Obstacles
to the Development of Media Education
in the United States

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Abstract

This article examines the political, economic, historic, and cultural explanations for why the United States lags behind other major English-speaking countries in the formal delivery of media education. The research relies on formal documents and newsletters, interviews with leading media education researchers and teachers from numerous nations, and site visits to five countries. Among the many factors explored are the sheer physical size of the U.S., its highly heterogeneous population, resistance to the federal government's making central educational or broadcasting policy, the fact that the U.S. exports far more media products than it imports, and a long-standing reluctance to take the popular arts seriously.

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The United States finds itself in the ironic position of being the world's leading exporter of media products while lagging behind every other major Eng1ish-speaking country in the world in the formal delivery of media education in its schools. Are there specific reasons that explain the less developed state of U.S. media education? If so, what obstacles lie ahead?

The formal research for this study began in 1993 when I began collecting material from around the world, including formal documents, brochures, newsletters, and educational plans; interviewing leading media education scholars and researchers, as well as experienced media education master teachers and inexperienced teachers from around the world; and directly observing in five countries, spending the greatest periods in England, Scotland, and the United States.

A worldwide movement in media literacy education has been growing for roughly 30 years. Since the mid-1990s, Australia has mandated media education from kindergarten through 12th grade. Ontario has mandated it for grades 7-12 since 1987. In Britain in 1996, approximately 25,000 students took their GCSE exams (for 16-year-olds) and some 8,000 university-bound 18-year-o1ds took their A Level (advanced level) exams in media studies. Even before the fall of apartheid, South Africa was already ahead of the United States in formal media education (Criticos, 1997). Numerous non-English-speaking regions and countries have also developed media education initiatives at a rapid rate. Substantive developments have occurred in Scandinavia, South America, Europe, Asia, Russia, and Israel (see Brown, 1991; Piette & Giroux, 1997).

In the United States, significant statewide initiatives are now in place in New Mexico and North Carolina, with noteworthy developments having occurred in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and other states. Most states are home to one or more organized groups working to advance the cause of media education, locally, statewide, or nationally. In 1992, the first National Leadership Conference on

Media Literacy was convened by the Aspen Institute. It brought 25 educators and activists together to establish a "definition, vision, and framework for developing media literacy programs" in the U.S. (Aufderheide, 1993). U.S. media education leaders have recently met with President Clinton and Vice President Gore. The fact that the term *media literacy* is now increasingly recognized by citizens and political leaders marks a substantive advance in the U.S. Still, most calls for formal media literacy training in the United States have gone unheeded, often for decades (see Anderson, 1983; Ford Foundation, 1975; Lewis, 1948; Munsterberg, 1916; UNESCO, 1964).

If a simple criterion measure of the state of media education development is the average number of hours of media education per student, then there is little doubt that the U.S. lags well behind other English-speaking countries. Still, an accurate comparative estimate is extremely difficult, if not impossible. As educators know, mandate and delivery are not one and the same.

Isolated Effort and Organization: Geography Matters
In smaller countries (e.g., Israel and Scotland) it is relatively easy for many interested parties in media education to meet regularly. A great percentage of these countries' media teachers can arrive at a central site within 2 to 3 hours. In these countries, and in physically larger countries such as Canada and Australia, strong local, provincial, and state efforts were built from substantial grassroots organizing by teachers, often in close contact with administrators and academics. Teachers feel closely connected to the leadership of these provincial movements, because teachers *are* the leaders in Western Australia and Ontario. There has also been more collegiality and a more even playing field between teachers and university scholars than typically occurs in the U.S. Having 50 states spread across 3.6 million square miles, all with different educational authorities, and each with scores of local school boards, has led to greater isolation of media educators in the U.S. than has been the case in smaller countries or in those with fewer provinces or states. Unlike other English-speaking countries, the leading media literacy advocacy groups in the U.S-- the National Telemedia Council, the Center for Media Literacy, and the Center for Media Education-- are "outside the educational 'establishment'" (Considine, 1990, p. 29). U.S. media educators are prone to saying that they have to "reinvent the wheel." On a more hopeful note, however, U.S. teachers now make contact with such organizations much earlier in their careers.

Media education has yet to obtain popular support. Far more parents, for example, will say that they want their children to be computer literate than will say they want their children to be media literate. Parents believe that computer expertise can equal a leg up in the job market. Such workplace concerns have long shaped American education (Cremin, 1988). Curiously though, at the very highest levels of education-- at elite universities, for example-- the received wisdom is that sophistication in the arts, popular culture, and the media is very important, and constitute a sort of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1984). At the middle and lower levels of the social structure, education in the arts and media are frills that consume time and money-- add-ons that can only come after the necessary subject areas are covered.

American Educational Culture and Practice
Because the U.S. is also relatively isolated geographically and culturally (e.g., we see relatively little foreign media product), it is more difficult than in Europe to entertain the possibility that we need to examine ourselves or our cultural products. In the U.S., popular culture products are more likely to be taken as natural phenomena than would be the case were we constantly exposed to the television, news, and film products of other countries. The long-standing ethnic, racial, and religious diversity

within the U.S. population, although arguably the nation's greatest strength, inhibits the ability to gain consensus on numerous issues, particularly those that pertain to controversial aspects in the socialization and education of children. Local school boards are numerous (New Jersey has more than 600) and unusually powerful in the U.S. (Apple, 1996; Considine, 1990; Silver, 1997). This is at least partly linked to our multiethnic, multiracial, and multireligious make-up. In 1890, a newly immigrated Irish-American parent in Brooklyn might well have found it disconcerting that her child's primary school teacher was Italian, Jewish, or German. Such differences helped fuel the rise of powerful local school boards. Put another way, it is generally easier in more homogeneous countries for parents to cede power to an educational authority, because it is assumed that teachers and administrators share the same sorts of background and values.

For these and other reasons, it is difficult for Americans to consider, let alone embrace, national educational policies (only 4% of educational expenditures in the U.S. come from the federal government). Furthermore, U.S. teachers are not treated as knowledgeable professionals, as they are elsewhere. According to Australian media educator Peter Greenaway of Deakin University, teachers in the U.S. are treated as low-level "process workers" who need to be given textbooks and told how to teach by others (personal communication, May 15, 1992). Elsewhere, teachers often have more autonomy and responsibility, and the teaching innovations, which are often a hallmark of media education, are more readily enacted. Similarly, in countries where most people are reasonably comfortable with a more singular national identity, and with, for example, a strong national broadcasting service (such as the BBC or Israel Television), making federal educational policy on most any subject is substantially easier to bring about. The Israeli Ministry of Education (1993), for example, agreed that media education ought to be developed. A curriculum was commissioned, and 2 years later it was widely available.

Why is government action important? Once a state mandates something educationally, subsequent hurdles become easier to surmount. Suddenly, there must be teachers, there may well be standards, and a whole bureaucratic process swings into operation, In England, the fact that media studies became an accepted area for advanced-level examinations legitimated the area as few other developments could. Most every leading media educator in England with whom I spoke considered it to be a very significant step forward. In contrast, consider what happened in the late 1970s when the U.S. government invested a few million dollars in piloting "critical viewing" curricula through four major grants at the preschool, elementary, middle and high school, and college levels.

In 1979, Wisconsin Senator William Proxmire got wind of the grants. Famous for his Golden Fleece awards to governmental agencies that he alleged were wasting the taxpayers' money on silly boondoggles, Proxmire went on the attack. Boston University, a site scheduled to receive a $400,000 grant, was the target. Responding to Proxmire's press release, a Boston newspaper ran a highly dismissive headline and story a few weeks before the Dallas Cowboys appearance in the Super Bowl about the "Department of Education giving a grant to their *friends* at Boston University *to teach college boys how to watch cowgirls on TV'* (italics added; Frank Withrow, then a director of the Division of Educational Technology, personal communication, March 3, 1993).

Things got worse when Proxmire appeared on a radio show with the Boston University project director, Donis Dondis, who explained that one of the many things they wanted media education to accomplish was to help college students better understand the political implications of what they saw on television. Dondis allegedly added, "for example, Senator, I believe you had a hair transplant

so you'd look a little better on TV" (Withrow, personal communication, March 3, 1993). In time, contracts were canceled and lawsuits ensued. The BU project officially ended on July 31, 1981, just 6 months after Ronald Reagan's inauguration and after his campaign to abolish the Department of Education (see Brown, 1991; Piette & Giroux, 1997, for histories of these and other projects).

Discussions with U.S. education schools reveal that some believe that media education need only involve experience threading a 16mm projector, running a VCR, and perhaps having students complete an assignment where they produce a multimedia presentation. There remains little recognition that language arts instruction in such standard topics as foreshadowing, representation, character development, and symbolism-- or that the means of information dissemination in our society-- might extend beyond print. The U.S. educational establishment refuses to recognize this fact, or is mystified as to how to retool and retrain in order to educate students and future citizens for the new realities of communication. By contrast, in the Australian language arts curriculum, teachers are *required* to teach nonprint as well as print media.

In and around London and Glasgow, there are buildings that house large rooms completely dedicated to media education materials. These provide space for interested media teachers to assemble after school, to hold seminars and workshops, preview materials, and simply find support, encouragement, and instruction from one another, and from master teachers. The funding comes from the local education authority. According to the teachers, these centers have been among the most crucial factors in the development of media education in their countries.

By contrast, U.S. teachers often arrange and pay for their own media training through private workshops. Many eager would-be media literacy teachers in the U.S. are young, untenured, and lack the power to make significant changes (Kubey, 1991). Some teachers fear that engaging in media education could tag them as being political (B. Duncan, personal communication, June 26, 1992). It's telling, too, that, to date, media education in the U.S. has advanced much further in private and parochial schools than in public schools. Private schools do not need to look over their shoulder at local and governmental authorities if they use media education as a way to teach values, or engage in educational innovation or experimentation. The public school teacher often needs to be much more vigilant.

With few states or local school districts having mandated a need for media education, and with most education schools turning out teachers no better equipped to do media education than was the case 20 years ago, the U.S. situation is one with no, or precious little, formal training.
More pressing needs are often cited. First, students must be able to read and write, an argument not easily rebutted. One can legitimately argue that media teachers around the world regularly report that nontraditional students often thrive in media education courses, and that reading and writing are necessarily a critical part of their video or radio productions. However, in the current U.S. educational climate this is an uphill battle. Another problem is that teachers wonder how just one more thing is to be added to an already burgeoning curriculum. Curricular additions over the past 15 years include drug education, AIDS prevention, anti-bullying and peer support programs, and computers. It is within this very crowded environment, with teachers being largely unsupported and overburdened, that media education innovations must compete.

Teacher attitude can be particularly critical when adopting a student-centered approach, something not easily done by many traditional teachers. Perhaps the most common mistake that inexperienced

media teachers make is to show a program or film clip from something that the students like, and then tear it to pieces while instructing why the *teacher's* responses are the correct ones, and the enjoyment that students derive is improper or naive. Few moves will set up a teacher for failure more quickly and are more insulting to the students' sensibilities or willingness to engage in interpretation (see also Buckingham, 1993; Hobbs, this issue). The consequences of such an error were well documented by a professor of American studies teaching undergraduate students, and realizing only at semester's end that she needed to reevaluate her approach to media teaching (Cayton, 1994). From Len Masterman's point of view, teachers would ideally be interested in "getting people to think for themselves, to think clearly and coherently rather than produce clones of yourself. Otherwise there's no difference between education and propaganda. . . . To begin a progressive educational practice one must begin by respecting the values and the ideas the kids are actually bringing into school with them." (personal communication, May 14, 1992)

For many who become involved in media education in midcareer, we hear reports of enormous bursts of new energy and a rebirth of excitement, precisely because teaching about and through the media can be especially exciting and student-engaging. For many others, however, after 10 or more years of conventional classroom work typical in the U.S., a fair number of teachers have grown so wedded to textbooks and others' lesson plans that the more innovative, seat-of-the-pants media teaching described above is something that they will not even try. Indeed, master media literacy teachers often report resistance from midcareer teachers who are exploring the media education waters precisely because the ideas of student-centered teaching and encouragement of the student's critical autonomy are especially threatening. Some teachers find it completely contrary to adopt, as some media educators advocate, that textbooks themselves be treated as media products open and ripe for deconstruction and criticism. The next step is criticism of the teacher and his or her authority.

Exported U.S. Media as a Catalyst for Media Education Outside the U.S.
One of the most intriguing factors in the development of media education outside the United States, and a highly ironic one, is that other countries' educational initiatives have been partly compelled by the huge importation of U.S. television and film products. Around the world, U.S. television, film, and popular music are both loved and loathed, often by the same people. Significant numbers of educators, policy makers, and critics believe that the cultural integrity of their own country is threatened by so much foreign (read U.S.) film and television product flooding across their borders. In short, there is a hope in many countries (e.g., Scotland, Canada, Spain) that media education will help their youth perceive that the values promulgated in the U.S. and other countries' media products are not necessarily their own (see Buckingham, this issue).

Insofar as precious little U.S. television programming comes from outside the country, one of the significant levers, then, that has helped advance the cause of media education elsewhere around the world would seem to be nonexistent, at least in the form of "foreign" media, in the U.S. context. After studying media education in the U.S., Australian Peter Greenaway concluded that, "To understand a culture, you've got to go outside it. Americans never go outside their own culture. That's why media education barely exists there" (personal communication, May 15, 1992). U.S. educators have also been historically less inclined to draw from the experiences of teachers in other countries, or to know about foreign intellectual developments in media studies (see below).

Cultural Studies Versus Inoculatory Approaches

British scholars lead the English-speaking media education world and a good many non-English-speaking countries, as well. Len Masterman, best known for *Teaching the Media* (1985), and David Buckingham for *Watching Media Learning* (1990) have each been invited frequently to Canada, Australia, and the U.S. in recent years to infuse media education movements. Both have been influenced by the thrust of media studies developments in Europe since the 1960s and can be situated within the cultural studies paradigm, which, pedagogically, involves more student-centered approach. Sense-making by different audiences (so called "interpretive communities" and "subcultural readings") is deemed important, and the audience's pleasures in media experience are taken seriously. In this approach, the unifying concerns are about representation, with the purpose of "denaturalizing" the media. For some, the ideal media education is investigative and refrains from imposing specific cultural values. The deconstruction of how the media impart particular cultural values is often one of the goals.

The inoculationist-protectionist aim, so common in the U.S., "has been almost completely rejected by educators in Great Britain, who point to concerns about class bias and elitism in identifying the fallacies of the protectionist model" (Hobbs, 1997, p. 176; see also Alvarado & Boyd-Barrett, 1992). In his historical review of European media education, Masterman (1997) referred to the "inoculative approach" as having been "characteristic of the first and longest phase..., lasting from the early 1930s to the early 1960s. It was from the outset, a defensive and paternalistic movement whose function was to introduce popular forms into the classroom only to dismiss them as commercial, manipulative, and derivative. . . . Media education was, thus, in its earliest manifestation, education against the media." (p. 20)

For Masterman (1997), the inoculatory approach constituted the early "unpromising origins of media education" (p. 20). For him, the U.S. media education movement is still mired in these debates that the Europeans largely left behind 30 years ago: "I've never been to a conference in the states, or a meeting of teachers without someone actually weighing in with Marie Winn and *The Plug-In Drug*. You would never get that kind of stuff raised anywhere else. . . . In America, TV is seen to be a sort of infection, something that isn't part of serious discourse. I can see how it would be more difficult to convince parents in the U.S.A. of the need and value of media literacy than in any other country. . . . In American culture, I would find myself blocked off at every turn." (L. Masterman, personal communication, May 14, 1992)

The development of media education in Europe began to emerge from its long phase of inoculationism in the 1960s with the rise of European cinema, auteur theory, and the popular arts movement (Hall & Whannel, 1964; Masterman, 1997). Media education was substantially changed "as a whole generation of teachers coming out of universities and going into schools, English teachers who were prepared to take popular culture seriously, got a toehold in the schools" (Masterman, personal communication, May 14, 1992). In the 1970s, European media education was influenced by semiotics (e.g., deSaussure, Barthes, Golay) and questions of ideology and hegemony (e.g., Althusser, Williams, and the revival of Gramsci). In the 1980s, new foci on industrial production and encoding and audience readings and decoding emerged.

In stark contrast to what Buckingham (1990, 1993) and Masterman (1985, 1997) have championed, it is true that scores of media education advocates in the U.S. regard the media, especially television, with something approaching outright fear and loathing. The cultural studies approach is known and

applied in the U.S. by some, but is more likely to be largely unknown (see Buckingham, this issue; Hobbs, this issue; Piette & Giroux, 1997).

To be sure, a great many U.S. media teachers enjoy film and television and seek to impart a more sophisticated appreciation to their students. What distinguishes the U.S. media education situation, however, is the unrelenting hue and cry over allegedly disturbing media effects (e.g., aggression and crime, sexuality, alcohol and drug abuse). U.S. media literacy conferences often are marked by this split, with one group of media teachers wishing to learn more about how to inoculate their charges against the media, and another group of cultural studies-oriented media teachers shaking their heads in near disbelief at what they perceive to be a badly misplaced, naive "moral panic" about television and a decidedly puritanical streak in so many of their inoculationist "colleagues."

One example illustrates how deep the differences can go. At one national media literacy conference, physician and epidemiologist Brandon Centerwall (1989), whose work has focused almost exclusively on TV exposure and murder rates, argued vehemently that media education should be conducted solely as a public health campaign. Insofar as television viewing constitutes a clear source of public disease in the form of violence and murder, it must be aggressively fought (Centerwall, 1994). The contrasting view, expressed in the same conference session, was that we would not want English and language arts teachers to be people who hated English literature, thinking it only to be a threat to public safety. Rather, we expect English teachers to have an abiding appreciation of poetry, short stories, and novels. One might hope that this would be true for those who teach about film and television as well. The split is real and quite problematic, because as media education gains momentum, its advocates have great difficulty speaking with one voice.

Furthermore, in the U.S., the inoculationist approach is the one more likely to be funded and meet with wide approval, by parents, administrators, and government officials. Just last year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services printed a 10-page pamphlet extolling media education as a way to combat drug abuse. Once linked to significant social problems, and with millions of dollars being spent on research and prevention, university researchers and directors of media literacy centers around the country recognize that such an approach might well infuse their research and programs with the finances they need to operate. In the case of the media literacy advocacy and education centers, these dollars can mean the difference between life and death. So, there is a natural, market-driven propensity to find ways to adapt media education to society's constant state of crisis about the socialization of the young. Not to give the wrong impression, media-education initiatives are often first launched with an agenda relating to morality, values, and democratic ideals. It is not as if they have altered or watered-down their agendas. It is simply that, in the U.S. situation, it is comparatively easier-- albeit still difficult-- to persuade a private foundation, donor, or government to supply tens of thousands of dollars if one holds out the hope that media education can prove a valuable weapon against the specter of social collapse. It is harder to make a winning case that media education will advance students' aesthetic appreciation of television and film or of media and the arts generally.

Add to this picture a cultural and educational atmosphere wherein the very idea of teaching how to watch television seems inane to many who hear only that phrase, and one can see why much U.S. media education is often more inoculatory in style and content. Also, many U.S. parents would prefer that their children watched less television, and it can be quite difficult to explain to parents why some of the school day is spent watching and analyzing part of an episode of *Touched by an*

Angel. These obstacles also illustrate why close teacher contact with parents is critical to the success of media education. Models for the supplementation of media education in the home (e.g., Singer, Singer, & Zuckerman, 1981) are valuable, especially given the growing body of evidence that parental coviewing and mediation are particularly critical to the development of children's viewing habits, impulse control, and the learning and modeling of TV content (e.g., Desmond, 1997; Desmond, Singer, & Singer, 1990; MacBeth, 1996; Masterman, 1997; Singer & Singer, 1983; Singer, Singer, & Rapaczynski, 1984).

Until there can be better accommodation between the two camps, and it can be seen, perhaps, that some inoculatory goals might be accommodated within a more student-centered approach toward appreciation and interpretation, a broader acceptance of media education may be very difficult to achieve. There needs to be give on both sides. Some inoculationists can see little or no value in television or film art, or if they do, they can advocate teaching about it only within the century-old tradition of teaching the pantheon and excluding contemporary film and television. As ideologically dug-in are some cultural studies media educators who find any notion of inoculatory goals to be at complete odds with the very theoretical and ideological underpinning of their pedagogy. One area to explore for accommodation harkens back to the foregoing section on the development of media education outside the U.S. as a means to combat the alleged cultural degradation brought about by the importation of U.S. media product. This trend demonstrates that, in reality, the inoculationist view is more pervasive worldwide than some cultural studies thinkers might wish to recognize, and that it is actually often present, if only subtextually, in their own work. Recognizing this, perhaps there is ground for some greater accommodation than has been seen to date.

Closing Observations

Research Directions
First, more formal investigation aimed at understanding what children already know about how the media communicate is needed. How far can we go with media education from K—12, as is often advocated, if we don't know more about existing knowledge (Davies, 1997)? Second, and more importantly, there remains very limited evaluation research demonstrating the efficacy of media education or the transfer of critical media analytic skills to other realms of critical thinking or course work (Bazalgette, 1997). Given the many difficult obstacles that have been outlined, it seems that the most progress will be made if experimental and field studies are conducted that verify the claims of media education advocates. Understandably, many media educators are reluctant to have social scientists come in and possibly disconfirm their theories and claims, perhaps improperly due to the misapplication of measures. Here, as elsewhere, trust needs to be built between researchers and educational innovators.

To the Future
Television viewing in many developed nations, certainly in the U.S., absorbs, on average, half of all free time. The average American who will live to age 75, and who sleeps 8 hours each night, will devote over 9 years of the 50 or so waking years each of us is given, watching television. The fact that many schools still do nothing to prepare a society's future adults for what will constitute nearly one fifth of their entire waking life-- not to mention the added time spent with film, newspapers and magazines, radio, computers, and the internet-- is inadequate. Media literacy advocates would be wise to include *information literacy* in their goals and agendas, and begin to work more closely with librarians and information scientists, who are themselves championing what it will mean to be

literate in the 21st century (Considine, 1990; R. Hobbs, personal communication, May 15, 1992). With each new story of people having difficulty establishing the true source, or veracity, of information available on the internet and world wide web, educators interested in critical thinking and democracy might hear a call to develop their curricula around this need as well (Tyner). And, ideally, schools of education would revisit their media curriculum.

In this essay, I have tried to show how closely interlinked and inseparable are political economy, geography, history, demography, culture, government, and education. Simple solutions are not easy to find. Although the focus has been on what is not working in U.S. media education, and why it has not developed as successfully or as rapidly as in other countries, there are many hopeful signs of late that media education is truly gaining energy and support around the U.S. Still, many obstacles and difficulties remain. It is better that we are aware of what they are and address them directly than ignore them and rely solely on the impressive passion and commitment of thousands of media educators in a country still so substantially ambivalent and uncertain about media and art, leisure and technology, education and government, or its own future.

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