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The Political Significance of Media Literacy[1]

I see a new Athenian Age of democracy forged in the fora the Global Information Infrastructure will create. (Al Gore, 1994)

Introduction

Is the ability to make effective use of new and emerging communication and information technologies essential to the realization of competent citizenship? By what standards? This essay will provide a critical analysis of how social and political theorists have connected social policy to questions of democratic citizenship, and of definitions of civic competence and related debates about a proper role for a democratic state in fostering it. This analysis enables me to draw connections between the aforementioned body of thought and *the media*, a term I define to include traditional "mass media" as well as new communication and information technologies (particularly the Internet) and their uses.[2] Despite the tendency of most social and political theory to treat communications media as an afterthought, I argue that no meaningful definition of contemporary citizenship should fail to account for how the modern media

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are technological and institutional means for citizens to obtain information about the world in which they live, and for engaging in democratic deliberation. I will aim in this chapter to provide an original, and, I believe, necessary way of conceptualizing the connections among communication policy, welfare politics, and the ideal of the competent citizen in an information society.

Literacy, Geography, and National Identity

What it means to be media literate is subject to a wide range of interpretation, and for this reason it is necessary to offer a working definition that could serve as the focus of a study about the political significance of media literacy. Any concept of media literacy must be founded on a working definition of literacy more generally. As Harvey Graff demonstrates in his valuable historical study, the concept of literacy bears decidedly political significance in complex ways, not only in terms of issues pertaining to citizens' ability to acquire "useful knowledge," that is, instrumentally, but also through the relationship between literacy and political judgement and action (Graff, 1987). Following the introduction of the movable-type printing press by Gutenberg in 1455, the spread of this technological innovation was rapid, and its political impact was significant. Historians of that period have recognized the impor-

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2. The term "media" is used here to refer to the fullest range of industries providing information and communication technologies, networks, and content. This includes the entertainment industries of Hollywood; cable, satellite and broadcast networks; the publishing industries, the music recording industry, software suppliers, and the various online information industries (including content providers and ISPs). It includes the providers of telecommunications infrastructure, specifically, the various local and long-distance telephone companies. It also includes the suppliers of the many types of hardware used in the production, distribution and retrieval of information and entertainment. A casual glance at weekly news magazines and daily newspapers tells one that all bets are off as far as any of these industries conforming to historical distinctions and separations from one another. The popular terms "synergy" and "convergence" pervade media industry news as mergers and acquisitions, and innovative movement into new market opportunities, transform the previously stable and familiar landscape of media and communication.

tance of the printing press – through which Bibles and religious tracts were made widely available – as a means of communication that was indispensable to the Protestant Reformation. Indeed, Martin Luther once waxed rhapsodically, "Printing was God's highest act of grace" (quoted in Eisenstein, 1968). By many accounts, the "press of protest" on which Protestant reformers relied represented a marriage of technological and religious revolution.

Printing and literacy are historically and politically significant not only for their role in spreading the word of God, but also for the forging of early modern European nation states. By the end of the sixteenth century (roughly 150 years after Gutenberg), the market in Europe for texts published in Latin, the universal language of print, was more or less saturated. Gradually, publishers sought to create new markets for books by consolidating linguistically similar geographic areas into single markets for publications printed in standardized vernacular languages. Thus, through a slow process of defining the geographic boundaries of linguistically unified markets, national literatures and elements of national cultures came to be reinforced and territorialized (Febvre & Martin, 1976). While no claim is being made here of which is cause and which is effect, as the printing press spread throughout Europe, the number of literate people grew, and what began as a strategy for developing new publishing markets became in effect a means of unifying the reading publics of national bourgeoisies. For example, the *Catechism* (1555) and *Grammar* (1584) published by Primo Trubar began the process of the standardization of the Slovenian language and, arguably, were among the most significant developments to consolidate the idea of Slovenian cultural identity.

Literacy was profoundly important for the circulation of political ideas in the decades just before the French revolution. As Habermas and others have shown, the availability of political newsletters and broadsheets was vital to the emergence and consolidation of political power by the French bourgeoisie (Habermas, 1989). Literacy also divided the bourgeoisie from the lower classes, which became a social issue that led to state intervention. For example, in mid-nineteenth century Britain, a state-supported literacy movement emerged that was, according to Graff, "derived from the need for social order and morality in a time of unprece-

dented social and economic transformation. Education was a Victorian obsession" (Graff, 1987). This observation illustrates a recurring theme in the history of literacy, namely, the tendency for literacy movements to serve as means of consolidating rather than challenging a given social order. Immediately following World War II, the British adult education movement promoted literacy beyond a very basic and functional level. Most famous among the participants in this movement was literary critic Raymond Williams, whose involvement was mainly through his work for Oxford University's Extramural Delegacy, which began in 1946 and continued to 1961. Despite the difficulties and frustrations of the work, Williams was a committed teacher who felt that he had an important political mission to fulfill in helping to elevate the critical capacities of the working class. As one biographer writes, "Williams wanted to assert the democratic imperative of a discriminating working class" (McIlroy, 1993). By 1950, Williams was introducing popular culture, specifically film, as a legitimate topic for serious analysis and discussion, an area of inquiry he promoted not out of an attempt to elevate the status of popular culture, but rather to promote understanding about the political significance of the popular arts. And he was doing so despite the guilt and pressure from peers and administrators who were disapproving of the few teachers who felt that popular forms of cultural expression are no less worthy of serious scrutiny and criticism simply because they are entertaining (McIllroy, 1993). In his writing and his teaching, Williams returned to this vein throughout the remainder of this career out of an explicit commitment to promoting political awareness within the arenas in which the working class engaged with culture. In this regard, Williams's contribution to the study of culture can be said to also be a contribution to the development of a particular, and explicitly political, concept of media literacy.

Today, the term media literacy is used widely, most commonly in the fields of media and communication studies, and in education. One quickly gets a sense of how diffuse the meaning of the term is when one realizes that it can range from dealing with concerns about how children are being affected in their television viewing habits to issues regarding the teaching of computers in the school. High school and undergraduate classes designed to teach

students "critical" television viewing skills can fall under the same general heading as instruction designed to teach students how to surf the Internet or build a web site. A media-literate person might be one who has ability to use the local cable access center's video equipment to produce a documentary on local environmental issues, or one who has the capacity to provide an insightful and rigorous analysis of the prioritization of political issues in a network newscast. Teaching technological skills is, in this sense, roughly equivalent to imparting political understanding. Of course, these differences illustrate the anemia inherent in the vocabulary used to describe the activities involved in various sorts of media education, and it presents a serious problem to the extent that technical capacities are seen as equivalent to civic competence in all of its social, cultural, and political dimensions. To complicate the matter further is the degree to which media education is focused on the provision of professional skills to future media industry practitioners, which is indeed the main reason for which college students are attracted to media studies. However, this very large category of media education, and its corollary definitions of media literacy, are not the central focus of the remainder of this paper. Rather, the focus is on the cultivation of knowledge among citizens to enhance their capacities for participation in cultural understanding and political communication of a variety of forms of discourse.

The Competent Citizen

Since the time that Walter Lippmann published his classic book, *Public Opinion* (Lippmann, 1922), there has been fundamental disagreement among intellectuals and political leaders (not necessarily mutually exclusive groups) about what role citizens can and should play in public debate and political decision making. In this and a series of subsequent books, Lippmann argued that the "omnicompetent citizen" is a myth, and that public debate should be left to more level-headed experts of various kinds. Among those who vigorously disagreed with Lippmann was John Dewey, whose *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey, 1927), was written as a response that aimed to depict the average citizen as one whose civic compe-

tence is worthy of cultivation and trust rather than of suspicion and under-estimation. In Dewey's view, the ability to participate as listener and speaker in public debate, both literally and figuratively, is essential to competent citizenship. This unsettled debate poses fundamental issues about educational policy, media policy, and the connection between the two.

Moving the discussion about the capacities of ordinary citizens forward into the late twentieth century, Carole Pateman begins with a critical explication of a position that echoes Dewey's, namely, she challenges the assumptions that participation is impractical and unwarranted, and that it should be limited to voting for representatives (Pateman, 1970). As Pateman notes, there is a powerful tendency in political thought to treat the public as a "mass" that is "incapable of action other than a stampede" (Schumpeter), that is apathetic (Berelson), whose lower socio-economic groups tend toward authoritarianism (Dahl), and whose increased participation would threaten to undermine political stability (several authors). Little needs to be said about the low regard that this perspective, and the political action it informs, holds for average citizens. This view of citizens is mirrored in many ways by the dismissive manner in which citizens are regarded in "mass society" theory from which much of mass media theory is derived (Brantlinger, 1983).

Drawing from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Pateman argues that the capacity for competent public judgment is derived experientially, and the feasible opportunity to participate in public life is a necessary precondition to that end. Tocqueville saw participation in local government as a means of enabling individuals to become effective participants in a national polity: "Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring within it the people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it" (de Tocqueville, 1945). Pateman's argument can be summarized as stating that participation in "political" and "nonpolitical" settings at local levels, where greater opportunities for participation are available, engenders a competent citizenry at representative levels. As she argues,

> "The ordinary man might still be more interested in things nearer home, but the existence of a participatory society

would mean that he was better able to assess the performance of representatives at the national level, better equipped to take decisions of national scope when the opportunity arose to do so, and better able to weigh up the impact of decisions taken by national representatives on his own life and immediate surroundings. In the context of a participatory society the significance of his vote to the individual would have multiple opportunities to become an educated, public citizen" (Pateman, 1970).

Pateman's analysis emphasizes the value of local participation in the name of both participatory and representative democracy. What Pateman does not emphasize, however, is what I term "trans-localism," the direct communication that increasingly takes place between and among active participants in organizations, coalitions and social movements which may or may not have significant memberships in a single locale, but whose collective membership across potentially great distances makes for an increasingly important form of participation. Amid all of the discussion of global culture, the information highway, and the globalization of the mass media, little is said about the persistent and increasing problems experienced at the local level by communities struggling to sustain political, economic, and cultural autonomy as capital deprives them of it with the tacit and active assistance of government at all levels. An examination of the opportunities and limitations for greater access to communications media is one of value in that regard (Calabrese, forthcoming).

A complementary approach to the idea of the competent citizen that is valuable for a political interpretation of media literacy is the critical theory of "communicative competence" presented by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 1970, 1970a, 1979). This theory centers on the argument that communication can be systematically distorted by relations of power and domination, which necessitates that actors, listeners, and speakers develop the capacity to recognize when such forms of repression are happening. Thus, as Thomas McCarthy has noted, the pedagogical function of such a theory is to offer a guide for the critique of systematic ideological distortion and for the institutionalization of more democratic

forms of discourse (McCarthy, 1975). Of course, Habermas has been taken to task for idealizing the conditions under which systematic distortion, assuming it can be identified, can be overcome (Holub, 1991). Despite this, Habermas's efforts to further develop a theory of *communicative action* continue to be based on the ideal of the public use of reason rather than on instrumental rationality grounded in power relations (Habermas, 1984, 1987; Warnke, 1995). Most important about Habermas's view on communicative competence is its grounding in historical materialism, which he argues is essential if we are to be able to recognize the deviations in discourse that can threaten democratic public communication:

> "I would propose to make the empirical assumptions, first, that these deviations increase in proportion to the degree of repression which characterizes the institutional system within a given society; and secondly that the degree of repression depends in turn on the developmental stage of the productive forces and on the organization of authority, that is of the institutionalization of political and economic power" (Habermas, 1970b)

Although Habermas's concept of communicative competence offers a valuable conceptual orientation to democratic education, its great deficiency is its abstractness, which leaves much to the imagination as far as what sort of interventions are possible, both in terms of a critique of systematically distorted communication, and of the institutionalization of forms of democratic communication. While Habermas does not appear to have abandoned the general normative goal of a practical concept of communicative competence within a broader theory of communicative action, his more recent work is preoccupied with the legal preconditions of democratic deliberation. Accordingly, the pedagogical preconditions for deliberative democracy remain unanswered, except in very general terms (Freire, 1990, 1985).

In contrast, such preconditions are at the forefront of the work on democratic education by Amy Gutmann, whose various writings address the relationship between the political education and public deliberation (Gutmann, 1988, 1988a). For Gutmann, politi-

cal education in the modern age necessitates state patronage, because in no other way can minimal guarantees be provided for universal democratic access to such an education. In taking this position, she links welfare politics to the politics of citizenship rights, a connection that has more than a few critics (Calabrese, 1997). Gutmann views education as a means to equip citizens with the capabilities to deliberate on what constitutes a good society. In her book, *Democratic Education*, she presents two core principles, or limits, which she argues need to be placed on political and parental authority over education, namely, "nonrepression" and "nondiscrimination":

> "The principle of *nonrepression* prevents the state, and any group within it, from using education to restrict rational deliberation of competing conceptions of the good life and the good society" (Gytmann, 1998).
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> "*Nondiscrimination* extends the logic of nonrepression, since states and families can be selectively repressive by excluding entire groups of children from schooling or by denying them an education conducive to deliberation among conceptions of the good life and the good society... The effect of discrimination is often to repress, at least temporarily, the capacity and even the desire of these groups to participate in the processes that structure choice among good lives. Nondiscrimination can thus be viewed as the distributional complement to nonrepression... No educable child may be excluded from an education adequate to participating in the political processes that structure choices among good lives" (Gutmann, 1988).

Based on these two principles, we can see that Gutmann is committed to the idea of a welfare state that is aimed at securing what she characterizes as a fundamental precondition for enabling citizens to engage in democratic deliberation, namely, *democratic education*. While this perspective does not dispute the fundamental contradictions of the welfare state, Gutmann reflects the liberal tradition that endorses such institutional forms as the outcome of a progressive movement toward democratic citizenship.[3] In her case, the highest aim is to enable citizens to become competent

interlocutors in democratic deliberation and decision making about what constitutes a good life. While it may be idealistic for us to think that such a burden can realistically be placed on welfare states, it is difficult to think that citizens can develop such capacities to recognize the sorts of political and economic distortions described by Habermas, and the forms of repression and discrimination described by Gutmann, without having access to educational resources that are not commodified by market relations. In Gutmann's own work, she examines how the media are means of social learning, for better and for worse, and she makes a case for state support of media that can best serve to enlighten citizens rather than appeal to them simply as consumers (Gutmann, 1988). However, she neglects to delve into the value, if not the necessity, of a system of formal education that can reinforce such values with respect to the citizens' use of the media. To that end, I wish to advocate a more central place for media studies as a part of the core of the *liberal arts*, defined as follows:

> **Liberal Arts:** college or university curriculum aimed at imparting general knowledge and developing general intellectual capacities in contrast to a professional, vocational, or technical curriculum. In the medieval European university the seven liberal arts were grammar, rhetoric, and logic (the trivium) and geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy (the quadrivium). In modern colleges and universities the liberal arts include the study of literature, languages, philosophy, history, mathematics, and science as the basis of a general, or liberal, education. Sometimes the liberal-arts curriculum is described as comprehending study of three main branches of knowledge: the humanities (literature, language, philosophy, the fine arts, and history), the physical and biological sciences

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[3.] Most notable among the proponents of that tradition is sociologist Marshall, T.H. (1950) "Citizenship and Social Class," in *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1-85. For more recent expositions on this perspective, see Turner, B.S. (1988) *Citizenship and Capitalism: The Debate Over Reformism* London: Allen & Unwin; and Barbalet, J.M. (1988) *Citizenship: Rights, Struggle and Class Inequality* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

and mathematics, and the social sciences. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

The important alternative to the academic treatment of media education as a subject for professional training is media education as a core subject of a liberal education. That is easier said than done. Some educators assert that "Computers are a tool, not a subject" (Bulkeley, 1997). Computers are indeed tools, but to ignore computers and other tools of communication and information storage and retrieval that are central to major structural transformations in the world is to ignore how those tools are being developed and used to test the possibilities and limitations of democratic citizenship. To view media education as a subject of liberal education is to see it as a means to further the development of capacities for critical reflection about the ways in which communication and information technologies shape and are shaped by social and cultural forces. Seen in this light, media literacy fits within a broader concept of *cultural literacy*, a form of literacy that is better reflected in the aims of Raymond Williams than of E.D. Hirsch.[4]

There is no shortage of futuristic speculation about how democracy will be strengthened as a result of technological innovation. However, a research and teaching agenda at a publicly funded university ought to go beyond platitudes about how "the digital citizen" of today has become a coveted target in terms of political marketing in modern democracies (Katz, 1997). It ought to promote discussion and inquiry about why it is important to understand media institutions as cultural and political institutions, and about the realities and potential for making technological innovation a means to enhance democratic citizenship. Assuming that the traditional ideals of liberal education should not be abandoned, and that they include a view of liberal education as civic education, how can such ideals be adapted to treat the study of communica-

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[4] By "cultural literacy," I mean more than what is posed by E.D. Hirsch, whose book by that name seems aimed at an instrumental sort of educational agenda that ultimately serves the purpose of offering readers a sense of what they need to "know" (a very superficial form of knowledge at that) in order to do a bit of pseudo-sophisticated name-dropping at cocktail parties.

tion and information technology in terms that can inform the practices of citizenship in modern democracies?

Media Literacy as Ideology

The idea of the information society has sparked the popular imagination, and visions of such a society vary widely. For nearly thirty years, scholars (Touraine, 1971; Kuhns, 1971; Bell, 1973; Frankel, 1987; Slack & Fejes, 1987; Schement & Lievrouw, 1987; Webster, 1995), futurists (Toffler, 1980; Naisbitt, 1982; Rheingold, 1993), inventors (Brand, 1987; Negroponte, 1995), captains of industry (Gates, 1996; Grove, 1997)[5] and world political leaders have speculated on and debated about the meaning of such a society. The currently popular discourse on "electronic democracy" is aesthetically pleasing, but these visions of empowerment are illusory or manipulative if they do not rest on the foundation of a clearly articulated vision of government (Calabrese & Borchert, 1996). Of course, it is possible that the vision of government that is operant will be one that is entirely swept away by the ideology of the information age, and the bandwagon of "computer literacy" is one that has become a very powerful symbol of this age. While we cannot afford to ignore the facts of there being material consequences to going without becoming "computer literate" (a mostly ill-defined term) we also must be careful of the seductions of a fetishized vision of the information society.

Today, a convergence of political, economic, technological, and cultural changes have made the idea of the information society a reality, albeit a contested one (Webster, 1995; Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998). This contest should be understood as a struggle over the balance between instrumental reason and autonomous citizenship, which can be seen readily by carefully examining the politics of media literacy. In the United States and other affluent countries,

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5. While Gates needs no introduction, Andy Grove, the president of Intel, is less well known. By 1997, Grove had led Intel to being supplier of over eighty percent of all personal computer chips. See K. (1997) "Only the Fast Survive," *The New Yorker* 20 & 27 October, 140.

telecommunication policies and educational strategies and policies are being harmonized to promote more competitive workforces and more prosperous economies overall. Often, it is implied that more democratic communication and participation will follow, which is a matter of contention, as is the proper role of the state in promoting such ideals (Masterman, 1985, 1995; Robins & Webster, 1989; McLaren et al. 1995; Goodson & Mangan, 1996; Kubey, 1997, Katz, 1997, Gilster, 1997). In this vision, digital literacy is a means to political and cultural autonomy, an emancipatory aim premised on equipping people with the tools to be competent citizens and to participate effectively in democratic culture and politics. On the other hand, digital literacy is a means to equip people with the skills necessary to work and consume effectively and efficiently. Either way, such increasingly familiar academic slogans as "to be hypermedia-literate is to be liberated" (Andersen, 1996) reflect how sold many educators are on a rarefied, sanitized, and friction-free vision of the information society that is not complicated by social relations, cultural differences, economic conditions, or any other form of encumbrance. In fetishizing the mastery of technique, the idea of civic competence based on political consciousness becomes an afterthought at best.

One quickly gets a sense of how vague the term media literacy is when one realizes that it can range from dealing with how children are being affected in their television viewing habits, to issues regarding computers in the schools, from teaching "critical" television viewing skills to teaching students how to surf the 'Net, build a web site, or operate a video camera. Should media studies be seen as advanced vocationalism and nothing more? Should it be seen as a proper focus of civic education? These questions highlight the Procrustean nature of the term media literacy, and they pose a category problem to the extent that the exercise of technical capacities is seen as equivalent to the practical expression of civic competence, that is, to the extent that *techne* is seen as equivalent to *praxis*, as the Greeks defined these terms. Thus, as Habermas asserts, "The modern thinkers no longer ask, as the Ancients did, about the moral conditions of the good and exemplary life, but about the actual conditions of survival" (Habermas, 1973). Even Lyotard, who in so many ways has been a major antagonist of Hab-

ermas's theory of politics, argues: "The question (overt or implied) now asked by the professionalist student, the State, or institutions of higher education is not longer "Is it true?" but "What use is it?" (Lyotard, 1984). Such is the condition of the academic study of the media.

Along with the vitally important and interesting questions raised in media studies, an ethical and intellectual challenge inherent in the institutional legitimation in the university of this field has come with the ever-present temptation among scholars to lose a critical distance and function mainly as industry handmaidens and lose sight of the tensions between market imperatives of the media industries and political needs for relatively unrestrained public communication. A critical discussion of private media ownership and control, and conditions of commercial competition among media industries, cannot continually be sustained in courses in which students are taught to become professional journalists. At some level, teachers and students in professionally related courses have no choice but to work within the constraints which market and political conditions impose on news story selection and presentation, and such conditions are for pragmatic reasons accepted as the order of things. Thus, it is all the more important that there be an emphasis elsewhere in the curriculum to stimulate critical self-reflection through theory and research. While the need for practical knowledge is important for researchers, I tend to think that the more serious educational challenge in the future will be to prevent professional education from becoming so instrumentalized that it will foster anti-intellectualism and relative ignorance of the political, economic, and cultural forces which shape the possibilities and limitations for professional practice.

To reduce the scope of media studies to an agenda that is bounded by administrative concerns would defeat the historical mission of liberal education. Such agendas often envision the proper role of the liberal arts as one of fostering "appreciation," if not the celebration, of technological power, rather than as a valuable resource that can broaden and deepen our understanding of the decisions we make about the development and uses of technology. Under instrumental agendas, specific technological innovations and vested interests often are granted a degree of unassailability that is expe-

dient from a bureaucratic perspective, but is not necessarily in the interest of the public. As one author argues, "[b]ureaucracy's double feat is the moralization of technology, coupled with the denial of the moral significance of non-technical issues" (Bauman, 1989) By dismissing or marginalizing the actual and potential contributions that the liberal arts – including all branches of the arts, the humanities and the social sciences – can bring to bear in terms of research, reflection, debate, and imagination about the possibilities of media education, the university will have set very limited sights for what it can contribute to society, and it will have trouble defending why such a narrow orientation should not be pursued somewhere other than at a university.

Conclusion

At this time, I am mainly qualified to speak about the state of media education in higher education in the United States,[6] and that is where I have tended to focus my attention in this essay. There is an increasing tendency for external forces to pressure university administrators to emphasize the vocational/professional aspects of media education at the expense of promoting broader cultural, historical, and political knowledge about the media. The viewpoint that pushes for such a status quo is short-sighted because, taken to its extreme, it calls into question the reasons why universities should be involved in communication education, if not to train well-rounded, intellectually flexible, and critical thinkers. It is easy enough for faculties to assess the skill demands in the media industries today in order to be able to train the students needed to fill those jobs. It is more difficult, and a more fundamentally important challenge for faculties to recognize communication education in

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* Currently, I am developing a research project on the state of media education in primary and secondary schools in the United States. That work will entail accounting for the range of investment, technological innovation, and pedagogical experimentation and support. As well, I also have begun a comparative policy analysis of relevant policy initiatives and developments in the United States and the European Union.

less instrumental, more ethically and philosophically grounded terms, and to design and maintain a curriculum which, while it cannot afford to ignore instrumental needs, also aspires to satisfy higher needs, particularly the historical requirements of a liberal education.

The more important question today is what sort of agenda for media education we can and should develop. While the priorities of media education are geared primarily toward professionalism, does it not make sense to also promote a deeper understanding of media institutions as social, cultural, and political institutions? Of course, to do so means that we must revisit the Lippmann-Dewey debate about the possibilities and limitations of citizenship in modern and complex democratic societies. Recently, significant financial investments in "civic journalism," "deliberative opinion polls," and "electronic democracy" initiatives testify to renewed interest in developing the means to involve citizens in public deliberation, thus lending support for Dewey's aspirations that participation in modern democracies not be out of the reach of average citizens. While the effectiveness and authenticity of these particular social experiments are matters of dispute, the optimistic conviction that underlies them is that professional expertise and technological innovation can serve as means to empower citizens to engage in democratic processes, rather than as obstacles.

Today, talk of a global information society also challenges cultural and political conceptions of citizenship that are based principally on the idea of the nation-state, and it leads to new speculation about the "deterritorialization" of literacy, including *media literacy*. Manuel Castells, a sociologist who has for many years focused on the impact of telecommunications on urban and regional development, has made the following useful observation: "The new territorial dynamics (...) tend to be organized around *the contradiction between placeless power and powerless places*, the former relying upon communication flows, the latter generating their own communication codes on the basis of an historically specific territory" (Castells & Henderson, 1987).

I would argue that this is a valid description of today's reality in terms of the relationship between a world of highly mobile flows of money and economic control, on the one hand, and worlds of terri-

torially distinct and relatively immobile cultures and communities. The challenge to aspirations for democracy in a world of "placeless power" and "powerless places" is that the nature of territorial integrity – political sovereignty, statehood, cultural autonomy – are widely considered to be under siege. According to this view, we live in a world of virtuality – virtual communities, virtual culture, virtual democracy – which, while in many ways is true, it also provides a very convenient mechanism for governments to renege on their responsibilities to citizens. Without wanting to appeal to any sort of atavistic sense of nationalism, or to reject the validity of arguments in favor of all citizens becoming more culturally knowledgeable, tolerant, and capable of respect for cultural differences, I do subscribe to the view that the value of democratic state institutions is radically underestimated in the context of the celebratory discourse about cultural and economic globalization.

To argue that we live in a world of "post-national identity" can be aesthetically pleasing, and to some degree it is accurate, particularly for those who are in the highest socio-economic strata and whose cosmopolitan life experiences and prospects have prepared them for such a world. However, the appeal to "post-national identity" can also be devastatingly harmful to the vast majority of individuals and communities in the world who depend on their governments, rather than on their personal wealth and life chances to survive the vagaries of the global market. For now and for the foreseeable future, the nation state is one of, if not the, best means for delivering democracy (Graham, 1997). From this perspective, I would defend the necessity of our treating media literacy as social, cultural, and political literacy, and a competent understanding of the global media as an absolutely vital frontier in redefining what we mean by civic education in modern democratic societies.

Bart Cammaerts, Leo Van Audenhove
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Beyond the Digital Divide

Reducing Exclusion, Fostering Inclusion

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