely ignored; distinctions. The most important such distinction is between the paramount value of a free press and the quality of its performance. Thus, in addition to media-literacy curricula, greater democratic accountability demands more public criticism of, and self-criticism by, the press. Broadcasting, in particular, is devoid of such criticism; like print and cyberspace, it needs more independent critics and ombudsmen. At the same time, every democratic citizen should be educated for and capable of some level of informed media criticism. News media are not an afterthought of democratic life.

Another elementary distinction that we routinely obscure, 15 when it suits our rhetorical purposes, is that between fair criticism and censorship. We degrade the First Amendment by impressing it into use as a shield against all criticism. Criticism does not threaten freedom of speech; it is not censorship. We need to distinguish between the rightness of an utterance and the right to say it; between the message and the messenger; and between a proper respect for quality and what philistines call "elitism." The American media have many shortcomings, based on commercialism and on ordinary human imperfection; but a mindless contempt for the media based on fear and ignorance is not the answer to the real and remediable problems of gathering and telling the news. It is rather a kind of bigotry toward informed citizenship.

THE ATTENTIVE SOCIETY: JOURNALISM AND IDEOLOGICAL LITERACY

E.J. Dionne, Jr., has written that, “Lurking beneath the widespread criticism of the media is the sense that something is deeply defective in the public debate itself and that the press is not taking on a role that it ought to embrace: to make that debate more accessible, coherent and honest.” For that to happen, media producers and consumers alike must become more ideologically literate. We must begin with agreement about indisputable facts; that is one of journalism’s essential functions. But facts are only where we start from. Interesting and important debates are never about facts per se; they are about how we interpret them, and which facts are more relevant to some larger question or principle. Interesting arguments are not about facts, but about values: in effect, about the extent and complexity of our role as our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.

Ideology is like weather: we may not like it, but it won’t go away. To suggest that it is bad or unnecessary is a form of denial which, like blanket contempt for the media or government, can only impoverish debate. Awash in sound bites and electronic propaganda, both political and commercial, in clashing images, personalities, and parties, young Americans need to understand the ideas and values underlying different points on the spectrum, and the nature of the spectrum itself. Conservatives should embrace their simplicity; progressives should take equal pride in an agenda based on a more demanding and complicated social compact.

Greater ideological literacy is especially needed in the news media, which both lead and follow society at large. This does not mean that journalists should share any particular outlook, or should become philosophers; rather, they need greater understanding of, and respect for, the range of democratic ideological debate. This applies equally, of course, to politicians and their spokesmen, pundits, academicians, and their audiences. In an ideologically literate society, politicians would identify with their visions, not blur them; citizens and journalists would respect both the legitimacy and the proper boundaries of partisanship. They would distinguish between the political strength of arguments and their moral force; between the political status of the left or the right at a given moment, and the validity of their claims or broader goals; between issues amenable to neutral problem solving and those on which there can never be complete political

consensus. Such distinctions are frequently obscured in a sound bite society, and most often at the expense of the left.

We should distinguish, further, between fiscal prudence—government not spending more than it takes in—and fiscal priorities: how much, and for what purposes, the government should take in and spend. We should distinguish between government regulation in the public interest and authoritarian government; between our individual notions of the good life, and the collective value of our common freedom to pursue those individual goods. Making such distinctions is a quintessential liberal project, and one that dignified conservatives and radicals can share.

What E.J. Dionne, Jr. and Glenn Tinder have called an “attentive society” is not a grand mutual pursuit of truth; truth is crucial, but only as a premise for the conduct of dignified argument. 20 Neither is it the pursuit of universal consensus on all important issues, which the complexity spectrum precludes. It is rather about a higher level of understanding and respect. As Christopher Lasch has written, “what democracy requires is vigorous public debate, not [just] information.” In a society where journalists often wield more influence than public officials, the quality of political representation, public discourse, journalism, and mass education are closely intertwined. Like our schools, television has the potential to contribute to a more, and not less, attentive society. It is erroneous to suppose that what we teach our children, and what television teaches them, about tolerance, democratic conversation, or ideology, are not similarly intertwined. The objective of journalism, writes Dionne, should be

> to salvage [Walter] Lippmann’s devotion to accuracy and fairness by putting these virtues to the service of the democratic debate that [John] Dewey so valued. This means, in turn, that journalism needs to be concerned with far more than its professional rules and imperatives.

Whatever their particular failings, the media as a whole constitute the only portion of the private sector that is protected by the Constitution and essential to the democratic process. That is why quality, and not just quantity or profits, is important. Among other things, we have lost sight of the purpose of journalistic competition; the public would be better served if journalists worried less about getting it first, and more about getting it best. Certain elements of the media inevitably will—and should—focus on the impregnation of celebrities by alien visitors. But if the need for bread and circuses cannot be dismissed, neither can the need for quality in the flow of information relevant to democratic life, and for education that builds the demand for it.

American journalism is founded on a glorious contradiction. Virtually all of it is commercially based or market dependent, even in the nonprofit sector. It is sometimes compromised, and always limited, by that dependence and its attendant pressures. In this sense, the media can't help being conservative. Yet while the media must sell, they also have a democratic mission to inform, and to provide a forum for debate; and for these reasons the journalistic enterprise has inherently liberal and democratic tendencies: tendencies which, contrary to their commercial foundations, challenge power, question authority, and empower ordinary citizens by diffusing information more widely than corporate or private interests would like. Thus, however ensconced in the private sector, serious journalism—like public libraries and public education—also has an intrinsically egalitarian public purpose.

There are several important ways in which this dilemma can be mitigated. One is a diverse and competitive environment of media pluralism—which the present media oligopoly is not. Another is for the mainstream media to follow the polestar of being fierce advocates—for democratic argument. The civic journalism movement has got it half right: we need journalism that promotes active and informed citizenship. What we don't need is journalism driven by surveys, opinion polls, or focus groups, which is market research masquerading as democracy.

To service democratic debate, the media must understand and respect all shades of opinion, and the dignity of ideological argument. Television's harsh, impatient gaze—oriented toward means and gamesmanship rather than ends, issues, or values; quick to expose scandal and flaws of character, slow to consider deeper motives or broader intentions or ideas—is part of the problem. In its institutional cynicism it inhibits and ignores serious ideological debate; hence the persistence of the naive supposition that bipartisan "solutions" can be found to important problems, and that partisanship is merely a fog obscuring the real political terrain, and not, in fact, the terrain itself. And when ideology is scanted, complex ideology is taxed disproportionately.

25 If facts are only a point of departure for democratic discourse, then journalism schools, an awkward anomaly within the American university with no clear public purpose or intellectual focus, ought to provide more than vocational training for the harvesting of facts (or worse, the unseemly commingling of truth and propaganda, in misalliance with advertising and public relations). To suggest that journalists are not merely brokers of information but educators, who should themselves be students of human values and society, is to realize both the vital role of the journalism profession and the deep impatience with real knowledge—about ideas, theories, and values—in American culture.

Instead of just teaching people how to produce journalism—a misuse of our national educational resources—we should teach them to be better critics and consumers of journalism. In effect, we need to relocate journalism education to the elementary and secondary levels, to educate younger Americans about the technical, economic, and moral imperatives of the media. In short, America needs less journalism education, and more media education. While the two are not mutually exclusive, it is far more important for kids to learn what goes into doing and using journalism, than for young adults to learn how to meet a deadline. And instead of just training and credentializing reporters, producers, and Webmasters, universities should prepare them for their wider role as educators.

Information—to return to our introductory theme—is indeed power. That is no mere sound bite. But there is also a deep and naive faith in American culture: that all information is equally useful, and we can never have too much of it; that a rising information tide lifts all boats; that information is somehow tantamount to wisdom, mastery, or sensitivity. We need more critical thinking and robust debate—not just the classic American quick fix of more technology. The Internet may be bountiful, but so is the local public library or the inspiring teacher. The Web won't save us, or make our children smarter, and neither will the simplistic policy of putting more computers in classrooms.

Real education—whether the medium be TV, video, computer, radio, a classroom, or a park bench—admits no such technological shortcuts. It is not about the glutting of minds with facts, but the culture of critical thinking and respectful debate. It is not, said Yeats, the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire. Commercial television, more than anything else in our society, under-cuts those values by inuring us, and our political and media surrogates, to solutions that are easy, visible, quick, cheap, short-term, and simple.

As Roderick Hart and others have urged, a new critical ethic of the moving image is needed for the twenty-first century. More than that, the sheer scope and complexity of the fusion between politics and the media warrant a new avenue of scholarly inquiry, combining the tools and techniques of media studies, moral and political discourse, and the social and information sciences, to explore the cognitive, psychological, political, and behavioral impact of all visual and interactive media, especially on children.

30 One option for the left, in the face of the corporate media oligopoly, lies in alternative sources of media production and distribution, in areas such as public access TV, microradio, and the Internet. The good news is that the cost of media production is declining; and here video, cable, and the Internet offer real possibilities. But so long as commercial television retains its dominance, and public television remains underfunded and subservient to political and private interests, market economics remains a powerful barrier to alternative voices. Ultimately, quality journalism, alternative or otherwise, will remain a ghetto until some information media are decommercialized, and until America invests more heavily in its schools.

Even with additional resources and channels, the structural barriers remain. These barriers at least partly explain why alternative programming efforts, in Graham Knight's words, "often turn out to be, in comparison with mainstream television, dull, longwinded, and sanctimonious. . . ." What is important, Knight concludes, "is not [the appropriation of existing] techniques per se (*as if they had some naturalized ideological essence*), [my italics] but rather how they are combined and used." This book has argued that there is precisely such a 'naturalized ideological essence' in the media, against the grain of which progressives must labor.

Questions for Discussion

1. What strategies for critical viewing and media literacy does Scheuer discuss? Why does he believe that it is important for these to become part of the mandatory school curriculum? Why is such media literacy "subversive" and likely to "offend conservatives"? What would a "media-literate nation" refuse to tolerate?
2. According to Scheuer, what is so dangerous about our current attitude of generalized hostility towards both politicians and the media? How would developing media literacy help us to reevaluate some of our blanket rejection of the media and politicians? Do you agree?

3. Why does Scheuer believe that ideological literacy within and in response to the news media is so greatly needed? Why are mere facts inadequate? What examples does he provide of important value distinctions that can be drawn through ideological literacy?
4. What are some of the reforms and strategies through which Scheuer believes the news media can achieve an "egalitarian public purpose"? Why is a college education in journalism inadequate as it is presently taught?

Ideas for Writing

1. Drawing on Scheuer's ideas and your own observations, write an essay in which you discuss and analyze both the causes for and ways to help people get beyond the blanket rejection of media information and politicians that leads many young people to feel alienated from public life and unwilling to exercise their fundamental citizenship right of voting.
2. Argue whether you believe that media-literate people would necessarily be any more engaged in citizenship and the nation's political decision-making than our current citizenry.

Independent Media Alternatives

David Barsamian

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More and more young people are taking to heart Jello Biafra's call to "Become the Media." They aren't just criticizing and complaining about the mainstream media; they're producing