

MEDIA LITERACY AS AN ETHICAL OBLIGATION: A GENERAL SEMANTICS APPROACH

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Can there be media ethics without media literacy? That is to say, can media professionals truly function in an ethical manner unless they have taken steps to promote and encourage media literacy? I would suggest that there is a moral obligation on the part of media organizations to ensure that media audiences can decode their messages accurately, interpret them appropriately, and most important of all, evaluate them critically.

When all of a society's business is conducted via word of mouth, that is, in oral cultures, the only prerequisite for participation in the culture is the ability to speak the language, that is to say, fluency. Since language acquisition comes quite naturally to our species, decoding messages and interpreting meanings would not be much of an issue, although critical evaluation has always been a major challenge for our species, as Alfred Korzybski (1950, 1993) famously explained. The invention of writing added a new wrinkle to the problem, as more and more of a culture became encoded in written form, including its religious, legal, economic, and political communications. The eventual result was that schooling, based on the traditional literacy associated with reading and writing (and the numeracy of arithmetic and mathematics), became a moral

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imperative. And as the printing revolution in Europe gave rise to the Enlightenment, it came to be understood that education based on the book is necessary for the maximization of the individual's freedom and autonomy in a democratic society. Now that we live in a world where public discourse is dominated by telecommunications technologies, it follows that media education is likewise an ethical necessity for participation in our contemporary technological societies.

It is easy enough to say that media education is an ethical obligation and ought to be taught in the schools. In the United States, there is a long-standing tradition of trying to address social problems through public education, for example, in the addition of curricula and courses addressing sex education, drug use, and racial prejudice. And while such efforts are certainly laudable, they do not address the question of what ethical obligations might fall to other institutions, apart from the schools, such as the family. In regard to media education, it would certainly be reasonable to ask whether there is anything that media organizations and industries can do to promote media literacy. Certainly, funding school programs on media education might be one answer although there are problems related to conflict of interest when an industry funds programs whose aim is the critical evaluation of that industry, as for example, when companies that produce snack foods provide educational materials about nutrition. But given the special case of the media industries, would it be possible for media organizations to include and incorporate media literacy-oriented messages and functions as part of their content? And assuming it is possible, would media organizations not then be under an ethical obligation to do so?

Of all of the types of programming that media professionals produce, content directed toward children and youth would be the most in need of media literacy messages. Children are presumably less experienced than adults in receiving media messages, less sophisticated in their ability to interpret those messages, and less able to engage in critical evaluation. At the same time, children are eminently educable, and it is our obligation to prepare them to take their place as responsible and participating members of a democratic society. To this end, media literacy ought to be incorporated as one of the primary objectives of children's media, and this idea became the basis of a research report entitled *The Future of Children's Television Programming: A Study of How Emerging Digital Technologies Can Facilitate Active and Engaged Participation and Contribute to Media Literacy Education* (Strate, Freeman, Gutierrez, & Lavalley, 2010). The focus of our research was to investigate how digital technologies might be used to incorporate media education into children's programming, but to do so, there first must be some way to operationalize media literacy as a goal, and

general semantics provides a good place to start. Although Korzybski did not have much to say about media *per se*, he offered a system for critical evaluation of messages and information, and others such as Neil Postman (1976, 1979, 1985, 1988), John C. Merrill (1997), Greg Hoffman and Paul Dennithorne Johnston (1997), and Renee Hobbs (2004) have applied general semantics to the study of media in various ways (as have I on previous occasions, e.g., Strate, 2011). In this instance, Korzybski's three non-Aristotelian principles of thought might serve as a useful basis for incorporating media literacy into children's media.

The first non-Aristotelian principle is that of nonidentity, that our representations and understandings of our environment should not be mistaken for the environment itself, or as Korzybski was fond of saying, the map is not the territory. Fictional narratives depend upon the audience's willing suspension of disbelief, but a media literacy program would require reminders of their unreality. Nonfictional reports about the world strive for the authenticity and accuracy, but need to remind audiences that they are necessarily inaccurate in some ways, that mediated reports, depictions, and monitoring of situations are not identical to direct experience and unmediated assessments. The principle of nonidentity points to the need to delay reactions, carefully evaluate mediated messages, and consider all conclusions drawn to be tentative, subject to change, and in need of further testing. Such testing could take the form of comparison of messages coming from different sources, and better yet of engaging in reality testing through unmediated experience if possible. At minimum, the incorporation of the principle of nonidentity into media content could be accomplished by statements made before, during, and after the program, the equivalent of a kind of warning label. A more sophisticated approach would incorporate messages concerning nonidentity into the very narrative or report itself.

The second non-Aristotelian principle is that of nonallness, that our representations and understandings of our environment are necessarily incomplete, abstractions of reality, selections taken from all that makes up our environment. This means that media producers make decisions about what to describe or present, who to speak to, in what order to arrange things, and in the case of audiovisual media, where to point the camera, what lighting to use, what type of shot to employ, and how to select and edit the footage that is shot. Again, including statements about the inevitability of selection, the many ways in which gatekeeping and editing play a role in the finished product, and the subjective element present in the process, could serve as a beginning, but a more in-depth approach would present alternative selections and combinations for

comparison, and perhaps even allow the audience to make their own choices about what to include and exclude, and how to arrange the material.

The third principle is that of self-reflexiveness, that our representations and understandings can extend not only to our environment, but back toward themselves, so that we can also have representations of our representations, and representations of our representations of our representations, etc. In this sense, there is media content that refers to the world in some way, and media content that refers back to itself or to media content in general, and there can also be content about content about content, etc. In regard to media literacy, it would follow that a goal would be to distinguish between reporting and depicting events in the world, and media organizations reporting and depicting, and celebrating themselves. At the same time, self-reflexiveness is exactly what is required to incorporate media literacy into media messages. A form of metacontent informed by media literacy objectives would certainly have the potential for increasing awareness and self-consciousness of mediation, and to encourage audiences to evaluate their own activities as consumers of media messages. Fundamental to this effort would be the recognition of the difference between content that asks the audience to step back and critically evaluate messages as mediated content, and content that promotes uncritical acceptance of messages as if they were unmediated experience.

The three non-Aristotelian principles of general semantics do not constitute a media literacy program or curriculum in its entirety, but do provide a good starting point and foundation for such efforts. As such, it is worthwhile to recall that Alfred Korzybski first put forth these principles out of concern to improve individual freedom and autonomy, and to alleviate the personal and social problems that give rise to conflict, prejudice, and a failure to live up to our full human potential. In applying the principles to media production, it becomes clear that there is much that media organizations can do to incorporate media literacy into media messages, especially for children's media, and that to do so would be to fulfill an ethical obligation on their part.

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