Teaching (With) Alternative Media

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Abstract

This essay examines a variety of approaches to teaching about and with alternative media across a media studies curriculum. I locate this discussion in the context of ongoing debates surrounding the theory and practice of critical media literacy (Kellner and Share, 2005; Lewis and Jhally, 1998). The essay proceeds with examples of teaching (with) alternative media in two courses: an introductory media studies course and a video production class. Throughout, I highlight the role alternative media play in educating students about the political economy of media, the cultural politics of media representation, and the relationship between media, citizenship, and social movements.

Keywords: *Alternative media, critical media literacy, cultural politics, journalism, political economy*

Alternatif Medy(ayl)a Öğretmek

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Özet

Bu makalede, alternatif medyaya ilişkin ve alternatif medya ile eğitimi tartışan çeşitli yaklaşımlar, medya çalışmaları müfredatı çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Çalışmamda, eleştirel medya okuryazarlığının kuramına ve uygulamasına dair süre giden tartışmaları (Kellner ve Share, 2005; Lewis ve Jhally, 1998) ele alıyorum. Çalışmanın devamında, ayrıca alternatif medyanın ders ortamında nasıl ele alınabileceği ve derste alternatif medya kullanımına dair iki ayrı örnek de yer alıyor. Bunlardan birincisi medya çalışmalarına giriş, diğeri ise video üretimi dersleri. Makale boyunca, alternatif medyanın, öğrencilere medyanın ekonomi politiğinin, kültürel temsil politikalarının ve medya, yurttaşlık ve toplumsal hareketler arasındaki ilişkilerin anlatılmasında üstlenebileceği işlevleri tartışıyorum.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Alternatif medya, eleştirel medya okuryazarlığı, kültürel politikalar, gazetecilik, ekonomi politik*

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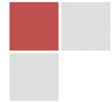

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In May 2007, *MediaChannel*—the web-based clearinghouse of news analysis and media criticism co-founded by journalists Danny Schecter and Rory O'Connor—featured a short video produced by group of undergraduate students at DePauw University.[i] Shot in a mock-documentary style reminiscent of VH-1's *Behind the Music*, the video features interview footage with, and original music performed by, a student composer. The video aims to alert viewers to the detrimental impact of radio payola on creative expression and independent artists.

Another group of students submitted their work to *Adbusters*—the Canadian nonprofit magazine "concerned about the erosion of our physical and cultural environment by commercial forces." In a sly appropriation of the AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) icon, students filled the familiar AIM Buddy icon with dozens of corporate logos. A comment on the commercialization of our physical, psychological, and social space, the graphic elegantly illustrates how we consume, and are consumed by, advertising messages.

Like their classmates, these students were asked to develop a public service announcement (PSA) related to a topic in contemporary media studies. The assignment was the finale to a semester-long investigation into what communication scholar Robert McChesney (2004) describes as "the problem of the media." Part academic analysis, part call to action, McChesney's work champions the cause of media reform. In addition to reading McChesney's lucid critique of the relationship between the economic and regulatory structure of the U.S. media system and the content produced by this system, the course made extensive use of news reports, consumer alerts, independent video, web sites and other forms of "alternative media" (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001). In doing so, the course introduced students to heretofore-unknown channels of public communication that provide opinion, analysis and perspective of the sort rarely seen or heard in mainstream media.

Conversely, the PSA assignment encouraged students to create "alternative media" of their own. Using a variety of technical resources across campus (e.g., audio and video production gear, computer workstations and graphic design software) students developed promotional campaigns related to ongoing media reform efforts.[ii] The assignment called for students to not only design and produce the PSAs, but to implement a distribution plan that included campus as well as external media outlets.[iii] To put it in the vernacular of media activists, this assignment encouraged students to "Be The Media."

This essay examines a variety of strategies for teaching (with) alternative media. I begin with a brief discussion of the concept of *critical media literacy*—the core principle behind an approach to media education that promotes media activism and reform. Following this, I discuss the pedagogical value of alternative media in two distinct settings: an introductory media studies course and a video production class.[iv] Throughout, I argue that integrating alternative media into the communication studies curriculum stimulates students' imagination by providing a mechanism for understanding and coping with mainstream media practices.

Critical Media Literacy: Making Distinctions in Media Education

There is no shortage of academic literature extolling the value of media literacy (Masterman, 1985/2001; McCall, 2007; Potter, 1998; Sholle and Denski, 1994). In recent years, regional teacher-training programs with an explicit focus on media literacy, such as the New Mexico Media Literacy Project and the Media Education Lab at Temple University, have

become commonplace. At the national level two organizations, the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA) and the Action Coalition of Media Educators (ACME), work with various constituencies around the country to promote and support media education.

And yet, despite growing numbers of parents, teachers, academics and policy makers who have come to recognize the importance of media education, the United States lags far behind other English speaking countries in integrating media literacy into school curricula (Kellner and Share, 2005). Ironically, the most formidable obstacle to media education in this country may be the conceptual and philosophical differences among media literacy advocates themselves.[v] Lewis and Jhally (1998) characterize these differences in terms of "textual" versus "contextual" approaches to media literacy. The distinction between "textual" and "contextual" approaches can be summed up as follows.

Textual approaches to media literacy focus primarily on teaching students to be critical *consumers* of media messages. Through deconstruction and semiotic analysis, textual approaches to media literacy seek to enhance student comprehension of the communicative strategies and techniques used to construct media messages. In a related fashion, this approach encourages students to make aesthetic judgments regarding media form and content. Occasionally, students develop their analytic skills through hands-on media production.

In contrast, contextual approaches to media literacy emphasize the relationship between media and democratic notions of *citizenship*. Specifically, contextual approaches consider media texts as but one of several foci for analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. This is not to suggest that contextual approaches dismiss the importance of textual analysis to media literacy. Rather, a contextual approach to media literacy examines the media text in relation to the conditions of its production and reception.

Adopting this broader perspective, media literacy takes up questions of political economy of the media industries and explores media's role in the circulation of meaning within society. In this way, a contextual approach to media literacy encourages students to not only analyze the voices, values, and interests present in media texts, but also to consider whose voices, values, and interests are excluded from media texts, and why. Thus, a contextual approach to media literacy foregrounds questions of power, control, and authority exercised within and through media culture. As Lewis and Jhally argue, "It is not enough to know that [media texts] are produced, or even how, in a technical sense, they are produced. To appreciate the significance of contemporary media, we need to know why they are produced, under what constraints and conditions, and by whom" (Lewis and Jhally, 1998: 110). As we shall see, this attention to questions of authorship and the limits and constraints that shape media texts is especially valuable in terms of media production pedagogy.

With this in mind, I use the phrase "critical media literacy" throughout this essay to signal this crucial distinction between media literacy of the sort that focuses rather narrowly on cultivating sophisticated ways of "reading" media messages (textual approach) and a broader perspective that highlights the socially constructed, and therefore highly political character of media culture (contextual approach). Taking up the sociopolitical dimensions of media messages, critical media literacy asks students to question the consequences of a commercialized, profit-oriented media system; to challenge the economic, political and institutional arrangements of such a system; and to realize their capacity to confront, challenge, and change their media environment (Torres and Mercado, 2006).

In contrast to textual critiques, then, a contextual approach to media literacy promotes structural reform of the current media system through education and activism. As Lewis and

Jhally note, "This approach undoubtedly has political consequences. Just as political education allows citizens to think more critically and constructively about politics, media literacy can provide people with the wherewithal for thinking about the limits and possibilities of media systems" (Lewis and Jhally, 1998: 113). Inasmuch as it encourages students to consider the possibilities of a media system that is not predicated on capital accumulation, critical media literacy is an emancipatory practice. That is to say, critical media literacy goes beyond demystifying media processes and techniques to challenge the notion that a media system dominated by commercial interests is either inevitable or irreversible. In what follows, I describe some strategies for using alternative media in support of the goals and objectives of critical media literacy.

Alternative Media in the Classroom

Theories of the press and its relationship to democratic principles are among the central concerns taken up by introductory coursework in media studies. The challenges of teaching this material are twofold. First, a significant number of students enrolled in this lower level course aspire to careers in the field of journalism. The demand for "practical" skills and insights oftentimes overshadows student interest in theoretical perspectives on the role of the press in democratic societies. Second, is a more general student apprehension toward theory. Students find it difficult to discern, let alone appreciate, the relevance of theory to their everyday lives.

Teaching with alternative media is an effective means of overcoming these pedagogical challenges while simultaneously exposing students to information and perspectives that illuminate, rather than obscure, the decisive role media play in creating a citizenry capable of democratic self-governance. For example, *Independent Media in a Time of War* (2003) produced by the Mohawk Independent Media Center (IMC), illustrates democratic theories of the press in an accessible and engaging fashion.[vi]

McChesney (2004) identifies three functions of the press in a democratic society. First, the press should serve as a watchdog of the powerful. Second, the press should ferret out truth from lies. Third, the press should provide a diverse range of opinion on matters of the public interest. Following a detailed discussion of McChesney's democratic theory of the press, we screen *Independent Media in a Time of War* featuring award-winning journalist Amy Goodman. I instruct students to "read" this half-hour video through the lens of the theoretical framework McChesney provides. Invariably, I find that students are more comfortable and better prepared to discuss the implications of democratic theories of the press following Ms. Goodman's critique of mainstream media coverage of the U.S. led invasion of Iraq.[vii]

For instance, Goodman challenges corporate media's subservience to the Bush administration during the Iraq War. Goodman calls attention to how closely U.S. reporting followed the administration line during the lead-up to the war and questions the breathless enthusiasm field reporters and network correspondents exhibited during the "Shock and Awe" campaign that launched the invasion. Likewise, Goodman's assessment of the practice of "embedded reporting" points up the banality and naked jingoism of these dispatches from the frontlines in Iraq. As elsewhere, the video producers illustrate Goodman's critique with "found footage" of news reports, press briefings and the like. Upon viewing what is in essence an "illustrated lecture," students were sympathetic to Goodman's critique. In terms of McChesney's theoretical framework, *Independent Media in a Time of War* vividly demonstrates that the fourth estate failed in its historic mission as a "watchdog" to the powerful.

The video is equally effective in revealing mainstream media's inability, or unwillingness to be more precise, to discern truth from spin, half-truths and out right falsehoods: the second function of the press in democratic societies. Acting as "stenographers to power," to use David Barsamian's (1992) useful phrase, the corporate press did little to independently verify the administration's claims regarding weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Similarly, the virtual absence of images of civilian casualties, combined with hi-tech, graphic representations of so-called "smart bombs," obscured the human cost of modern warfare.

Goodman's comparative analysis of press coverage of CNN International, which featured images of Iraqi civilian casualties, and the sanitized version of the war presented by CNN for domestic consumption reveals the extent to which the American people were purposefully misled by the U.S. press corps. Revealing corporate media's complicity in aiding and abetting the Bush administration's deceptions, Goodman's analysis underscores the vital role the press should have, but failed to play in ferreting out truth from lies. The point that reporting of this sort distorts the role of the press in democratic societies was not lost on students. Class discussions underscored the consequences such shoddy reporting has had for both the American and Iraqi people.

What resonated most with students, however, was Goodman's suggestion that the practice of embedding reporters, if it is to be at all taken seriously, should also include journalists embedded in hospitals, at military funerals, and in the peace movement. Citing a study conducted by the media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) Goodman notes how thoroughly mainstream media marginalized dissenting opinions on the war (Rendell and Broughel, 2003). Here, Goodman observes corporate media's exclusive reliance on "official sources" and its virtual blackout of the peace movement. Students found Goodman's argument that corporate media failed to provide a diverse range of opinion on the wisdom and legality of the Iraq invasion compelling and persuasive.

This is not to suggest, however, that all students respond favorably to Goodman's critique. As often happens when using examples from the alternative press—documentary film and video, investigative reports, opinion pieces, or critical analyses—some students resist perspectives that are unapologetically out of step with "conventional wisdom." Of course, such reactions are completely understandable, given how narrowly corporate media frame important public policy debates, such as the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.[viii]

Nevertheless, in the face of resistance to material of this sort, I ask students to reflect upon the diversity of their news and information sources. Here, a political economic analysis helps students begin to understand why independent journalism matters and how it differs from news, opinion and analysis produced and disseminated by corporate media. In the course of these discussions, I also make it clear that as citizens in a democracy it is in our own self interest that we have access to and make use of a variety of news sources: corporate as well as independent, local as well as national, foreign as well as domestic.

Production Pedagogy

Production pedagogy is most effective when it leverages students' formidable knowledge of, and pleasures with, television form and content. Here, then, my production classes make extensive use of examples culled from corporate media. Doing so is essential for deconstructing television production codes and conventions. Within the framework of critical media literacy, however,

this is but the first step toward a far more nuanced appreciation of the cultural politics of television.

That is to say, critical media literacy informs production pedagogy inasmuch as it builds upon the central tenets of textual analysis—with its attention to the *constructed* character of all media forms—and foregrounds the myriad ways in which television form and content are deeply implicated in social learning, the social construction of reality, and the broader struggle over meaning. Equally important, with its emphasis on activism and civic engagement, critical media literacy encourages students to use their newfound production skills in the public interest.

> Critical media literacy not only teaches students to learn from media, to resist media manipulation, and to use media materials in constructive ways, but is also concerned with developing skills that will help create good citizens and that will make individuals more motivated and competent participants in social life (Kellner and Share, 2005: 372).

Independent video and other forms of alternative media are particularly well suited to this task. In the context of media production coursework, judicious use of alternative media has the potential to transform student perceptions not only of the media, but also of themselves and others as historical actors and agents of social change.

On this score, *This Is What Democracy Looks Like* (1999) is a real eye opener for student video makers. A collaboration between the Seattle IMC and Big Noise Films, *This Is What Democracy Looks Like* is an unflinching account of the demonstrations that led to the collapse of the World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings in Seattle, Washington, November 1999. [ix] From the standpoint of production pedagogy, the video is significant for a number of reasons.

First, the feature-length video features footage recorded by over 100 independent media producers. This represents a formidable technical, aesthetic and logistical achievement. For students who are often disillusioned with group work, *This Is What Democracy Looks Like* reveals the advantages of collaborative projects and work habits. That is to say, no single filmmaker or television news crew would have been able to capture the "Battle of Seattle" with the sense of immediacy as hundreds of independent media activists had done. *This Is What Democracy Looks Like* inspires students to work in a collective fashion, sharing skills and expertise among working groups and lending assistance on each other's projects. Participatory production processes—long recognized as a catalyst for individual and collective development[x] —are ideally suited to critical media literacy and its emphasis on collaborative practices and social change.

Second, *This Is What Democracy Looks Like* underscores a valuable insight of critical media literacy alluded to earlier: namely, that social, economic and political context enables as well as constrains cultural production. In one particularly telling sequence, a mainstream television news report states that Seattle police have not used tear gas or concussion grenades in their dealings with demonstrators. This report is directly contradicted by footage recorded by independent videographers of police hostility, including the use of lethal force against peaceful protesters. How and why corporate media ignored or otherwise de-emphasized the police riot in Seattle, while over-emphasizing limited vandalism that did take place in the downtown business district, are rich discussion points that get production students thinking critically about the role of news workers and organizations in the *interpretation* of historical reality.

Moreover, for students who look at their own work and are disappointed because it falls short of the standards of commercial media they are so accustomed to, alternative media demonstrate that so-called "non-professionals" can produce high-caliber video using consumer grade equipment. Equally important, activist video underscores the strength of a "hyper-local" approach to student media. All of which is to say that in strictly technical terms students cannot possibly compete with commercial media outlets. Nor should they. Students' busy schedules, lack of production experience, and relative freedom to pursue projects unencumbered by expectations of financial reward provide a very different context for media production than those of their "professional" counterparts.

Put differently, recognizing how media production in an educational setting provides a distinctive set of limits and possibilities can be liberating for student producers. In the absence of the economic prerogatives and institutional constraints that confront commercial media producers, student media makers are free to address issues and concerns that are typically ignored or marginalized by mainstream media (Huesca, 2002). This insight helps cultivate a sense of public service that is sorely lacking in a media system predicated on capital accumulation. Thus, using alternative media in the production classroom reaffirms the importance of putting people before profits—a valuable lesson for all students, especially those who aspire to work in the media industries.

Conclusion

Assuming an explicit, oppositional stance to mainstream media, alternative media routinely interrogate the implications of private ownership and control of the media system on democratic values and practices. Insulated from the logic of the marketplace, alternative media also provide a valuable public service, one that promotes cultural diversity, civic engagement and participatory democracy—especially for individuals, groups and communities routinely marginalized by mainstream media. Finally, alternative media are palpable expressions of individual and collective agency in confronting media power (e.g., Couldry and Curran, 2003). Organized around the idea that our media system should serve the public interest, independent, grassroots, and nonprofit media organizations represent a viable alternative to corporate media culture. Herein lies the value of alternative media in realizing the goals and objectives of critical media literacy.

In saying this, I do not want to underestimate the resistance some students exhibit toward alternative media. For instance, students are quick to point out that alternative media are biased and often take up advocacy positions. While I do not deny any of this, I remind students of media literacy's core principle: all media are social constructions and therefore incomplete and subjective *interpretations* of reality. Further, critical analysis of mainstream media reveal their own set of biases—attitudes and perspectives that have been naturalized over time but which, nonetheless, serve to reinforce or legitimate existing relations of power.

Finally, for students, especially those aspiring media workers, who think I am conflating pedagogy with proselytizing I assure them that my goal is far more modest. That is, my teaching is not intended to get them to think as I do. Rather, my aim is to get students thinking critically about media power. To that end, I use the following metaphor to capture my intentions: Critical media literacy is akin to walking around with a stone in your shoe. It won't hurt or kill you, but it will bother you just enough that you won't be able to ignore it for long.

Notes

[i] DePauw University is a liberal arts institution in Greencastle, IN. These students were enrolled in one of two sections of *Media, Culture, and Society* (COMM 233) I taught in Spring 2007.

[ii] The media reform issues addressed in these campaigns were: commercialization, low power FM (LPFM), net neutrality, radio payola, and fake news.

[iii] Campus media included the student newspaper, radio station and close-circuit television channel. External media included *Adbusters*, *FreePress*, *MediaChannel*, *Prometheus Radio*, and *SavetheInternet.com*, among others.

[iv] Space constraints prohibit me from discussing the use of alternative media in other media studies course work. Elsewhere, I have discussed the use alternative media in the context of television criticism.

[v] There are, of course, additional factors that account for the present state of media education in the U.S.: the effects of the *No Child Left Behind* program and other vestiges of the "standards movement" that stifle pedagogical innovation; the encroachment of corporate interests on teaching materials, course content and extracurricular programming; and the lack of formal media literacy programs in college and university departments of education, to name but a few.

[vi] *Independent Media in a Time of War* is available through the Media Education Foundation--one of the premier producers/distributors of educational resources that critically examine media institutions, practices and behaviors.

[vii] Based on observations I have made using this video in tandem with McChesney's "The Problem of the Media" in three sections of *Media, Culture & Society* (COMM 233).

[viii] For more on corporate media's effect on limiting the terms of policy debates see Chomsky & Herman (1988) and Cohen & Solomon (1993).

[ix] *This Is What Democracy Looks Like* is available for purchase through the co-producers' website: http://www.thisisdemocracy.org/. For more on the Seattle IMC and the IMC movement see Kidd (2003).

[x] For a book-length treatment of participatory video see White (2003).

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