

From the Media Awareness Network



## Barry's Bulletin

a popular culture digest for media educators

By Barry Duncan

### Winter 2004

Welcome to the Winter edition of *Barry's Bulletin*. In this issue, Barry discusses *Super Bowl Antics* as a timely teachable moment and provides food for thought on celebrities in the media. From malls to postering, Barry discusses *The Collision of Public and Private Spaces*. This edition also includes two special contributions: Greg Taylor writes about culture and communications graduate opportunities; and Heather Debus reviews Shari Graydon's new book on advertising. Finally, don't miss Barry's *Interview with Media Educator Neil Anderson*.

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## Super Bowl Antics: Moving Beyond Nipple-Gate



"Sports and the mass media enjoy a symbiotic relationship in American society." (McChesney, 1989) The Super bowl half-time entertainment has always been a site for exploring audience desires and fears through watching this highly publicized global event. In the past the entertainment has featured plenty of singers and dancers. One year the U.S. Air Force staged a very military show of aggressive fantasies of young boys (the desire to be a pirate, a policeman or a member of the armed forces) and ended with a soldier in his

jet pack circling the stadium and landing in centre field to enormous, thumbs-up applause.

This year the exposure of singer Janet Jackson's right breast during a dance number in the half time event provoked controversial debates and discussion in the media around the world.

Peter Howell's column in the *Toronto Star* raises some interesting angles on what gets attention in the media.

You know this Janet Jackson breast-beating has gotten completely out of control when even Spike Lee expresses outrage." What's gonna be next?" "...It's getting crazy, and it's all down to money. Money and fame. Somehow the whole value system has been upended."

It is all further evidence, if any were needed, that America is the most sexually repressed and morally confused of all Western nations. For all of its power, wealth and technological know-how, the U.S. hasn't advanced all that much from the chastity-belted values of its founding Pilgrims.



In countries less prone to prudery, the Janet Jackson affair has been the source of much mystery and merriment. Can people really get this worked up over a single bare mammary? A headline in *Le Monde* this week summed up the French reaction: "America Thrown Into A Panic By The Right Breast Of Janet Jackson. Good thing it wasn't her left breast, or Jackson might have faced accusations of being a communist sympathizer."

But all joking aside, there may actually be some good that comes out of this idiocy. The boob brouhaha has done more to highlight the inconsistency of American censorship, which deems that all things to do with sex are sinful and bad. Yet at the same time, almost anything to do with violence is perfectly all right. You need only look at the misuse of movie ratings to prove it. The suggestion of sex and nudity is okay, à la *American Pie*, but actually seeing sensual frolicking isn't. A little bit of profanity is tolerated, but a lot of swearing means a push into a stricter ratings category.

Acts of violence are a whole other story. The MPAA is much more tolerant toward scenes of bloodshed, battering and bombings, especially if a gun is involved. You can get a PG-13 rating for a movie that kills scores of people, as long as your violent characters don't swear or have sex in the midst of the carnage. If the flap over Jackson's stray breast serves to point up America's ridiculous censorship rules, this tempest in a B-Cup may turn out to be worth all the uproar. We can only hope.

Peter Howell, "*Land of the Pilgrim, home of the prude,*"  
The Toronto Star, February 6, 2004

## For Discussion

- Assess the coverage of this event including the arguments of both critics and those who were not upset by the incident. Why do you think the coverage was so excessive?
- To what extent is it hypocritical for the media industry to be accepting of representation of violence but censorious regarding showing sexuality? Why is North American media so negatively concerned about sexual representation?
- What about excessive swearing vs. only a few swear words? Where should we draw the line?
- Examine the arguments pro and con the film classification laws in Canada and the United States. What problems arise in using classification labels in judging controversial content?
- We need to ask questions about the ritual rape of a young black female during an event highlighting hyper aggressive masculinity. Research the claims that spousal abuse/rapes by males is at an all time high after the Super bowl. To what extent does this evidence give credibility to the argument that here is a strong correlation between seeing violence and aggressive play and subsequently acting on it?
- Why was so little attention given to the role played by Justin Timberlake?
- The breast is so highly sexualized by our society. Is this incident telling our kids (and society) that breasts are only sexual objects, and are dirty, and are not to be seen?
- Comedians and talk show hosts such as Jon Stewart and Jay Leno had a field day about the Janet Jackson incident. How did comedians and talk show hosts and open line shows handle the event? (The incident was described euphemistically as a "ward robe malfunction".) Prepare a skit or a newscast in which you explore some original satiric possibilities.



## Michael Jackson, Martha Stewart and Princess Diana: Troubling Icons for our Times



Besides fodder for the tabloids and Fox News, what do these troubled celebrities, and the public spectacles surrounding them, add up to?

One role unwittingly played by of celebrities is to help us define important social issues and to foreground problems and conflicts with which society is concerned but may not seriously engage in until a celebrity's behaviour turns into a public spectacle. Of course, this is where the media come in and exploit the fears and desires of the public. Relating these elements to the movies, Bell Hooks aptly states: "[movies] not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues."

An important, and I believe still neglected area of media studies is examining the meanings audiences negotiate when a celebrity's behaviour is dramatized before our eyes. When celebrities acquire multiple personae and roles, they gain considerable star power.

Michael Jackson's recent trial over sexual abuse with minors goes back 10 years. In January, we saw him holding his umbrella aloft as he pranced about on top of his SUV, pandering mischievously to his fans and inviting them to the "Neverland Ranch." Peter Pan, the King of Pop, the black kid who wants to be whiter than white, Jackson's images present us with an amazing evolution, mixing androgyny and racialized sex with rumours of pedophilia.

An icon of American popular culture, the saga of Michael Jackson provides us with the key questions regarding how popular culture works. We should be grateful there are, beginning with the Internet, plenty of sources for teachers to investigate the Michael Jackson phenomenon.

### For Discussion

What would be the questions you might want to pose to Jackson? If Jackson were to be exonerated, how feasible is it for him to make a comeback in the world of pop? How has Jackson benefited in the past from controversy? What songs best typified the struggles of gender, race and class? With the OJ Simpson trial, Blacks believed OJ was innocent and Whites that he was guilty. How might the racial card be played this time? What strategies might the Jackson legal defense team use to accomplish such a task?

Assess the on-going coverage. Will it be nothing more than a freak show? In the PR war, how will spin doctoring be used?



### Martha Stewart: Domestic Maven Strikes Out

Sociologist Magalene Harris Taylor comments on the achievement of Martha Stewart. After years of gathering information about the domestic media maven, UA sociologist Dr. Magalene Harris Taylor has come to the conclusion that Martha Stewart not only cooked up her own success, but she also discarded three halfbaked social stereotypes in the process..

"Part of Martha Stewart's great appeal comes from her ability to embody contradictory qualities," said Taylor. "She's traditionally committed to home and family, but her ambition and her business sense are highly feminist. She comes from a middle class white background, yet she appreciates different ethnic and cultural lifestyles."



By devising tips and techniques for every household project, Stewart gave people new tools to make their chores more efficient and enjoyable. And by emphasizing creativity, Stewart has reminded men and women that their homes should be reflections of their own personalities."

On camera, Martha is feminine, relaxed and fully in control. The current scandal based on alleged insider trading of her stocks goes against this appealing image. Seeing Martha trying to stay unruffled in front of the media feeding frenzy is a great source of voyeuristic appeal. That is but one interpretation. Are we resentful of her multi-faceted success? What are some other interpretations of the media circus?

While Michael and Martha occupy some media space in 2004, the coverage pales in comparison to the outpouring of grief after the tragic death of Princess Diana in 1997. As Lance Morrow notes in Time Magazine (September 15: 1997), "it is a strange transaction, people projected all sorts of strange fantasies upon Diana in somewhat the ways girls project little play scenarios upon Barbie Dolls". Morrow's observation raises the question: Which of the many Dianas were we grieving? Her empathy for the sick and battered? The celebrity seeking jet setter? The lonely victimized mother? What is your interpretation of Diana's appeal?



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### **The Collision of Public and Private Space: From Shopping Malls to Postering**

Many of you will know the 'mall crawl' field trips I have helped to stage with the purpose of having educators/students reappraise an environment we all take for granted. (It is one of the most popular activities in my text *Mass Media and Popular Culture*.) By looking critically at this media saturated environment, I contend, we will also grasp the key issues engendered by privatization and public space. Besides, voyaging through the mall with several colleagues is a pleasant social experience, giving us permission to celebrate, assail and maybe just gossip about our consumer driven society.

- Thinking critically about the mall will help us discuss and debate the colliding realms of public vs. private. Teens are often surprised that they have no rights inside a mall, that security guards need little pretext to evict cantankerous youth
- Mall crawls allow us to assess the conflicting values, which young people derive from their mall experience. It is, after all, their favourite place to hangout.
- "Television proposes and the mall disposes." The mall is indeed a rich and layered media text. It not only resembles television, it is intimately connected with our image-saturated culture, the world of advertising and middle class urban life. In short, malls are richly intertextual, referencing almost every aspect of popular culture.

Teengers are faithful consumers, but in typical paradoxical teen behaviour, they seem eager to condemn their 'trendoid' peers for purchasing their designer clothes and bottles of Calvin Klein perfume. The discussion really comes down to a reflective look at our consumer culture, about what we are prepared to defend, and - more important - what we are prepared to give up.

#### *Tactical Advice:*

Begin by arranging a field trip to a local mall- ideally in the morning when the mall population is lowest and easier to observe. If you want to use cameras in the mall, you will need to get permission in advance. Working in groups of two or three, have the students observe the environmental factors which influence our behaviour, from the fountains, the store logos to the



white noise emanating from the air conditioners.

In Toronto and most North American cities, I have recently become aware of some valuable extensions to the mall crawl, all centered on the role of other public spaces including the creation of new public squares and restrictions on posterling lamp posts See below.

### Conducting a Mall Crawl and Investigating Other Public Spaces



#### Activities

- What is your favourite mall? Why? Describe and explain the variety of responses to the mall within your group.
- To which social subgroups does the mall appeal? How does it attract these groups? Which subgroups are excluded? How?
- To what extent is the mall a gendered experience?
- Briefly interview several people, ideally representing the mall's different constituencies: shop keepers, tourists, teens and seniors, and occasional visitors. What is each audience getting out of the mall? What are their likes and dislikes?
- How is the mall incorporating and capitalizing on current pop culture trends? Is there evidence that it has misinterpreted or modified a trend?
- Comment on any of the following observations:

Shopping in the mall is a kind of religious experience I shop; therefore I am. Veni, Vidi, VISA	Shop till you drop. Becoming a shopaholic. The mall is a garden of Eden in a fallout shelter... The mall is a temple of Mammon, a cathedral of consumption.
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- If you were a director, how might you use a mall as a set for an updated version of a Shakespeare play? Identify the scene and how the mall would figure in it.
- What are the similarities between the way we experience television, the Internet and the way we experience the mall? Might the Internet be a virtual mall?
- Malls are increasingly becoming outlets for a small number of stores with global distribution, from the Gap to Polo Ralph Lauren. What problems - cultural, economic and/or social do these stores create, represent and hide? (See *No Logo* by Naomi Klein.)



## Public Spaces Under Siege



While malls are clearly private spaces, we often have only a short distance to go to witness the typical assault on other public spaces. In Toronto, the southeast side of the busy intersection of Yonge and Dundas (opposite the Eaton Center) has undergone a major transformation. Buildings were torn down and a so-called public square ( Dundas Square) was created. There has been plenty of controversy about the planning of the square; it seems less a place to socialize and more a venue for video advertising.

Below are some edited quotes from an admirable, new Toronto publication "Spacing; Covering Toronto's urban Landscape" ([www.publicspace.ca](http://www.publicspace.ca)). The preface is a manifesto, a call to action.

"Almost everyday of our lives we step out into public space. It's where we interact, teach, learn, participate and protest. These actions are essential to our democracy, yet the public space they need is shrinking. Instead our citscape is dominated by automobiles, advertising and private interests.

Residents of Toronto, and other major cities across the globe, are resisting the privatization of our environment with random acts of beauty and intellect."

"Whatever critical perspectives one adheres to regarding the condition of public space in Metropolitan "World Cities" such as Toronto and New York is no longer the product of local trends. Instead, it must be seen and understood as part of the globalization phenomenon. These factors are leading to the containment, control, sanitization, militarization and privatization of former public spaces by urban governments that are increasingly submitting to the pervasive of the private sector represented by local business improvement associations.

It becomes acutely apparent that the plan for Yonge-Dundas Square is not new and unique. Rather, it fits neatly into a broader international trend towards colonization of formerly public places by joint ventures between the State and the private sector. All over the world, formerly "public" spaces and places are being remodeled, revamped and recast to resemble the clean, efficient, consumer driven space of the shopping mall, which is explicitly designed to keep people moving and entertained in an effort to induce a frenzy of consumption.

Through the use of closed circuit surveillance and private security officers, the rules, the regulations and by-laws applicable to a given "public" space or site are enforced, creating a "safe," "cleaned-up" and seamlessly-simulated, hyper-real environment in which people are regarded solely as consumers.

The intersection of Yonge-Dundas Square followed the predominant trend in urban redevelopment by submitting to the political and economic control of the private sector. No longer and organic, naturally evolving region, the square is becoming a sterile, sanitized, militarized, semi-privatized space. In this sense Yonge and Dundas Square is intended not so much as a place for people to talk and interact, but as a place for to pause in between intense bouts of efficient commercial consumption, in order to absorb and adopt new consumer identities through surrounding multi-media advertising."

Christopher Smith, "Remodeling Public Space," *Spacing*



## Activities

Let's assume that in your city there is a public square, which offers similar challenges as the Toronto example.

- Research the cost of billboards and video ads. In Toronto at the Yonge and Dundas intersection (Highest concentration of outdoor advertising in Canada), a billboard costs \$460,000 a year and a 60-second video loop costs \$8,000 a week and \$416,000 a year.
- Video billboard commercials, like the ads in theatres before the feature film, are now taken for granted. Many are lavishly produced and pleasant to look at. Why would we want to deprive people of this visual, high-tech experience? Debate the validity of this argument.
- The advocates for more and less restricted public space claim that responding to their concerns is essential to our democracy, yet the public space they need is shrinking. Brainstorm the connections between the wise use of public space and the fostering of democracy.
- "The public square is becoming a sterile, sanitized, militarized, semi-privatized space."  
Christopher Smith
- To what extent is this true of your public square? If you had the money and resources, what elements would you change?
- Write a letter to politicians at various levels of government in which you address both the positive and negative aspects of a public square in your city.

You may want to consider aesthetic concerns, the use of greenery and fountains, the use of advertising - how much and what kind? What restrictions would you impose on the public use of the square? For registering complaints about ads from large companies, (The Gap, Sony, McDonalds, AOL Time Warner) you might want to critically examine their Web sites and respond with e-mails.

- Learn about poster by-laws in your community. What are your rights? (For example, in Toronto poster on a lamp post permits only notices which are no larger than 8.5 by 11 inches.) What would happen if you postered for an anti-government, anti-war rally?

### Public vs. Private: Other Sites of Struggle

To extend the discussion on private vs. public space there are innumerable possibilities. Here are just a few:

- The debates around the commercialization of schools, from soft drink franchises in schools (the Cola wars) to the powerful influence of Channel One and its three minutes of advertising in a 12-minute newscast (shown in 35 per cent of American high schools).
- The sponsorship of high cultural events such as exhibits in museums and art galleries. In Toronto, the Santa Claus exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum was sponsored by Coca Cola. At the Art Gallery of Ontario, the prestigious Barnes art exhibit needed corporate sponsors with deep pockets. Critics complain that controversial, often innovative exhibits will not be seen because corporate sponsors will run away and hide behind their logos. Check out this trend in your area.



## Background Reading

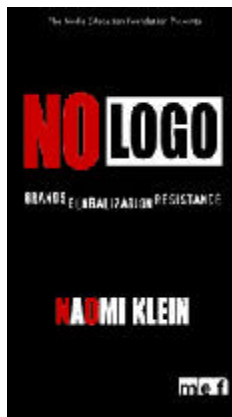
*The Mall of America* by William Kowinski, 2003  
A classic study now back in print with a new introduction

*Spree: A Cultural History of Shopping* by Pamela Klaffke, 2003

*The Urge to Splurge: A Social History of Shopping* by Laura Paquet, ECW press 2003  
A readable account of the evolution of shopping

*Culture Inc: The Corporate Take-over of Public Expression.* By Herbert Schiller, 1986-  
A still relevant, hard hitting exploration of corporatized culture (out-of print)

*Shopping: The Art of Consumer Culture*, Christoph Grunenberg and Max Hollein (eds). 2002  
How artists conceptualize consumer culture. A really fresh take on the subject.



### **NO LOGO with Naomi Klein produced by the Media Education Foundation**

Readers will know that I have strongly promoted the work of Toronto activist Naomi Klein whose 1999 book *No Logo* made her an academic celebrity and the most sought after expert and activist in the anti-globalization movement. *No Logo* brilliantly describes the creation of our branded identities.

Now the Media Education Foundation has interviewed her and provided some outstanding visuals and cutaways to enhance her ideas. Through hundreds of media examples, this video shows how the commercial takeover of public space, destruction of consumer choice, and replacement of real jobs with temporary work the dynamics of corporate globalization – impacts everyone. Naomi Klein argues that globalization is a process whereby corporations discovered that profits lay not in making products, but in creating branded identities that people adopt in their lifestyles.

I strongly recommend that teachers use short segments. The ideas are rich and dense and anyone not familiar with her work will go into intellectual overdrive as they struggle to keep pace.

Try doing some relevant pre-viewing activities, activities while viewing, and wrap up with post-viewing discussions and projects. You can also download the teaching guide which has plenty of worthwhile activities.

To purchase the video or to look at the online catalogue visit The Education Foundation Web site at: [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org)



**The Graduate Program in Media Literacy at North Carolina's, Appalachian State University is hosting a special week-long media literacy class in the period July 9th- 5th, 2004.**

*Highlights*

Jean Kilbourne will be on campus July 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. She is known nationally and internationally for her videos including "Killing Us Softly". She is also the author of *Deadly Persuasion: Why Women and Girls Must Fight the Addictive Power of Advertising*.

David Buckingham will teach part of the day Monday- Wed of the week, and David Considine will teach the rest of each day and close the class on Thursday 15th.

Professor Buckingham is one of the most respected voices in media education throughout the Western world and has recently returned from South Korea. He is the Director for the Center for the Study of Children, Youth and the Media, Institute of Education, University of London.

His topics for the summer session will include a.) The Facts of Life: Children, Sex and the Media b.) Children's Global Media Culture: From Pokemon to Potter; c.) Going Digital: Digital Production by Young People and d.) Media Education and the Challenge of Critical Theory.

*Details*

- The class is offered for three hours of graduate credit which can be applied to a master's degree or an 18 hour certificate of completion.
- Students from other universities may be able to transfer credit to their own program.
- Places in the class are limited. The University is already receiving national and international requests for seats in the class.
- Dormitory style on campus housing and meals will be available at approximately \$65 per day.

Visit the program Web site at: [www.ci.appstate.edu/programs/edmedia/medialit](http://www.ci.appstate.edu/programs/edmedia/medialit)

Anyone wishing to apply for a seat in the class should contact:

David Considine (no later than March 1<sup>st</sup>)  
Coordinator Graduate Program in Media Literacy  
Appalachian State University- College of Education  
Boone , N.C. 828 262 2270

[828] 262 2270

Email [Considinedm@appstate.edu](mailto:Considinedm@appstate.edu)

*David Buckingham and Jean Kilbourne continue Appalachian State University's dedication to exposing our students to the highest quality of media education by featuring distinguished scholars at the national and international level. Previous instructors have included Kathleen Tyner and Barry Duncan.*



## Conference Update

### Northeast Media Literacy Conference 2004

The Northeast Media Literacy Alliance and the Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut, in conjunction with the National Alliance for a Media Literate America and the Action Coalition for Media Education present:

*Children, Youth, and the Media*

*A Conference Promoting Media Literacy in Young People Today*

Empowering Children and Youth to Grow from Being Critical Consumers of Media to Being Effective Communicators through the Media.

Friday, April 2, 2004

University of Connecticut

For more information, visit the conference Web site at: <http://medialiteracy.education.uconn.edu> or contact:

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## "Declarations of Media Independence!"

ACME's July 1-4, 2004 Summit in San Francisco

This is one of the larger media education events this year. "It's time for Teach-Ins!"

For more information, visit: <http://www.acmecoalition.org>

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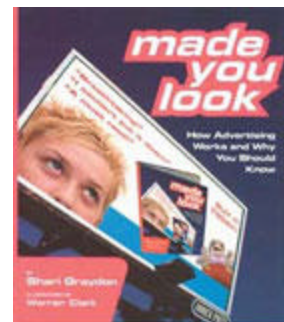
## Book Review

***Made you look: How advertising works and why you should know***

Author: Shari Graydon Illustrated by Warren Clark, Annick Press, 2003. <[www.made-you-look.com](http://www.made-you-look.com)>

Reviewed by: Heather Debus

Shari Graydon's book is a real winner and seems to be reaching a large and diverse audience of parents, teachers and young people. There was a half page article in the *Globe & Mail* and Shari has been interviewed on over five talk shows on radio and television.



Although the mass media and popular culture are pervasive, understanding them is a challenge. Shari Graydon, a media activist and former president of MediaWatch Canada, provides a common sense, kid-friendly tool for understanding the many facets of advertising. Advertising: "Learn about it and do something about it!" is the theme of the book. With the comical and creative illustration of Warren Clark, *Made You Look* invites students to learn about powerful advertising strategies and encourages them to **actively** and **consciously** decide what they will or won't buy.

Graydon's writing style is simple and direct, a quality, which will engage young people. She keeps the content moving, delving only briefly into the history of media. What she does is to provide us with lots of activities, discussion starters and "did-you-know" sections. The tone of the book is friendly and empowering as opposed to lecturing and nagging about the perils of media. In fact, Graydon notes that some of her readers will choose advertising careers. Respecting this possibility, she shares her hopes that educating people about the ins and outs of advertising is important. Her approach may even help marketing methods improve their craft.

Graydon's chunking of information and bits about advertising makes it easy to browse through randomly. In a typical example, the author reveals that Julia Roberts had a body double for the poster advertising "Pretty Woman." The primary appeal to youth is best located in sections which encourage risk taking: to think for themselves in the sections marked "Don't try this at home" and here the don't is crossed off. The reverse psychology works really well.

Not only is *Made You Look* enjoyable and educational for young people, parents reading this book will also learn a great deal. It's a great catalyst for challenging issues engendered by advertising, including body image, consumer rights, misleading advertising and the role of advertising in schools. After reading Graydon's book, it was impossible for me to ignore a small, glossy and "official" looking newspaper issue that came in the mail about a local contractor. Looking closer I realized that his company had paid to have influential information published about his craftsmanship, including articles, references, photos and resume. I immediately thought of Graydon's point that people are more receptive to advertising in the form of newspaper articles as opposed to coupons and flyers. It could be argued that parents are just as influenced by media tactics as their children. Reading *Made You Look* together will lead to great family discussions.

Elementary teachers who might otherwise be intimidated with the challenging and political content of media studies will get their feet wet knowing they are helping their students. The physical layout and presentation of the book is easy to use, especially for teachers uncertain of the where to start with such a big topic. With the help of Graydon's cute, blue cartoon fish character (which symbolized the metaphor "water is invisible to the fish") popping up in the margins teachers can tackle invaluable mini-lessons such as debating about washroom stall advertising. Each of Graydon's sub sections could become a starting point for more research and discussion throughout the elementary curriculum. For example, a teacher could introduce the chapter "Kid Power" and discuss the points presented about consumer power, companion power and complaint power, extending this to activities in which students select a company (e-mail facilitates this activity) to explore a particular issue in-depth.

In order to effect change in this world, Graydon demands that awareness of problem leads to analysis and finally to action through teaching about advertising.

**Reviewer Heather Debus is a mother of a young toddler, a member of the Association for Media Literacy executive and taught elementary school for five years.**



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## Recommended Resource



### **Creating Television: Conversations With The People Behind 50 years of American TV** by Robert Kubey, Earlbaum, 2003.

A good friend of media education, Robert Kubey has helped the American media literacy movement in many ways, from editing valuable publications to special presentations at conferences. In this new book, he has made a major contribution through this collection of interviews with the key people behind American television. Chapters include "The Pioneers: Creating the First Decade; Writer-Producers, the actors, the agents." Important people from the 37 interviews include Sid Caesar, Steve Allen, Matt Groening, Ed Asner and Henry Winkler. This is not a dry academic book. Because television is such a collaborative medium, we learn, through the interviews, how important decisions got made. A terrific resource for media educators who need behind-the-scenes insights.

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## **The York/Ryerson Graduate courses in Culture and Communications: How Media teachers upgrade their knowledge and skills**



by Greg Taylor, a Toronto based secondary English and Media Studies teacher

It's been almost ten years since I finished three university-based, additional qualification courses in media literacy with John Pungente and Barry Duncan in Toronto. (Three AQ courses are needed to receive a Media Specialist certificate.) Acquiring what was a rare specialist certificate at the time proved to be a wise move for a young teacher, as it saved my job in more than one round of staffing cuts in the mid-90's. It also opened a field to me that was constantly evolving and a discipline I believed to be absolutely necessary for contemporary students.

Despite my best efforts to keep my classes fresh, in the last couple of years I felt my mind was in need of some refueling. I looked into various places and was intrigued by a new MA in Culture and Communication, offered as a joint York University/Ryerson program. It seemed a good match for a media studies teacher: the new technology of Ryerson, coupled with the theory of York. (This generalization has proven largely inaccurate: Ryerson has plenty of theory courses and York offers some excellent applied work.)

I applied and was accepted for the 2002/2003 school year. I took a bit of a gamble and took a year's leave from teaching, thinking I could support myself with some substitute teaching along the way. Though the finances have proven difficult at times, I've been very pleased with my decision.

The program offers three areas of focus: Media and Culture, Technology and Practice, and Politics and Policy. After several years in the anti-Harris neo con trenches, I was interested in politics and policy. My first two classes were "the political economy of communications" with John Shields and "core issues in cultural studies" with Colin Mooers. The reading and work was demanding but it felt terrific to be intellectually challenged again.

I have since taken courses in popular music (with renowned music historian Rob Bowman), the image industry, readings in public policy, communications studies, and visual culture. My major paper, due this summer, will concern efforts by the conservative Fraser Institute to influence Canadian broadcast policy.



I attended an excellent conference in Montreal last February entitled "Who Controls Canada's Media?" that featured media/political heavyweights like Peter Mansbridge, Adrienne Clarkson and Alan Rock. I was very pleased to be accepted to present a paper at the Canadian Communications Association annual meeting in Halifax last June. My presentation was on the roots of the liberal media argument in America.

The program has been an enjoyable experience and I know I've learned a great deal. My plan is to be finished this summer (2004). Despite the impending financial difficulties, I have applied for PhD. programs in communications for next year.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at [gregorytaylor@sympatico.ca](mailto:gregorytaylor@sympatico.ca).

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### **The Corporation - A documentary not to be missed**

*Airing in Ontario: Feb 25, TVOntario (three successive evenings)*

"The Corporation": I reviewed this outstanding and controversial documentary last November. Since then it has picked up numerous awards including the Special Audience award at Sundance. The filmmakers have been interviewed extensively. The business community is, of course, up in arms and in the National Post, hardliner Terrence Corcoran described it as "an ugly, evil pack of lies," thereby creating an appetite for seeing what this 2 hour and 30 minute documentary is all about.

(Watch for screenings and discussion groups in larger urban centers in North America in March/ April.)



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### **Neil Andersen Interview January 2004**



*Big in physical stature and big in his ideas, Neil Andersen has made his mark on media education. (He has won both national and international awards.) With over 25 years of teaching experience, he brings a mix of skills which are truly formidable: a teacher in a variety of schools, an English department head, a computer consultant and, more recently, an English and Media Consultant for the Toronto Board of Education, Canada's largest school board.*

*But these are formal, official matters. What is left out are his innumerable special projects, from writing text books and study guides to presenting workshops in Toronto and around the world. (He has just returned from Japan.) Neil is on the executive of the Association for Media Literacy and on the Board of Directors for the Media Awareness Network. He also teaches a media studies course for teachers at York University in Toronto on a part time basis. Having worked with Neil for most of his career, I can testify to his keen intellect, versatility, compassion and humour-elements which will continue to allow this gentle giant to grow the media education movement, both locally and globally.*



**B.D. What have you been watching on film and /or TV which has engaged you in recent months? Please elaborate.**

**N.A.** I watch considerably less TV than most people think. I'm one of those people who have traded television hours for Internet hours. I do find that I am very loyal to a television series. I stayed with the "X-Files" steadily for several years, and even more so with "Millennium", which fascinated me by its overt acknowledgment of the afterlife. As formal religions continue to decline, popular culture fills the gaps.

I have a hard time finding redeeming qualities in reality-based TV, which bears no relationship to my reality or anyone's I know. It often just seems to be a genre that producers have discovered is very cheap to produce when compared to paying for "Friends." It seems to have a high voyeuristic quotient, but I find myself uninterested in the contestants' lives. Maybe an extrapolation of reality-based TV some years hence will be amateur sports, where we will see hockey tournaments between people who play for pleasure and a cash prize instead of players holding out for millions each season.

It's also interesting to see how cable networks have worked their way into niche markets. I recently became a fan of "Six Feet Under," which deals with a long-standing taboo in North America – open talk of death. Challenges such as "Six Feet Under" are forcing broadcast networks to do some soul-searching.

There is an interesting dichotomy appearing in the feature film domain. I have seen many movies which update long-standing movie formulae with little imagination. It's as though 21st Century versions of Rock Hudson and Doris Day move like chess pieces across the board. I feel as though I could write the plots on the fly. It's not that they are not well done, but that they are so well-worn. Then there are other films which truly seem to be pushing envelopes. Their narratives are inventive and fresh. I pretend there is a Lord-of-the-Rings-style conflict between these two styles, and I am intrigued to see which might win.

**B.D. You have two sons and two daughters. I suspect you have learned a great deal about media through their eyes?**

**N.A.** What an irony! I am a career media teacher, yet NONE of my children took a media course. "Why should we? We have you!" We have had some great discussions over the years, and they constantly have kept me fresh in my awareness of new pop trends. I'm sure I tested their patience when holding forth about a plot or commercial, but they kindly indulged me.

Watching my children grow, and growing with them were the best influences on my teaching that I could hope for. Truly humbling.

One remarkable moment occurred when I attended my son's university drama presentation. He had conceived and directed it and its focus was media violence. What he hadn't told me was that he had built in a Brechtian moment where audience members interrupted, and in fact ended, the action on the stage. It was so well staged that I thought this mutiny was spontaneous. He had used stage conventions so well that he had completely convinced me the artifice was real. The expert was fooled – the joke was on me. It was a great moment.

**B.D. You have just returned from a visit to Japan. Could you give us some pithy observations on Japanese pop culture and media?**

**N.A.** My wife was struck by how different Japanese culture is; I was struck by the similarities. They have roads and cars, schools and playgrounds, television and shopping malls. The teens hang out together at the malls and steal moments to enjoy their own culture during classes.



Japan has almost 100 per cent penetration in cell phones, and the students I spoke to said that they changed phones every six months to keep up with new features. Their cell phones are their personal digital assistants – their Palm Pilots, their Visors. They take and store pictures on their cell phones, schedule their appointments on the calendars, surf the Internet, send text messages, look up words in dictionaries, and more and more. I think that wireless is a fascinating new trend that completely redefines sense of place.

There is a Japanese obsession with communications technology that places media education in a most interesting position. Officially, there is no media education in Japan, but many teachers are hungry for it, for obvious reasons. Many people are teaching media now on their own, and there is a growing grass-roots movement, which I hope will continue.

**B.D. Many years ago you made a short 16 mm film at UCLA. How important was that experience in formulating your views about media education?**

**N.A.** I came back from California ready to be the next great Canadian director. I discovered that there were a few people ahead of me. I continued making movies for about five years, but the closer I got to full-time production the less attractive it became. As much as I adored production, I adored my family more and felt that I had to make a choice. Teaching media and film allowed to me to maintain both a connection with cinema and the stability I needed to raise a family.

As for the production experience, it was invaluable. I hope that every media teacher can gain some production experience because being a creator forever changes your position as a spectator. I had studied film theory and history at university for several years before the production course but could never have learned what it taught me. Viewing-only is as artificial as reading without ever writing. One experience reflects and validates the other.



**B.D. You have been teaching for over 30 years, what are the significant changes you have noticed in the evolution of media education? Is everything for the better?**

**N.A.** I feel as though I have lived through the history of media education in Ontario. When I reflect on the Eddie Dick triangle, I remember the 70s, when we showed students movies on 16 mm film and then used the Socratic method to explain their meanings. I can remember when audience theory appeared and we began to share interpretations with our students. The

UCLA course had pretty well established the production side of the triangle in my mind; in fact, I taught film production before I taught media, so that side has always been with me.

I also remember when media teachers felt passed over at the sudden popularity of computers. Budgets and energy seemed diverted away from things we held as important so that students could learn 'information processing.' Now that programming has become less arcane, computers more ubiquitous, and multimedia is alive and well on networks, the computer has converged with media. Just as media teachers abandoned the 16 mm film and black and white television, they need to follow the culture and make room for the Internet, wireless and gaming cultures.

You asked if everything is for the better. One thing I see as better is the way media courses address students' lived experiences rather than covering the history of film or parts of the newspaper. I do think that that it is shameful to see the lack of pre-service and in-service Media Education that has been provided to teachers. In an age where communications technology is the lingua franca and where Media Literacy is essential to life success, many schools provide a



profound disservice to their students. I am obviously biased in this point of view, but I invite anyone to seek the opinion of students who have received quality media education.

I am also pleased that Ontario teachers are required to address media studies in their language classrooms. It has been slow to start, but many teachers are doing a great job.

**B.D. You have done extensive work over the years on study guides for Media Studies - the best known of which is material for the study guide to teaching the video kit for "Scanning Television Parts One and Two." How would you describe this series in terms of its critical pedagogy? Another way of seeing where you are going with such teaching aids is to answer the question: What makes for a good study guide? Could you illustrate with some suitable examples?**

**N.A.** For most of the last 10 years I have written some 200 study guides, including guides for the National Film Board, the Canadian Television Network, KidsWorld magazine, YTV (Canada's Nickelodeon), Canada's Year of Asia Pacific (1997), Much Music, Book Television, CityTV, the Toronto District School Board and Scanning the Movies. I have become an informal student of study guides, both others and my own, and have tried many variations on the form.

Scanning Television 2 benefited from my study of reading theory, and I tried to provide better quality and more thoughtful pre-viewing strategies for students. Another aspect of study guide writing which fascinates me is the crafting and sequencing of questions. I work carefully to lead the students to more critical thinking by building one question upon another. I also avoid questions with obvious or yes/no answers.

There is an irony here. Media Education is iconoclastic and often quick to identify hegemony. Yet study guides are themselves examples of hegemonic intention, where the writer attempts to control students' thinking about a subject. I try to keep this in mind and provide as many open-ended response opportunities as possible.

I am also bothered by study guides that diverge wildly from their subjects. I think a study guide should help viewers get more out of the media experience, but not necessarily go so far beyond the issue that the original media work is forgotten.

I am also mindful of 'the medium is the message,' and try to include opportunities to consider the forms within the media message as well as the content. I.e., if a movie is about honour, I also draw viewers' attention to the uses of editing or music as well as discussing the themes of honour.

**B.D. Working with John Pungente, you create a study guide for "Scanning The Movies," a semi-regular 30-minute television program on current films from Warner Brothers (broadcast only on the Canadian version of Bravo). Could you describe the work you did on teaching some of these films?**

**N.A.** The excitement of writing guides for "Scanning the Movies" is that there are no scholarly analyses or popular reviews to use as reference materials. We are among the very first people to see the movies, often seeing them in the same screening rooms as the critics and occasionally even before the critics. As such, we can write completely without prejudice. This is also stressful, but in a good way.

There is no 'thumbs up,' no salivating over wonderful scenes, no condescending tsk tsking. Scanning the Movies is unique because it never deals with how good or bad a movie is, but how interesting it might be, how it uses cinematic techniques effectively, and how it might appeal to its preferred audience. Rather than telling audiences what to think of a movie, it suggests viewing activities through which the movie experience might be enhanced. I like this because it respects both the movie and the audience.



Movies, like all media works, mean different things to different people, and are used differently depending on people's states of mind and circumstances. "Scanning the Movies", and its guides, respects those varying conditions.

**B.D. Currently there is a heated debate about the willingness of some media educators and media ed organizers to do media literacy work for big media corporations such as AOL Time-Warner, Channel One and Chum Ltd. In this regard, you have had to defend your participation and, along with other members of the AML including myself, regarding the assistance provided by Chum Ltd. could you comment? Have we sold out?**

**N.A.** What is educational integrity? Teachers are invested with trust by parents and students to help students make choices that will best serve their lives. They become surrogate parents while the students are in their charge. Good teachers are committed to helping students develop the critical thinking skills they will use as adults, and to be able to apply those skills independently.

There is certainly a danger that teachers who produce educational materials for specific media companies might tailor those materials to fit the ideologies those companies prefer. There have been examples of math textbooks that framed questions around specific brands of spaghetti sauce, thus implicitly promoting that brand. Educational materials are available from the Milk Marketing Board, Beef Producers, Pork Producers, stage productions, NASA and the CIA. Each of these organizations uses their educational materials to promote their products -- some to promote their ideologies. Some people might argue that the materials should all be banned from schools, which they suggest should remain ideology-free zones. I think this is quite naive -- schools were NEVER ideology-free zones to begin with, and if we want our students to be able to recognize and understand marketing in their best interests, don't we need to let them examine it in the clinical environment that the classroom provides?

I have received criticism for my work with media corporations, but I think this has come from people who have not researched my work. Associating oneself with a media corporation is not necessarily selling out. Would we say that a public school coach who liaises with a professional sports organization is selling out, or is she simply exploring ways her athletes can pursue their sport in a post-secondary environment? Would we say that a science teacher who liaises with a corporate chemist is selling out, or demonstrating viable career options to her students? If I really want my media students to gain a realistic view of media organizations, shouldn't I get to know some of the people in those organizations? If I do, does it automatically mean that I agree with the ideologies of that organization?

The first condition I make to people who have hired me to write study guides is that I must be allowed to criticize the subject of the guide, including its ideology. No one has ever declined that condition. Are some of the guides biased? Probably. I'm human, a white middle-class North American male, and there are biases I cannot hide in my work, if only because I can't see them through the filters of my socialization. Dozens of my study guides are currently online. Any curious persons can access my work and decide for themselves its degree of bias or sell-out.

At the same time I am proud of my collected work. While it has been paid for and distributed by a variety of corporations, I think that it promotes critical thinking and media literacy; it has influenced the teaching practices of many teachers in Canada and beyond, several parent-child conversations, and I think that is a good thing.

It is often too easy to vilify media corporations and suggest that they will maximize profit at any cost, including the obesity of children, etc. There is no doubt that some corporations seek to colonize teens, but the people I have worked with take corporate citizenship seriously, and have produced media works that support critical thinking. They have gone out of their way to seek me out, acquire and publish my work. Does this help them sell more products? Probably, but not as



much as it helps me do what I think is important -- encourage people to think critically about media messages. I could never influence as many teachers, parents and students on my own. I am comfortable with that arrangement. If others prefer not to align themselves corporately and remain independent, I respect that. There are many paths, and I am convinced that mine has educational integrity.



**B.D. Another debate in media education -- primarily in the United States -- concerns the impact of media representations of sensationalized sexuality, drugs and alcohol and media violence on young people. The argument goes that intervening with media literacy can help overcome these negative influences. How do you critique these controversial concerns?**

**N.A.** The question is whether or not media messages reflect social problems or create them. It is probably some of both. An international perspective might be helpful here. Canadians' media consumption is more

than 80 per cent American, yet Canadians are not 80 per cent as troubled as Americans. Japanese TV is much more violent than American TV, but the Japanese violence rate is almost non-existent compared to the US rate.

This is all too complicated to suggest that media literacy will fix a problem -- in fact John Pungente says that these discussions just serve to distract people from the real problems -- endemic poverty, impoverished and antiquated education systems, the dissolution of the family, disloyalty of governments and corporations to their constituents, etc.

McLuhan suggested that 'media literacy is civil defense against media fallout,' but I don't think he was thinking of sex and violence, which is a symptom rather than an influence. He suggested that media literacy would allow people to better understand the influences of electronic media and thereby temper their reactions. Sex, drugs and violence might be results, but the effects are the redefinition of community, values and communication that we need to pay attention to.

Speaking of sex, drugs and violence, I think we need to re-think the terms, because my real concerns are for the unspoken, the invisible. North America is notably sexually repressed, and were it less so then sex in the media would not attract such attention and the bedrooms of the nation might be happier places. The drugs I worry about are legal -- sleep aids, diet aids, depression aids, stress aids, pain aids, constipation aids. A society that feasts on this much malady really needs to re-think its values. The violence that concerns me is not the gunfight or the exploding car, it's the institutional violence that forces some groups to do equal work for less wages, or live in domestic situations or communities against their will, or dress or behave in ways they don't enjoy, or that keeps marijuana from AIDS sufferers. We have a large community of illegal aliens who cannot vote or get medical care, yet we are OK with that because it costs us less to live. That, to me, is real violence.

**B.D. "Responding to Violence: Starting Points for Classroom Practice," (Pembroke, 1998 ISBN 1-55138-001) which you co-authored, addressed the individual's negotiation of meaning-especially how young people respond to such media texts as video games, films and violence in the school yard or at home. How does this textbook address the challenge of media violence to media educators?**

**N.A.** The book attempts to raise awareness in two ways. First, that there are different kinds of violence; and second that children's developmental stages influence the best ways to help them understand violence. The book suggests that there are three distinct kinds of violence: verbal



violence, physical violence and institutional violence. This was an attempt to widen the scope of the discussion and to help children consider their relationship to each. Sample lessons were written to illustrate how media education pedagogy needed to change to match their intellectual development.

Many people agree that children need to think critically about media violence because they cannot be protected from it (research shows that news is the scariest show on television for children, yet few parents would think to protect children from breakfast or supper newscasts). The question is how, and the book provides answers to that.

**B.D. You have written about the use of media technology within and also beyond the frame-work of media education. Sadly many teachers teaching computers or making digital media productions have little idea about media literacy. What are some essential skills and insights which media literacy can contribute to their understanding and application of media technologies?**

**N.A.** The battle over technologies in schools is a most interesting one. Imagine a school where students had to share pencils and paper, or which had only one television which could only present one program at a time. That was true at one time, but these technologies are now ubiquitous in schools.

I am enough of a veteran to recall ordering one-inch videotapes that were played on a machine the size of a piano in a far-away room. Teachers arranged the presentation for a specific time, and had to have the black-and-white TV connected to a wall jack and tuned to the correct channel at the precise pre-determined time. The programs were poor quality black and white, and there was no pausing or re-playing. The result was that very few teachers used the technology and the class discussions were quite different than we see today.

Computers and multimedia technologies are scarce resources in most schools and their rapid obsolescence will likely keep them that way. They have a vital role in all curricula, however, so the in-fighting between teachers that try to claim them does a significant disservice to students. At the same time, teachers need to pay particular attention to the most appropriate uses of these technologies. It is inevitable that people have to use technologies for a while before they understand them fully, but teachers and teacher-educators have a particular obligation to understand and utilize new technologies to their fullest potential -- the time and money they have absorbed demand that they be utilized well.

Any teacher using any technology, from photocopier to digital editor, should be thoughtfully questioning their best uses. Much of the critical thinking we should be modeling for our students involves when and how best to use technologies, and we need to be thoughtful and transparent about these uses so our students will understand them better. If teachers involve their students in production activities without such thoughtfulness, their teaching is woefully incomplete.

**B.D. As a consultant you visit many classrooms and offer in-service training primarily to English and Media teachers. How do you overcome the typical reluctance of teachers untrained in media education to do media literacy?**

**N.A.** Few of the teachers I speak to believe that media education has no place in classrooms. Those teachers usually avoid me altogether. Those I see most often are comfortable in the notion that media education is important, but they are uncomfortable with their own lack of understanding and expertise.

I begin by examining how they are already using media, which is true for all of them. Then I suggest modest ways that they might begin to expand their understanding and utilization. Most of the people I speak to are not media teachers but teachers of English, science, history, etc. Rather



than designing discrete media units, we find ways of adding media components to their existing activities. We also make sure that there are supports for these activities -- appropriate media texts or technologies -- so that they are confident that the activities are doable within their current limitations. Often, they are excited to learn that media education is not a whole new world, it's just education from a different perspective. They find that they can add a new component to a familiar unit, and achieve media education and increased student success at the same time.

Because I am responsible for hundreds of schools and will never be able to meet all the teachers, I also co-write study guides which are distributed to each school. They are written for people who have no prior media education knowledge. These are a different technology than the workshop, one that can be activated whenever it is needed and modified to suit the current situation. I have received feedback from people who have never met me, but have found a timely lesson when it was needed. We have produced study guides on fads, news of war, Halloween, narratives, and food. Each of these contains concrete applications of media studies concepts at several grade levels.

**B.D. You have taken a particular interest in new media, or multimedia. How do you see these new technologies changing media education?**

**N.A.** Media technologies are evolving so rapidly that it's a full-time job just to keep track of all the changes. I am constantly in catch-up mode, and the fact that I can't even keep up with the technological changes guarantees that I cannot keep pace with the media education changes. While we were busy talking about digital TV and the internet, gaming became the largest media industry and texting became a new language. Thanks to Henry Jenkins (M.I.T., Media Lab) for paying attention. It takes a village to raise a child and it will take a global village to understand media.

Just as every teacher is now seen as a teacher of literacy, every teacher must be actively involved in media education. The media strand in the Ontario English curriculum is a wonderful innovation, but each subject that uses media -- and that is likely all of them -- needs to contain a media strand. Science and history use media in ways different from the English classroom, and teachers need to address those differences.

I don't think this would spell the end of Ontario's grade 11 Media Studies course, as that can become the site of self-expression and career-preparation in media, but I was never able to complete all the activities I had planned in my media courses. If this is the Information Age, or the Communication Age as some call it, students cannot have enough time devoted to understanding media communications, to become valuable workers, vital citizens and cultural participants.



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