Visions of media education: The road from Dystopia

Len Masterman

Once again it has been war, with all the attendant horrors, pain and misery that it inflicts upon innocent men, women and children – which heightens awareness of the paramount importance of media literacy. As George Bush and Tony Blair were casting around for publicly credible reasons to justify their invasion of Iraq, both of their governments were engaged in a vigorous propaganda war against their own publics' scepticism about the necessity for war. It was a process bolstered – as it was also on the Iraqi side – by misinformation, distortion, lies and the vilification, stereotyping and demonisation of the 'other', the enemy. It is a familiar process whose contribution to the total sum of human misery is incalculable. Could the need in all societies for a critical mass of knowledgeable and sceptical citizens who can understand, see through and oppose this process be clearer?

It was ever thus. The visions which have fuelled media education's progress in the past have not been futuristic, utopian or technological. They have been, if anything, anti-technological, dystopian, and rooted in the past. They can be summed up in two words which history has repeatedly proved to be over-optimistic, but which those determined to learn the lessons of human catastrophe have to utter: 'Never again'.

The father of media education in the English-speaking world, was F. R. Leavis, and his interest in promoting media education in schools presents us with a puzzle. Why should the most influential, rigorous and irascible literary critic of the day take an interest in, let alone encourage, the classroom analysis of magazines, advertisements, newspapers, and other ephemera?1 After all, Oxbridge dons do not generally bother themselves with such apparently trivial classroom minutiae.

One answer to this enigma may lie in what must have been a transformative experience for Leavis, but which he nowhere mentions in his published work. During the Great War he had served as an ambulance worker and stretcher-bearer on the battlefields of Europe. The horrors and depredations which he witnessed must have been deeply traumatising and had a profound influence upon the young Leavis. What he was witness to were the flesh-and-blood consequences of the breakdown of humane and civilised values, in which men's lives were regarded, even by their own commanding officers, mechanistically, as being simply disposable.

Leavis would also, of course, have seen the effects of the contemporary campaigns of mass persuasion which were necessary before an entire generation of young men would be prepared, often voluntarily, to face death and serious injury. And, as the war progressed, the necessity of keeping the truth about the scale and magnitude of the slaughter from the people was acknowledged by the leading politicians of the day. Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister said

to C. .P Scott, editor of the Manchester Guardian, 'If people really knew, the war would be stopped tomorrow. But, of course, they don't know and can't know. The correspondents don't write, and the censorship would not pass, the truth.'2

While there is no direct evidence to support it, it is difficult not to make a connection between Leavis's personal witnessing of the slaughter of his generation, his subsequent analysis of the mass media, and his conviction of the importance of media education in schools. He had seen for himself the consequences of the media's promotion of what he called 'the herd instinct', a conformity of tastes and ideas which was necessary both for the consumption of mass-produced goods and the governance of mass societies. Education, for Leavis, had to provide a counter-influence to this conformist, levelled-down environment and encourage resistance to it through the development of discrimination and critical judgement. In the words of Leavis's co-author, Denys Thompson, – and the choice of analogy is significant – the purpose of education 'should be to turn out misfits, not spare parts'.3

Ideological function of mass media

While Leavis was beginning his educational work on the mass media in Britain, the leading exponents of media study in continental Europe were the Frankfurt School of theorists. Once again, the political context could scarcely have been more personally traumatic. The rise of Nazi-ism compelled the School to leave Germany in the 1930s and move to the USA. The success of Nazi-ism was scarcely separable from the effectiveness of its propaganda machine, and this in turn was made possible by the growth and development of the mass media during the 1930s. In particular what the Nazis created was a mass-audience for its State-run broadcasting system. As early as 1933 German radio manufacturers had been encouraged to produce a cheap uniform set, so that by 1939 Germany had a higher percentage of households owning a wireless set (some 70%) than any other country in the world. Even this was not enough for the Nazi propagandists. Compulsory listening was introduced by putting loudspeakers into factories and even installing loudspeaker pillars in the streets.4

In attempting to analyse and explore the rise of fascism (and later the lack of support for radical ideas in the USA) the Frankfurt group gave some centrality to the ideological function of the mass media, and their role in shaping public opinion, a role which they saw as essential to the success of the Nazis in the 1930s, the prosecution of war, and ultimately to the practice of genocide.

I was fortunate to be born of a generation which did not directly experience these horrors. And when I began teaching in 1963 I knew little of the Frankfurt school or Leavis's media work. The previous year, however, I had had a 'never again' experience of my own. I was a graduate student at Rice University in Houston, Texas, when the world came close to nuclear catastrophe during the Cuban Missile crisis.

As we now know, it was a cataclysm which was averted as much by luck as by political judgement. However, no less shocking to me than the probability of a nuclear holocaust was the fact that as far as I could tell most of the population of the USA seemed to be revelling in the possibility of a final 'showdown' and 'shoot-out' with the Russians. For example, Texans

seemed to be almost uniformly gung-ho. But this was not simply a Southern conservative response. My fellow graduate-students in English, intelligent, liberal, and from all parts of the USA, all backed Kennedy to the hilt.

Media coverage of the crisis and most of the discussions taking place in the USA at the time seemed to me to be based upon a crazy assumption: that a nuclear war was actually winnable. And that it was worth winning. Overnight I attained the uncomfortable and unsought-after status of 'outsider', someone completely out-of-synch with what appeared to be well-nigh unanimous public opinion. My Britishness was, of course, part of the reason for this. While it may have been just crazily feasible that some semblance of civilisation might possibly survive a nuclear war in a country as vast as the USA, in Britain a mere half-dozen bombs would be enough to blow my far-away family, friends and fellow-countrymen off the map. And in 1962 Britain, as one of the most important strategic bases from which American nuclear weapons would be dispatched to Russia, was a primary first-strike target.

This, then, was my own traumatic experience, from which grew the first stirrings of a consciousness of the importance of a critical media education. Sadly the 'never again' experience was repeated. In 1982, in order to pursue the Falklands War, Margaret Thatcher's government had to persuade the British people that it was worthwhile losing British lives for the future of some small distant islands of whose very existence they had been blissfully unaware just a few weeks earlier. The transformation of public opinion was remarkable. Even after the Task Force had sailed, 60% of the British people still opposed the taking of military action. Yet a few weeks later to have expressed such a view could easily have provoked physical confrontation, and charges of being a 'traitor'.

Clearly an enormous amount of ideological work was necessary to achieve this movement of public opinion. To that end a whole battery of news management techniques was employed to ensure that this would be a 'good news war'. These included both direct and voluntary censorship, the political intimidation of broadcasters, and pressure upon all journalists to become propagandists. Journalists from favoured newspapers were specially selected to accompany the Task Force in return for which they were expected to (and did) connive at the government's censorship and misinformation strategies. This, the press-pool system, was Margaret Thatcher's pioneering contribution to political control of the media, and was subsequently adopted by the Pentagon in Grenada, Panama and the war against Iraq, and by Russia in the second Chechnya war.5

Living through the Falklands conflict was, for me, a dramatic confirmation of the need to develop a widespread critical understanding of the media, not simply in schools, but throughout society. As a result I was motivated to do my bit by writing my own book, Teaching the Media, in which I used media coverage of the Falklands conflict and the miners' strike of 1983/4 as key examples. But the book was not the product of any vision. Like my much more distinguished predecessors, I was simply trying to absorb the lessons of contemporary events.

Media influences and effects

These 'lessons' are now deeply unfashionable. The thrust of much media theory and research over the past twenty years has been to play down notions of more general media influences and effects in favour of a representation of audiences as active meaning-makers who use the media

for their own purposes and pleasures. This is sensible enough. Indeed it is the very function of media education to stimulate and support these kinds of active readings. Unfortunately, the views of earlier theorists have too frequently been caricatured as postulating the idea of audiences as passive 'dupes'. This is not an interpretation that can be substantiated by direct reference to the work of the theorists themselves. Indeed Canadian scholar Dallas Smythe, a mass-society theorist if ever there were one, who was noted for his work on the media as Consciousness Industries, could write nearly fifty years ago, in 1954, that:

'It is important to understand that audience members act on the programme content. They take it and hold it in the image of their individual needs and values'.6

In fact reader-response theories are neither as new nor as revolutionary as many of their exponents would have it. But because audiences can and do make their own meanings from (and even set up their own resistances to) media messages, we should not draw from this the quite unwarranted conclusion (as some have) that the media themselves may not be of any great ideological influence or significance. That is to fly in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary.

Whatever view one takes of earlier mass communication theorists such as Leavis and the Frankfurt School, the phenomenon they were trying to understand and explain still has to be accounted for. It haunts us today.

The twentieth century was disfigured by every conceivable kind of barbarity – and barbarity on a grand scale: wars; national, religious and ethnic conflicts; the wholesale murder and extermination of civilian populations; genocide; apartheid; and crimes against humanity which have transgressed taboos which have existed in all societies, such as the torture or murder of adults and the killing of children. The scale and magnitude of these atrocities is only explicable in terms of the existence of effective channels for the widespread dissemination of propaganda, disinformation, stereotyping, hatred and lies. As Cees Hamelink has put it:

'The exercise of gross violence on a grand scale needs motivating beliefs. In order to get people to commit such crimes, they need to believe that the violent acts are right. In situations where crimes against humanity are committed one normally finds systematic distribution of hate propaganda and disinformation. The purpose of this is the promotion and justification of the social and/or physical elimination of certain social groups. Members of such groups are first targeted as 'socially undesirable'; they are publicly ridiculed, insulted and provoked (often in the media) and when the harassments became physical, the victims are indeed beaten up and killed. The elimination beliefs that motivate people to kill each other are not part of the human genetic constitution. They are social constructs, which need social institutions for their dissemination. Such institutions include religious communities, schools, families and the mass media.'7

Hamelink was writing in 2002 with recent evidence from the Balkans and Rwanda in the forefront of his mind. He is certainly right to place the role of media within the context of a network of other influences upon human consciousness. No one would argue – and I am certainly not – that the media have been the root cause of the conflicts and problems I have been describing. But the scale and ferocity of those conflicts is scarcely explicable without recourse to the power and effectiveness of contemporary media.

The role of hate radio in the Rwanda massacres, for example, has now been well documented. This was no stoking of age-old animosities between rival ethnic groups. Until 1959 there had never been systematic political violence recorded between Hutus and Tutsis anywhere.8 In 1994, 800,000 Tutsis were killed by Hutus in just one hundred days: that is five and a half lives terminated every minute.9 Neighbours who had lived in peace for years were killed by people they considered to be their friends. 'Ordinary people turned into crazed killing machines' – and all of this orchestrated by RTML Hutu extremist radio who referred to Tutsis as 'cockroaches', and recited the names, addresses and vehicle numbers of prominent targets, so that they could be murdered. Philip Gourevitch's classic study of the Rwandan genocide makes a crucial point:

'In 1994, Rwanda was regarded in much of the rest of the world as an exemplary instance of the chaos and anarchy associated with collapsed states. In fact, genocide was the product of order, authoritarianism, decades of modern political theorising and indoctrination and one of the most meticulously administered states in history.'10

In Rwanda national radio was used 'to prepare the ground for slaughter and to ratchet up the suggestive message of us against them to the categorically compelling kill or be killed.'11 In a historic legal judgment in 2002, the mass media were recognised for the first time as being complicit in war crimes. The Belgian broadcaster Georges Ruggiu was given a 12-year prison sentence for the war crime of inciting people to commit genocide in his broadcasts for Rwandan radio.

As we stand at the very beginnings of a new century in a world more unstable and insecure than it has been within the living memory of most of us, who would dare to predict that the horrors which await us will not exceed even those of the past hundred years? Philip Knightley, author of that classic history of war reporting, The First Casualty,12 said recently that war reporting is now dead: 'The war correspondent now has only two choices. He must become part of the government and military's propaganda machine or he must quit.' What is clear is that the control and manipulation of the media by state, political, military and commercial interests particularly at times of crisis have never been more cohesive or sophisticated.

Media education: A resource for hope

H.G. Wells almost a hundred years ago described civilisation as a 'race between education and catastrophe.' Has that race now been definitively lost? Given the power of the forces lined up against us, what influence can we possibly have as puny media teachers? Perhaps little. But there may be some grounds for hope. In 1976 media education as we know it now did not exist. Today it is represented by an international movement that has active networks in many countries

and at least a foothold in perhaps a majority of countries in the world. It represents a resource for hope, one to which any media teacher can connect, and it has already made an important contribution to the creation of media-literate citizens in many countries across the world. In a time-span of less than thirty years, this has been no mean achievement.

There are grounds for optimism, too, in the gaps which are opening up all over the world between increasingly sceptical publics and the politicians who are supposedly representing them. The world-wide protests against the invasion of Iraq provided impressive evidence of what Mary Kaldor has called a 'global civil society', that is a critical mass of media-literate citizens who are no longer prepared to accept unquestioningly the spin of their nation-states.

In Britain, it has been precisely Tony Blair's addiction to spin which has eroded public trust in him. A particular feature of the anti-war protests in Britain was the spontaneous eruption of dissent from school, and particularly sixth-form, students, many of whom were subjected to disciplinary action where they returned to their schools. I hope that it is not too fanciful to suggest that this (to me) encouraging evidence of an active engagement with the political process by young people may not be entirely unrelated to the recent spectacular growth of media studies in our sixth forms.

This article has attempted to demonstrate the links which may exist between the 'visions' of some of the founding fathers of our movement and our own. These visions are neither utopian nor technological, but grounded in an analysis of the grim realities of contemporary conflicts and crises. They are visions that can help us place our own, often mundane day-to-day activities within the context of an international movement which, in the long run, may turn out to be of more significance than we can yet imagine.

One thing is for certain. The work of the distinguished pioneers of our movement, and of thousands of media teachers and academics across the globe attests to the belief that these are visions to which it is worth devoting a professional life. And, in a grim world, that offers at least some grounds for hope. It may not amount to much, or it might turn out to be of greater significance then we can know. But it is what we can do.

Notes

1. F R Leavis and D Thompson, Culture and Environment, Chatto and Windus, 1933.
2. Phillip Knightley, The First Casualty, Quartet, 1975, P.93.
3. D. Thompson, 'Advertising God', Scrutiny 1, 3, December 1932.
4. See Z A B Zeman, Nazi Propaganda, OUP, 1964.
5. See R Harris, Gotcha! The Media, the Government and the Falklands Crisis, Faber and Faber, 1983, and John Downing, 'Issues for Media Theory', Media Development, 1/2002.
6. Dallas Smythe, 'Reality as presented by Television', Public Opinion Quarterly, 18.2: 143-56. cited in J Corner, Critical Ideas in Television Studies, Clarendon Press, 1999, p.81.
7. Cees J Hamelink, 'Communication may not build peace, but it can certainly contribute to war', Media Development 2, 2002.
8. P. Gourevitch, We wish to inform you… Picador, 1998. p.59.

9. Ibid. P. 133.
10. Ibid p.95.
11. Ibid.
12. P. Knightley, The First Casualty, Deutsch, 1975.

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