

# Critical Education

Volume 6 Number 15 August 1, 2015 ISSN 1920-4125

## *Engagement with the Mainstream Media and the Relationship to Political Literacy The Influence of Hegemonic Education on Democracy*

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Citation: Carr, P. R., Pluim G. W. J., & Howard, L. (2015). Engagement with the mainstream media and the relationship to political literacy: The Influence of hegemonic education on democracy. *Critical Education*, 6(15). Retrieved from <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/184942>

*An article in the Critical Education series The Media and the Neoliberal Privatization of Education*

### **Abstract**

*This article focuses on teacher candidates' perspectives of media literacy in the context of education for democracy as a possibility to enlighten students to address the mainstream media's predisposition towards the neoliberal privatization and corporatization of education. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from research at two campuses of a university in Ontario, Canada, we illustrate how this sample of future educators demonstrates a normative inclination to embed media literacy in their teaching; however, real barriers exist that can diminish their engagement with controversial issues, alternative media, and, even, democratic education, and education for democracy, itself. This contradiction, we argue, underscores the difference between media awareness that many teacher candidates possess, and media literacy, a quality that requires greater focus at education institutions. Set against the backdrop of the television news media's largely imperceptible neoliberal predisposition towards education, education for democracy must necessarily incorporate a critical approach that enables future teachers to identify and critique the mainstream media's support of, and entanglement with, the neoliberal cooptation of education. The article ends with several proposals to address the democratic deficits created through limited engagement with media literacy.*



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Critical Educational Studies and housed at the University of British Columbia. Articles are indexed by EBSCO Education Research Complete and Directory of Open Access Journals.

## Introduction

Amongst contemporary critical media analysts it is widely recognized that biases exist in the mainstream media towards market-oriented solutions over socially-democratic resolutions to societal challenges and problems. This narrative extends to mass media representations of educational institutions by upholding the virtues of a narrow definition of accountability, school privatization, voucher programs, high-stakes competition, and standardized testing as a means and measure of “quality education,” especially in the US (Apple, 2000; Stack & Kelly, 2006). By and large, this privileging of neo-liberal ideology in education goes unrecognized within a largely media illiterate culture, predominantly oblivious to the concealed and subtle messaging (and even the explicit signs) in the many types and forms of mass media that proliferate in all public spaces today.

Media industries are much more than isolated islands of knowledge, ideas and propaganda dissemination, and many media advocates and insiders suggest that the mainstream media reflect and represent the society, to varying degrees, to which it broadcasts (McLuhan, 1964; Toennesen, Hodgson, & Mimmack, 2013). Thus, it is incumbent on a democratic society and the individuals within it to demand more meaningful representation of its citizenry and their perspectives in mainstream media, to source and rely on local and alternative media wherever possible, and to ensure that their own media literacy is cultivated in a way that reflects their commitment to a just, equitable and democratic society.

Using education as a primary means to acculturate an understanding of, appreciation for, and engagement with democracy could foster a more broad-based, critical literacy of media portrayals of society and education (Carr & Porfilio, 2009; Collins, 2009; Kellner & Kim, 2010). As we argue in this paper, education for democracy involves engaging in (more) critical thinking, controversial issues, deliberative democracy, and refining one's own individual as well as collective media literacy. This is necessary so that students can engage in counter-hegemonic reflections, deliberations and actions that will benefit them and their communities and societies in relation to social justice, political literacy and transformative change (Abdi & Carr, 2013).

In this article we focus on the perspectives of teacher-education students on education, media literacy and democracy as an indicator of the propensity of future educators and their students to develop a recognition and analysis of the biases of mass media, and, in particular, to interrogate the neo-liberal onslaught within the mainstream media on institutions of learning and the potential for social change. We begin by briefly examining the importance of media literacy through the example of television news broadcasts. Next, we lay out our position on the centrality of education for democracy as an approach to engage in controversial issues, critical awareness, deliberative democracy, and media literacy. We then present our study with teacher-education candidates at two campuses of a university in Ontario, Canada, and relay our findings of their perspectives on media literacy as an important component of and for their future teaching and engagement in education. The subsequent section analyzes the findings of the teacher candidates' positions on teaching controversial issues and democracy to illustrate the differences in conceptualizations between media *awareness* and media *literacy*. We conclude with some proposals for the education of (future) teachers to promote media literacy in teacher education programs. Our contention is that greater media literacy amongst future educators is integral to cultivating a more media (and politically) literate student population that is able to recognize,

deconstruct, critique, contextualize and act on the media's neoliberal portrayal of education in society, which, inevitably, impacts on society as a whole.

### **Media Limitations, Biases, and Illiteracy in Society Today The Example of Television Newscast Viewing**

The ways in which large numbers of citizens are conditioned to, and acculturated by, the neoliberal portrayal of education through mass media education can be illustrated through a sociological analysis of news viewership. Television is a primary source of media consumption for citizens across North America, and its reach has an important influence around the globe as well. In television programming, almost every half an hour is a discrete event, separated in content, context and emotional texture. News broadcasts are amongst these finely-tuned time-blocks, although increasingly media corporations favour on-going, 24-hour news channels. In an extremely germane and clarion analysis of the impact of the onset of the television, Neil Postman (1992) argues that news is constructed as pure entertainment, fragmented, without context, without consequences, without value, and without essential seriousness. Postman suggests that news-readers, news executives and others involved are more concerned with attracting the largest audiences possible as they employ a cast of players, personalities and sales-people who are considered likeable, charismatic and credible. Television is the paradigm for our conception of public information, and has achieved the power to define the form in which news must come as well as how we shall respond to it. Although not everyone watches television, its impact on diverse digital platforms (internet, websites, blogs, tablets, smart phones, social media, etc.) is extensive, especially given the vast concentration and interconnectedness of the mainstream media today.

Mainstream television news can and often does provide disinformation, misinformation, trivial information and uncontextualized information. The packaging of the news as an event helps create the illusion of knowing and engaging with what is considered important, the "news," and the redundant, repetitive, rhythmic nature of formulaic news programming can easily lead to the corollary. Postman (1992) wonders whether we are losing our sense of what it means to be informed; is this heightened ignorance, he questions, within a post-modern sense of being knowledgeable? Credibility replaces reality, and political leaders need not worry about important matters as they believe that they are compelled to ensure that they are "on point," saying the right thing in the right way to the right audience, and, importantly, that they are telegenic (Gencarelli, 2005).

News stories rarely present fundamental, critical and nuanced implications that require viewers to digest, unpack and closely analyze the multi-layered dimensions of a piece; this would obscure the attention of the next event. Instead, each news item is presented as an isolated component in itself, seamlessly meshed between corporate advertisements and an unforbidding stop-watch that ensures that debates, ideas and dialogue are never too deep or conducted in a deliberative way (Postman, 1992; Williams & Carpini, 2011). Producers of television news broadcasts are well aware of these matters, and, ultimately select criteria for the presentation of the news based on a certain set of principles and conventions that seek to maximize entertainment value and corporate profits, often skilfully avoiding offending hegemonic interests. In particular, television news portrays the institution of education in absence of its value as a public good, and increasingly frames it as a private commodity (Giroux & Saltman, 2009; McChesney, 2011; Meyer & Hinchman, 2002).

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All of these aspects concerning the neoliberal bias on education of and within the mainstream media are normalized and extended through the supporting features of a standard news broadcast. From their analyses in this area, Williams and Carpini (2011) describe three such features:

- *The newscaster*: The truth of the information provided rests heavily on the shoulders of the newscaster, who is usually vetted through focus groups, advertising numbers, and popularity ratings. Television provides a new definition of truth; the credibility of the newscaster is the ultimate test of the truth of a proposition, not past statements, reality testing, evidence, or seriously contextualized, nuanced and scientific analysis. The impression of sincerity, authenticity, vulnerability, or attractiveness are, therefore, considered fundamental.
- *The musical accompaniment*: A stylized, dramatic musical theme for the news show is there for entertainment, to create a mood for connecting with the audience. If there were to be no music, news alerts and life events might seem alarming, disconcerting and requiring reflection and action. With music, there is nothing to be alarmed at or with, and the relation to reality is seen as a play, a seamless wave of entertainment.
- *The commercials*: No matter how serious or grave the news is, it will be followed by a series of commercials that will defuse the importance of the news. For example, viewers could be presented with a horrific tragedy involving mass violence or a causality, and then, within seconds, there could be a Burger King commercial or McDonalds advertisement upon the screen with no irony or regret. Moreover, corporate financing means that media organizations would, naturally, alter editorial reports, analysis and commentary, since the wrong reports about sponsors could eliminate their continued patronage.

The consequences of television news are especially far-reaching in relation to young viewers, many of whom will be tomorrow's educators and leaders. Youth and young adults depend, in large part, on television for cues as to how to understand and respond to the world. It can be argued that television perpetuates the theory of anti-communication, which cultivates a discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction. The idea is to keep everything brief and constantly stimulated through variety, novelty, action, and movement. We are required to pay attention to bite-sized, irrelevant or often inexistent content, or a specific character for no more than a few seconds at a time. Throughout this discourse, complexity is avoided, nuances dispersible, visual stimulation substitutes for thought, and verbal precision is reduced to anachronism. The problem is never societal or systemic because the mainstream news will focus endlessly on a single rapist, a single killer or a single racist, not on violence towards women, societal violence or deeply entrenched cultural, institutional and societal discrimination and racism (Carr, 2009).

The public understanding of the mass media and their methods is inherently limited (Carr & Porfilio, 2009; Chomsky 1989; Tuchman, 2010). This homogenized ideology infers that we need not critique the macro political economy that is generally obscured and only presented in a veiled manner by the mainstream, corporate media (Carr, 2007, 2011; Carr & Porfilio, 2009). Harold Innis and Alexander John Watson (2013) suggest that mass circulation of media, such as

newspapers, are biased towards space (empire, territory), against time (duration, continuity), and against overtly environmental issues (McLuhan, 1964). If a democratic society rests upon a citizenry that chooses to engage in issues that enable greater equity, justice, and societal and environmental well being, individuals need to be politically literate about global issues. In addition, citizens need to better understand the contextual and structural factors that surround them, and to engage in deep, deliberative debate on the issues that affect the most vulnerable. Education for democracy is one pedagogy that focuses on media and political literacy as central pillars of learning (Carr & Becker, 2013).

### **Our Research with Teacher-Education Candidates**

It is against this backdrop of the tendency of the mainstream media to limit perspectives on possibilities for equity and social justice in society, emphasizing instead its bias towards increased, supposedly unstoppable neoliberalism within society and education, that we position our research with teacher-education candidates. The central aim of our study is to elicit and examine the viewpoints, perspectives and experiences of teacher-education candidates on education for democracy. For this particular component of the research, we are particularly interested in how participants understand, relate to, and engage with media literacy, especially in relation to democracy. Further, we sought to better comprehend how these pre-service educators might incorporate media literacy and controversial issues in their teaching.

We recruited participants from teacher-education programs at five university campuses across North America, and in several other jurisdictions but, in this article, we focus on the responses from two campuses (“North” and “South”) of Lighthouse University (a pseudonym) in Ontario, Canada. Both sites of Lighthouse University are in relatively small cities, the North site being the main campus with upwards of 8,000 students, while the newer, South satellite campus is home to about 1,500 students. Lighthouse University is known as a learner-centered institution, and it recently placed in the top ten in a national ranking of primarily undergraduate universities in Canada.

The data from teacher candidates at Lighthouse University were collected through an on-line survey that included a detailed demographic section as well as a substantive section of twenty qualitative and quantitative questions on education for democracy. The demographic section enabled a depiction of our research sample. The majority of the participants were young (under 23 years of age), white, female, English-speaking, and undertaking a pre-service (as opposed to a teaching certification or graduate degree) program. For purposes of transparency, each data bit in this article is connected to the campus from which the data were collected, and contains a numeric identifier of the individual teacher-candidate (for example, North-43 represents participant 43 from the North Campus). This study includes 118 participants from the North Campus, and 168 from the South Campus.

In the main portion of the questionnaire, the quantitative data were collected using a five-point Likert scale (with [1] inferring very strong disagreement with the statement, and [5] indicating very strong agreement), and the qualitative data were collected by providing opportunities for open-ended comments either in conjunction with or separately from the Likert scale responses. Descriptive statistics were calculated using the findings of the quantitative data to garner measures of central tendency and the degree to which respondents supported each statement in the questionnaire. Qualitative data were analyzed through a thorough, two-step

process of open and focused coding. When the data were fully coded they were assigned themes, such as the types of engagement with media, strategies to address controversial issues, and interpretations of education for democracy. These themes, when grouped together, began to paint an overall portrait of the perspectives of the sample of teacher-education candidates at Lighthouse University, which we describe and critique in this article. Other findings and analyses of this research project as well as previous ones informing it have been reported elsewhere to illustrate other aspects and correlations between education and democracy (Carr, 2007, 2011; Carr & Becker, 2013; Lund & Carr, 2008).

### **Findings from the Study**

The central findings that we report on here concern the responses of teacher-education candidates to the question of whether media literacy is an important component of education for democracy, the propensity of these candidates to engage in controversial issues, and their position on whether teaching for democracy is even considered important in the first place. When asked whether media literacy is an important part of education for democracy, most teacher candidates concurred. “Media literacy is beyond important, this is where we get ALL our information from news, newspapers and so forth” (South-124), explained one teacher candidate at the South Campus, where 82% of respondents (n=115) agreed or very much agreed that media literacy is an important part of education for democracy. Other participants at the South Campus elaborated in a similar manner:

Media literacy and political literacy are paramount to understanding democracy. One cannot make an informed choice without first understanding the workings and functions of government. (South-59).

Democracy will continue to exist in this lackluster state unless we are well rounded, well versed in all these different facets of life. ... Media literacy and technological literacy in this day and age are critical. With so much of the world’s information being spread through the media and technologies, we must become able to decipher good from bad information. We must understand why we are being given certain information and not given certain information. At the same time, remaining current and able to navigate technology gives us access to information that we would otherwise be unaware of. Christopher Hitchens once said that he watched the news or read the newspaper not to get the news, but to see what news other people are getting. Instead he relied on sources around the world that provided him with information unavailable to certain populations (South-81).

At the North Campus, these perspectives were more pronounced. An even stronger proportion of (90%, n = 75) of teacher-education candidates agreed or very much agreed on the importance of media literacy as a component of education for democracy. Said one teacher-education candidate: “I rated media literacy highest because the media is so ingrained in our culture, but students need to be aware that it is often skewed” (North-58). Others from the North Campus concurred:

I think media, political and technological literacy are important for education about democracy because these are the tools which the political elite use to

convince us to their side of an issue, or even what issues are important, and to be able to think for yourself you need to be able to understand these tools (North-11).

I rated media literacy as high because social media is the primary method by which young people are being connected and sharing information regarding political movements. The Egyptian Revolution is an obvious example of how social media has been used. Similarly for *Idle No More* (North 55).

Nevertheless, if teacher-education candidates—and by extension, educators, in general—view so positively the importance of media literacy as a central component of education for democracy, why is it that our society is so willing to blindly support mass media that portrays an unnecessary narrow vision for society, including the image of education as an exclusive and increasingly private good? Similarly, why is critical media literacy so marginalized within the formal curriculum and formal educational experience, and why are nuanced alternative interpretations of social realities seemingly so difficult to pull together (Marshall & Sensoy, 2011; Stack & Kelly, 2006)?

There are several explanations for this mismatch between rhetoric and reality. First, there little attention is given to media alternatives. For one of the authors, for example, a recent exercise with a class of teacher candidates at the South campus of Lighthouse University demonstrated a dearth of experience and familiarity with alternative media sources and alternative expressions of democracy. The activity involved choosing from a list of 11 alternative media representations of democracy to guide a discussion on the most promising and interesting alternative ways in which democracy can play out in society. Among these examples were *Democracy Now*, an independent news network in the US, the Occupy movement, Wikipedia, and Idle No More, the Aboriginal protest movement that emerged in 2012. When it was time for discussion, only a handful of education students out of a class of over thirty had heard of *any* of the initiatives on the list, let alone having had any personal experience to share about them. All students subsequently undertook an in-class web search to learn about the roles and approaches of these alternative media, which they relayed back to the class. The dominance of mass media in cultural production today heavily diminishes the awareness of youth of media sources that are alternative to the mainstream. Moreover, the implications include the narrowing of potential counter-hegemonic work towards social justice, understanding and engagement.

Second, despite rhetorical support for media literacy, teacher-education candidates in our study uncritically cite mainstream media to support their perspectives on democracy around the world. We have elaborated elsewhere about the perceptions of the teacher-education candidates from these university campuses on democracy in reference to a list of twelve countries. While their opinions and rationale varied somewhat on the degree of democracy in their own country and abroad, what stood out was that they justified their responses largely through “what they learned from the media” (see Carr, Pluim & Thésée, 2014). In many cases the teacher candidates had strong views on the levels of democracy in these countries, however the ways in which they substantiated it portrayed a lack of media literacy, with many openly acknowledging that they were “guessing”.

Third, while teacher candidates favoured the inclusion of media literacy as part of education for democracy, they held much less support for teaching controversial issues, and the importance of teaching for democracy altogether. We explore these findings in the next section.

### *Teaching and Controversial Issues*

Perspectives on the ways that imbalances, injustice, and inequities in society are resolved are inherently controversial. Redistributing wealth and power has enormous consequences on those who maintain them, and history suggests that restructuring the status quo is often met with great resistance. Thus, the reporting on societal issues such as education through news outlets and other forms of media is characteristically a controversial endeavour. For teachers to engage in media literacy, controversy must, necessarily, become part and parcel of the educational experience. If educators are fearful of deliberative democracy, what are the chances that students (and, importantly, educators themselves) will wilfully, easily and comfortably engage in critical but difficult and problematic issues of great significance (Carr, 2009, 2011)?

Interestingly, while teacher-education candidates expressed in large numbers the importance of media literacy as an essential component of education for democracy, fewer research participants agreed that teachers should raise controversial issues in the classroom. Whereas 82% of teacher candidates at the South Campus supported media literacy as an integral part of teaching for democracy, only 73% agreed or very much agreed that controversial issues should be part of teaching for democracy (n=118). Many expressed caution in presenting such topics, noting, for example, that controversial issues may be appropriate “so long as they do not cause chaos” (South-1). Other participants further elaborated:

There is a time and a place [to incorporate controversial issues]. Kids still have to be kids and scaring them from very controversial issues is not a way to help them see different sides. I feel [that] there still needs to be a filter to what kindergartens [*sic*] are learning compared to grade eights or higher may be learning (South-47).

Some topics may be too sensitive for younger children, or may not be appropriate to discuss in the classroom. Others though, should be talked about publicly, to teach tolerance and acceptance of the views of others, and to raise awareness and acceptance of the specific issue (South-18).

This drop in support was at a very similar rate at the North Campus where 8% fewer teacher candidates (n = 84) agreed that controversial issues should be part of a teaching agenda compared to a media literacy curriculum (i.e. 82% compared to 90%). The rationale at the North Campus was expressed similarly to that from the South Campus: “Controversial issues may leave a negative impression on students. If controversial issues are discussed, it should be done so with caution” (North-59). Another teacher candidate emphasized the sensitivity of teaching controversy:

One has to be very careful, based on the age/grade level of a class, before hitting them with controversial issues. The problem with controversy and teaching is that a teacher's opinion will affect a student if they do not have the background knowledge to understand the issues. It is not a teacher's place to offend students or parents by attacking their own personal or cultural values. I have seen too many loaded topics thrown at students under the guise of “social justice”, without considering their readiness to understand the topics, or impact it will have on them afterward (North-70).

Especially telling was the drop in support when participants were asked whether teachers should be teaching for democracy at all. While 71% at the South Campus agreed or very much agreed that educators should promote a sense of democracy in their students, this represents an



11% difference from the percentage of teachers who endorsed the importance of media literacy. As one respondent noted, teachers “have to be careful not to offend others” (South-112). Another cautiously agreed that democracy could be promoted “to an extent, but not to the point of anarchy” (South-90).

At the North Campus, an even smaller proportion of teacher candidates were enthused about promoting democracy in their teaching. Some 16% fewer teacher candidates agreed or very much agreed that teachers should promote a sense of democracy in their students than the proportion of those who similarly felt media literacy should be taught as part of education for democracy (74% compared to 90%). One respondent replied by saying that teachers “shouldn't give personal democratic opinions to students, it's unprofessional or insulting depending on their family voting history” (North-88). Another suggested, “it really depends on the cohort. Younger generations appear to be raised by television and video games... democracy in that generation might appear hurtful to those who actually care about true political issues” (North-52).

## Discussion

The analysis of these results suggests that when teacher candidates support the idea of incorporating media literacy in their class, what they are really talking about is media awareness. On one hand, teacher candidates recognized that media can present “skewed,” “misleading” and “bad” information that renders teaching for media literacy as “paramount” and “beyond important”. Yet, on the other hand, teacher candidates felt that controversial issues may be too “sensitive,” and teaching for democracy can be “unprofessional”, “offensive” or even “hurtful”. We contend that teaching for media literacy fundamentally involves the kind of teaching for democracy that risks offending others, a project which includes sensitive issues, and equally seeks to engage in controversy. The objective is not denigration, humiliation and/or subjugation but, on the contrary, emancipation, critical engagement, and building the capacity to comprehend and shape the socio-political realities and issues we face as individuals and as collectivities.

The necessity for media literacy to be incorporated within the formal curriculum in a critical and engaging way is obvious and pressing. Media today (still largely) include an explosion of television, print, and online global networking systems saturated by corporate ideologies promoting homogenized values of consumption, competition, hierarchy, sexism, homophobia, and racism, among others. Education can play a central role in raising awareness of these controversial issues, their interconnections, and the common denominators underpinning social inequalities and power imbalances (McChesney, 2011). In order for students to be aware of such societal issues and their impact on their environment, educators within elementary and high schools need to become fundamentally aware and fluent with such a diverse array of popular culture materials, concepts and approaches that their students can read, view, and consume media in a critical manner. As the influence of the ever-expanding multi-media continues to impact classrooms and society, educators have paid, comparatively speaking, little attention to the manifestations of media influence. The lack of opportunity for students to critically engage and interact with one another in evaluating the effect of the media on society and their own lives, therefore, needs to be addressed.

In *Rethinking Popular Culture*, Marshall and Sensoy (2011) provide a basis for a new approach for educators, one that involves discussing the troublesome issues involved within commercialism and democracy. They argue that the notion of entertainment, enjoyment and

pleasure needs to be balanced with a greater emphasis on the understanding the influences of media on democracy. This critical approach to media will enable students to access the tools of critical thinking to more fully understand corporate influences related to power and profit.

Marshall and Sensoy (2011) suggest that it is necessary for educators to resist such a non-nuanced social world that is created by popular culture and mass media. The simplified notion of education as an exclusive and neo-liberal commodity that is incessantly presented as such by corporate and dominant hegemonic forces limits our understandings of complex social histories, identities, and structural inequalities. In seeking to shape democratic students for the future, educators need to be aware and able to educate their students with a view to problematize the corporately manufactured media discourse, and, equally, to cultivate informed public engagement and participatory democracy. To evolve as a society of informed citizens, mainstream media cannot ingratiate consumption and profit as their singular goals, and do it with the magical touch and air that this is normal, that this is what we are all about as a society. A community aware and considerate of social justice and equality for all is one that should be privileged in the upcoming years. In understanding that decisions are made in the corporate media by a small group of wealthy and powerful individuals with little regard for informed public participation or deliberation, students need to know that, through their construction of knowledge, awareness, engagement, communication and critical analysis, they may be able to improve their democratic experience as citizens, which can lead to understanding democracy through new and enriched perspectives. If people are conscious of the manufacturing role of the media to create consent and docility (Chomsky, 1989), then they may act differently, or, at the very least, function in a way that acknowledges their complicity with a non-critical, homogenized media culture that aims to limit their democratic participation and engagement (Carr, 2009, 2011).

A general understanding that popular culture and media—including the well-known reality shows, sit-coms, late night shows, movies, music and games—relentlessly reproduces existing relationships between dominant and subordinate groups is a fundamental learning point. If these connections are not problematized, the very notion of informed public discourse and participatory democracy will continue to be threatened. In our current socio-cultural system and educational experiences, students are often manipulated to serve the corporatized view of consumption and profit, rather than developing valuable experiences and characteristics of informed citizenry. From a corporate viewpoint, schools are ideally placed to influence attitudes, build long-term loyalties, introduce new products, and test-market, promote and generate immediate sales and economic consumption (Marshall & Sensoy, 2011).

An example of this presented in *Rethinking Popular Culture and Media* depicts a number of schools in Colorado that have become marketers and distributors for Coca Cola. At first, many individuals may not truly grasp the detrimental effect and influence that this imposes upon students' educational experiences but the very notion of profit and advertising rather than providing a fundamental experience for students is troublesome and problematic. Rather than the continual bombardment of advertising and corporatization, shouldn't our schools be an environment for students to engage in decision-making, critical thinking, thoughtful analysis and deliberative dialogue? In order for students to be engaged critically within their society in the future, the fundamental function, order, and use of media needs to be deconstructed and problematized throughout the educational experience. A thick perspective of democracy entails

citizens being media literate and seeking media sources beyond those controlled by powerful sources (Carr, 2011, Carr & Becker, 2013).

For students and educators to truly engage with this understanding, one needs to step away from the general notion of set classes and formulaic curricula based on the “official” pedagogy of government structures, policies, and formal voting (as the way of teaching democracy, for example), and recognize that dominant hegemonic factors, such as the media, need to be addressed and analyzed for a deeper understanding of their effects on our lives individually and collectively (Giroux & Saltman, 2009). In observing the media, one cannot ignore the overwhelming amount of commercialism that is presented through diverse mediums and platforms, such as television, print, radio, and the Internet, and how these interconnections reinforce the same social meanings. Thus, commercialism is increasingly infecting public and private space, creating a market of corporatized and profitable values that have become the dominant agent within society, one for all to be judged against (McChesney, 2011). For example, students need to be able to read the sub-text that a Colgate commercial is not simply an advertisement for toothpaste but rather an international corporate campaign that shapes the consciousness of hundreds of millions of people through subtle, nuanced and sophisticated ways that create goodwill toward consumerism and the products being advertised. Transnational companies seek to gain competitive advantage by giving the illusion that they are servants of the people, and, without more robust forms of critical media literacy, there is the significant threat of anti-democratic behaviours and realities (Tuchman, 2010; Williams & Carpini, 2011).

A deeper understanding involving the influence of private profit and corporate control and its direct impact upon the economy and social life is also essential. This is a staggering phenomenon when one acknowledges that the amount spent on the promotion of products is in the billions of dollars, far more than is spent on education. Are corporate views more important than the educational vistas of young students? What about students’ multi-layered and diverse interpretations and perspectives of the world? Are we to say that, in Western and other societies, more importance must be given to profit and maximization? Are commercially produced curriculum, field-house scoreboards and Coke machines as necessary as social justice and democracy in and through education? How are we to assist students to evolve into knowledgeable citizens who are critically engaged with the complexities and dynamics of the vast and ever-evolving world around them?

## **Proposals**

To confront the increasing framing of education as a neo-liberal commodity, a broader and more robust media literacy education is needed at the tertiary level, and, in particular, within the curriculum of teacher-education candidates. This type of media literacy should invoke social justice and democracy, and should be incorporated and interwoven through the educational experience (Lund & Carr, 2008; Marshall & Sensoy, 2011; Stack & Kelly, 2006). Carr (2009) stresses the importance of ensuring that educators know how to teach media literacy as well as being appropriately engaged in the process, which requires training, support and a critical thinking framework to provide teachers and aspiring teaching with concepts, principles, and strategies to teach about, and for, media literacy in a critical way. It is essential to teach and engage students in deconstructing how the media play a role in propagating certain realities that enhance the marginalization of some voices, and reinforce stereotypes and inequitable power relations without critical interrogation (Kellner & Kim, 2010).

Popular culture and media literacy offer adults and children an opportunity to reposition themselves from the dominant hegemonic grasp of corporate entities into social actors with intentions on jamming, resisting and rewriting the status quo. Examples are provided below that offer critical opportunities to revise and analyze such issues, and to provide educators and students with access to, and a re-affirmation of, agency over the everyday media that we consume, read, and view daily. It is problematic to only acknowledge current curriculum and standardized testing, and not consider the importance of critical thinking in media literacy as well as the effect that it may have on enabling future global citizens to make informed choices. Ultimately, we are hopeful that the link between media literacy and political literacy can be achieved, which could have an effect on more meaningful, engaged and critical forms of democracy. The following activities have been inspired by the work of Marshall and Ozlem (2011) in addition to other scholars, and have been adapted, augmented, and developed through our research project on education for democracy.<sup>1</sup>

***Researching bias in the news media:*** Much can be learned from critically observing and analyzing what happens in various news formats (print, electronic, video, internet, radio, newspaper, television, etc.). It is critical for students to understand whose perspectives are being delivered by the news, and what sorts of messages are being “manufactured” (Chomsky, 1989; McLuhan, 1964). In an activity developed by Carr (2009), a chart can be devised for students with segments that can be divided into the following sections: anchors/reporters, news items, entertainment, sports, and weathers. Students can be asked to examine critically how the news is developed, packaged, presented and consumed based on a focus of each one of those components. How often do newspapers/news programs quote grassroots activities opposed to governmental policies?

Students at all levels can be broken down into groups, and watch the same television news program together, then layering on an analysis of what each group saw, experienced and understood, according to specific categories (one group could look at the political angle, another the editorial angle, another the timing and cadence, and another criticality of the news presented). A plenary discussion could then take place around a common theme such as, “Are media outlets fundamentally focused on news or entertainment? What has been included in the broadcast, and what has been omitted?” Students can also be asked to reflect on why so many media outlets cover the similar stories, and present them from the same (or very similar) angle. What does this mean for society, for media literacy, for education and for potential social change?

***Developing media literacy of news on education:*** This activity emphasizes the critiquing and analysis of television commercials and their influence on the normative acceptance of neoliberalism in society today. Students can compile a list of the television commercials one evening, breaking them down for each 30- and 60-minute show. Students should keep track of the type of commercials, and how long they lasted. Educators can devise a lesson-plan that consists of previously watched commercials with questions such as: “What messages are conveyed by the commercial, and why?”, “Who does most of the talking?”, “What race, gender, age, etc. are the characters on the commercials?,” and “How many instances of violence does one observe?” Students can then seek to explain the difference between implicit and explicit messages, what is being said and not said, how subliminal messages are presented, and what

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<sup>1</sup> More details on these activities can be found at: [www.education4democracy.net](http://www.education4democracy.net).

might be the effect. After watching and discussing various commercials, students can write about the concealed and overt messages. Cartoons, sitcoms and reality shows can also be shown and analyzed in class in a same manner.

**Taking action:** Often, newspaper articles, commercials, and biases within the news can provoke spontaneous student activism. It is critical as educators to look for opportunities for students to act upon their knowledge and interest on these topics. Instead of writing the same classroom essays that stay confined to and within institutions, ask students to create projects that have the possibility to move beyond classroom walls. Students need to see themselves as actors in the world who can be fuelled by opportunities to convince and make others aware of the long-lasting effects and influences of the media, commercials, advertisements, the news, and other powerful sources. A critique of what events, ideas, concerns, etc. are considered, known and acted upon can be undertaken, in addition to a detailed examination of why certain societal struggles garner the support of mainstream media, and others do not. This is especially salient in light of the overwhelming coverage of pop stars as icons in contemporary culture. Having students develop their own media, especially within the age of Youtube, internet blogs and social media, is also an effective way of seeking insight into media construction, messaging and bias.

Indeed, these types of activities can prove to be immensely valuable for teacher candidates to experiment with and develop their own sense of media literacy that they can ultimately pass on to their students. In earlier research documenting a critical, media analysis project with teacher candidates, Carr (2009) found that a common theme highlighted by many of the students was concern over the corporate domination of media. Students critiqued the corporate sector in how it buttresses, shapes and manufactures the reality generated and espoused in the media. Carr (2009) found that the news that is funnelled into the classroom can have a deleterious effect on the educational experience of young people as well as a societal impact of not cultivating a politically literate populace. The students from his study—now educators themselves—commented on the effects of the news on further standardizing curriculum, and dampening critical thinking skills. Educators, students and society have to be vigilant, as we are increasingly exposed to a broad and never-ending range of mass media images, messages, and content that influences how to construct our identities, experiences and perspectives. If left unchecked and unrecognized, the necessary attachment that they have to democracy, education and participation in society will be diminished.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have explored the impact of the mainstream media—especially that of the mainstream news—on education and democracy. Through our analysis of the perspectives of teacher-education candidates at Lighthouse University, we underscored how broad support for media literacy can actually be interpreted, instead, as media awareness. We have argued that this approach is less significant in cultivating a population to meaningfully engage in education for democracy. Thus, a more robust form of media literacy through education for democracy needs to be promoted, one that includes the teaching of controversial issues, alternative forms of media, and political literacy (Carr, 2011; Carr & Becker, 2013).

An important chain of knowledge construction and dissemination exists for which increased media literacy can intersect: mainstream media influences teacher-education students; teacher-education candidates eventually become teachers who inspire students; students become

consumers of media, and support—complacently, subconsciously, and explicitly—the reproduction of media; and finally, all of these levels support an uncritical higher education institution, such as teacher education faculties and programs. We propose that the finding and opening up of spaces, formally and informally, to incorporate the inclusion of media literacy as a central component of education for democracy for teacher-education candidates is a vital step to disrupt this cycle.

There exists a dialectic relationship between the mainstream media and teacher-education institutions. Tertiary education, university faculties, and teacher-education institutions are becoming increasingly privatized, or, at the very least, affected by private, corporate interests. Concurrently, media reporting on education increasingly promotes and legitimizes education as a privatized good. Naturally, the media influences teacher-education students, like all citizens, and propaganda, invisible messaging, and the powers of hegemony run deep in mainstream culture, so much so that even the most critical interpreters of contemporary media would find it difficult to discern all sub-conscious, manipulative, and influential messaging with media. There needs to be time and space available within the school curriculum and experience to foster students' critical thinking skills in relation to real world issues. If the role of education is to create informed, creative, global citizens, then media literacy for a critically aware populace, one that strives to build a more cogent, socially just, engaged and critical democracy—must also be incorporated into the teaching and learning process.

### **Acknowledgement**

The research undertaken for this article was supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant for a project entitled *Democracy, Political Literacy and Transformative Education*, for which the first author is the Principal Investigator and the other two authors are research assistants.

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ISSN 1920-4175

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