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Media And Children: Education Or Exploitation?

By

Lawrence V Mahon
Media and Children: Education or Exploitation?

Lawrence V Mahon
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June 1995

Television and the new media are among the most powerful inventions in the history of humanity, and we use them to tell children to buy hamburgers! We convince children they need a worthless piece of plastic, that we have squeezed into the shape of something aggressive, violent looking, and proclaim its pricelessness. We use the media to do this, and we still wonder whether it is exploitative.

Even in regulated areas our people allow 20 minutes of advertising to saturate every hour our children watch television. Often it is necessary to cut sections from the program in order for the "show" to finish on time, and still fit in all the messages.

It seems true to me that whatever amazing things people invent and create for the advantage of humanity, some others will use to the Disadvantage of humanity.

For the purposes of this paper I will narrow down my field of attack, and concentrate, though not exclusively, on the new media - the emerging technologies associated with the promised superhighways and "buyways", and the possible effects on those with and without access to the technology.

Let me demonstrate, one way or another, the potential learning value of multimedia, compared to a short written passage of the same event. (Video clip)

The next best thing to being there could be a well-made multimedia product. But being there will NEVER be replaced.

I find it necessary in answering this question about exploitation and education to set myself some parameters. While involved with new technology and multimedia at the Australian Children's Television Foundation, I would see a variety of groups in the world becoming more and more isolated around this issue. There are the "haves" and the "have nots", there are the "I wants" and the "I don't want"
you to haves. With world resources properly managed, the "have nots" should be reducing in size daily. The opposite seems to be happening. The "haves" are becoming the "have mores", with a determined aim to become the "have it alls". Some interest groups will realise their positions will be threatened if the "have nots" start to "have", and so the "I don't want you to haves" feel a need to resort to all sorts of tricks to justify and maintain the status quo.

The major important fact relating to the new media technologies is that they can not be easily controlled by governments any more than a telephone can be controlled. If people are affluent enough to get hold of the necessary equipment, they are then able to tap into the vast sources of information that used to be easily controlled by some governments. "Freedom of the press" is rapidly becoming "freedom of the press of a button". This offers all of us hope for the future. We now have the ability to hold lies up to the light- to see them for what they are.

This of course can be threatening to those groups who have legitimate paranoia. Their lies will be exposed. Any single source of information can be viewed in relation to thousands of other sources. People will have access to a plethora of sources, will be able to interact with those sources, and help define the content. If media is used in this fashion, there is no way it is exploitative. A worldwide communications network can give children a valid view of the world they are inheriting.

We are going to have new issues arise. Censorship seems to be the one that gets front page in Australia quite often. Some sleazy group sees unending profit in exploiting women. An errant politician is caught in a compromising position. A report of failing economic policies is about to hit the air. Whose interest is being served by a blanket of silence? When "Plaything" was published did we ever think of banning all literature to overcome the problem of exploitation? Should, in all honesty, the errant pollie survive politically? And wouldn't it be nice (albeit impossible) that all our politicians came clean with ALL their policies, let alone the economic ones. Figures released recently suggest that pornography takes up .01 percent of the Internet's time and space. In Australia pornography is mentioned in nearly ALL newspaper articles related to the Internet. I wonder who has the real problem!

There were recent anti technology articles published in Australia after three major disasters occurred because of so called computer errors. Each disaster absolutely unacceptable, whether they be telephone and data base systems crashing, as happened in the US recently, or the
most frightening of all, aircraft crashing. Yes, the consequences of failing technology are often tragic.

But what is the alternative? And is it "failing technology" really anything other than the content WE put on it?

One hundred major shipwrecks in a hundred years along a hundred miles of southern Australia's coastline. That's Victoria's claim to fame. Thousands of lives lost. Was the sextant ever blamed? If the captain was playing "spin the bottle" to decide on which way to go, was the bottle ever blamed? Well, yes, the bottle was often blamed, but not because of its spin.

The wild card sometimes referred to as "human error" comes into it frequently. Who would feel safer six hours into the journey across the ocean towards Indonesia hearing from the Captain "All navigation and piloting of this aircraft will be done manually from now on. As we get closer to Jakarta, we'll be asking for volunteers to help us wind down the wheels. OOOH, look, there's Africa!"

And the telephone system! For those lucky enough to be served by digital telephone networks remember pre-digital service during an international call?

"Hhheellllllooo" "Itt'ss goooo..." "Hi, how a..."
"Hel" "Long ti..." "Where hav..."

etc, etc.

I have taken to the echo free system with great enthusiasm. Systems do still break down. Have we forgotten how often they used to breakdown before high technology came on the scene? "Hello, operator...Hello,? Hello?" Click!

The increasing use of high technology opens us up to more errors relating to technology. But they are still HUMAN errors. The human errors are merely different human errors. We have ignored the fact that OTHER human errors are diminishing in impact and frequency. Technology related errors are human errors that have been screened from view through the use of a different and unattainable language to most of us, they are screened by such sophisticated looking equipment, most of us write it off as "too hard" before we've even been introduced properly. And while designing interfaces that are off-putting has successfully alienated most of the world's people, those clever interfaces have successfully constructed an elite class that becomes more and more powerful and more and more dodgy as time goes on. As the rest of us catch up to the language of technology and are less intimidated by the fact that we don't get to speak to humans anymore, the technoheads are discovering new ways to confuse us. Sure, an intuitive screen that lets us do
what we need to do without thinking is a bonus. For a time. What happens when we want to go further? Click here, and it will all happen automatically. That's nice! But what if I want a slight variation? Perhaps a four year degree in C++ would be a good starting point. The more so called "user friendly", the less control over the process is held in the hands of the user. I can't wait until my washing machine comes into my room, picks up the clothes from the floor, washes, dries and irons them, folds them up, and throws them back on the floor (so I will know where they are!). Press three buttons, and it's all done. So "user friendly" that it is all done for me, and WITHOUT me. By relinquishing my involvement, I am also relinquishing my participation at the decision making level. That's okay if it is my real decision after considered thought. At the moment no one is asking me.

While it is okay for a task such as washing clothes, is it still okay if someone else, particularly the faceless, tells me who I may speak to, when I may do it, and what I may say? How far are we from opening up a WWW page, and having only three options? Will we want more, and will we be able to get them? Will those who control the WWW be also able to control the flow of the information? And more critical, will they then be able to control the content? And will it be renamed "the Information Super Tollway"? Will this not constitute a massive exploitation and alienation of the future leaders of this world?

Perhaps "user friendly" is not the way to go if we wish to halt the world of exploitation. It seems that the less control over the technology we give our children, the more control any one group can have over our children. That is frighteningly exploitative.

I don't find it terribly reassuring to know that my generation is the last generation to actually be able to choose in relation to taking on board the use of high technology. My children do not have that luxury. They were born into a world of high technology. Their access to it determines whether or not they are advantaged or disadvantaged.

The rate of technological development is rapid. Probably too rapid for most of us to stay in touch with. The ones who find the pace okay tend to include those who have most to gain from gap in the development of the new technology, and the general community's understanding of its current powers and potential purposes. The research papers I tried to access one week through the postal system, are responded to and disproved through the Internet before the originals have arrived. But to what end? Education, information and knowledge all tend to lead to some form of action, or considered inaction. I am unsure whether or not access to
such a dramatically increased supply of information will have an immediate impact on action.
Will the environment be cared for more, just because people know there is an environment home page on the Internet? My fear is that so many people will have so much access to so much information, they will switch their computers off, and use them as large paperweights. Too much of too much.

While the advertising whizkids dream up new ways to direct their skills at our kids, we have a duty to educate ourselves and our children in the technological possibilities. We must know how to counter the attacks. It may be possible for an advertiser to slip an ad into a mainstream internet document. We need to know that we can use that same technology to filter out the ad, and anything else we don’t see as advancing our children. We need to know that if there is a technical block placed on our access to information, the same technology can be harnessed to open up that access. Our own knowledge will free us, and will allow us to free our children.

Our level of technological literacy needs to be at a deeper level than our basic literacy. An example I like to use to help me understand literacy per se is based around a sign on the factory wall: “Stand Back. This Machine KILLS”. The person who can read stands back. The truly literate person ensures the machine is removed, or made safe. What response is therefore appropriate of the technologically literate person in the world of hype accompanying the onslaught of new age equipment?

In conclusion, let us realise that exploitation itself is education in its own way. But what lesson is it teaching? Is the message of exploitation one we want our kids to copy? As the forms of media begin to blend and to focus more on the world of computers, the impact of exploitation and of education through this medium is obviously greater than at any time in the past. We must be vigilant in that while we accept with open arms the technological vehicles arriving from the more technically oriented nations of the world, we reserve the right to marinate the messages in our own cultures if we are to be true to our children’s heritage. Children in all corners of the earth should be given the opportunity of adding their own messages. This means they should be given the skills of authorship (but that’s a different paper!). Listen to what they have to say. The technology can do it. They can get their messages out to millions now, instantaneously. Perhaps instead of contacting millions, they just want to get closer to a few. Closer to millions through technology - or close to a few. Who among us knows what they have to say?