

DO YOU SPEAK VISUAL?

A Primer on Visual Language for Children in Countries of Conflict

Proposal for a Planning Grant

Kellogg Foundation

Nada Korac

Yugoslav Child Rights Centre

Belgrade, Yugoslavia

Assisted by

Jan Hawkins, EDC

Center for Children and Technology,

New York, New York

Salzburg Seminar Collaborating Countries:

Israel (Abraham Yogev, Tel Aviv University), Northern Ireland (Marian O'Doherty, University of Ulster), Macedonia (Mimoza Anastoska-Jankulovska, Electromechanical School Center "Gorgi Naumov", Bitola), Zimbabwe (Michael Mambo, Secretary for Higher Education)

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The ubiquitous presence of electronic visual media as sources of information in today's world raises a very important educational issue in all countries - that of learning the complex literacy that is needed to understand these media critically and well. As an educational objective media literacy represents a real challenge for the future worldwide, particularly for the education of our youth. It is an especially pressing matter in countries that are involved in conflicts, where the media are a now a central and dominant source of information about those situations, often exacerbating conflicts through distortion and abuse. Additionally, it is an issue pertaining to children's rights: the right to receive information they can understand (Article 17 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), and the right to an adequate education (Article 29).

The proposed project arose as an outgrowth of deliberations among representatives of several countries attending the 348 Session of the Salzburg Seminar this summer, Educating Youth: Challenges for the Future. We are requesting a six month planning grant to undertake detailed planning for this collaborative project, resulting in a full proposal and a funding strategy for the project. In addition to Yugoslavia, other current partner countries in the project include: Israel, Northern Ireland, Macedonia, Zimbabwe (and through Jan Hawkins, the United States).

The proposed project addresses two key issues: (1) Through television programs and curriculum materials, educating children and youth to acquire basic media literacy in the visual language of the television media. The need for this kind of education has been largely underrated not only in developing countries but also in some of the highly developed ones. In this way, a great cultural achievement is being marginalized, leaving an open door to all kinds of media abuse. The deleterious effects of media abuse can be demonstrated by many examples, the most recent and dramatic one being the hatred, violence and cruelty generated by the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. Therefore, the specific aim of this project would be to, (2) offer basic guidelines for young people to acquire the critical capacities required for protection against media abuse.

The problem: history and present context

Three years ago, on December 28, 1994, the world celebrated an important anniversary: 100 years since the first film was shown in Paris. This was a centenary of utmost significance to all those involved in filmmaking and culture in general. But unfortunately, given its vast educational influence worldwide, this event was not nearly as important to those involved in education. It should have been, since it had marked a hundred years since humanity began creating and using a completely new kind of language - that of moving pictures. Among educators, this occasion should have been regarded with same attention and importance as other epoch-making events in the history of communication and the transfer of knowledge, such as the emergence of speech, writing, print or radio.

Visual language is, of course, older than film, even much older than writing. However, in its long history from cave drawings to film, communicating through pictures has come a long way. The most recent period of that history was the time when the biggest, perhaps crucial, step was made: the emergence of television. What written language gained by the emergence of print, and what speech gained by the emergence of radio, was what visual (cinematic) language gained by the emergence of television: a new medium involving large audiences and therefore gaining enormous power and influence. To many people, a TV set is just another household gadget; to some, it is a status symbol; to both, it is a "world window". Unfortunately, most people are rarely aware that what they see and hear through that "window" is not the world itself, but only one of the many possible images of it, presented in a specific language. People tend to misunderstand this language, not because it is complicated and difficult to learn, but mostly because they are unaware that it is a language in the first place. As for children, relevant research shows that this misunderstanding is not only a mass phenomenon but that it is also significantly related to the specific nature of their cognitive development. It is therefore necessary to be especially careful in conceiving and implementing any audiovisual education program intended for children.

The main reason why an average viewer confronted with a filmed or televised message is not inclined to notice the language in which it is encoded lies in the fact that its basic means of communication is moving picture. Moving pictures are what makes viewers "believe their own eyes", accepting visually presented information as a reproduction of reality rather than as only one of the many possible ways of presenting and interpreting reality. This is a huge and dangerous misconception.

Although it is true that moving pictures are an unsurpassed means of documenting information about events, it is also true that their technical capacity for revealing their full complexity - which is always more than meets the eye, or a camera lens - is rather limited. They can readily serve the viewer with half truths or even outright lies. This intrinsic contradiction that marks the nature of visual media has been poignantly expressed in the

promotional slogan for the film Adventures of Baron Munchhausen: "The adventures of Baron Munchhausen - a true story! We've got a film to prove it!" It is this intrinsic contradiction ("life-like" quality + technical limitations + sophisticated technology) that constitutes the perfect formula for all kinds of manipulation and abuse.

Direct and indirect manipulation of the attitudes, perceptions and feelings of people (both children and adults) by means of visual media has been brought to light not only by a substantial body of research but also by mass tragedies, such as the war in the former Yugoslavia. The "media war", which was waged several years before the real war broke out, is a drastic example of how deleterious the effects of such manipulation can be. Although it is impossible to prove that such effects could have been avoided altogether, it can be assumed that they would have been less tragic if the potential victims of that war - millions of viewers throughout the former Yugoslavia - had been equipped with the appropriate "defense weapons" : (a) a clear awareness that what one sees on TV is not a mere reproduction reality, but its interpretation conveyed by means of a specific language (which, like any other language, has a capacity for creating false messages), and (b) at least a basic knowledge and understanding of the major ways in which that language is used. It is these two ingredients that form the basis for a critical reception of messages conveyed through visual media, i.e. for what is sometimes termed intelligent television viewing. We believe that gaining such awareness and knowledge has great importance, especially in countries in which conflict is present or imminent. Our partners in this project include representatives from Israel, Northern Ireland, Macedonia, Zimbabwe through their representative fellows who attended the Salzburg Seminar on Education and the Future, July 1997.

More than one hundred years have passed since the world began to "speak" the language of moving pictures, a language whose power to influence people's beliefs, feelings and behavior surpasses all other languages. It is time that the young generation be systematically taught how this sophisticated language works. Better than by means of any book or manual, this could be achieved by using that language itself. We therefore propose to undertake the planning for a project that would create materials to educate young people, aged 14-18 about media literacy,

especially relevant to helping them to grasp how these media can manipulate their understanding. The materials, including video and print, will focus on helping young people to acquire the critical viewing skills essential to understanding media, especially in relation to understanding the construction and effects of media in times of and situations of national and international conflict.

The collaborating countries from the Salzburg Seminar have been involved in the project definition, and will continue to collaborate in the planning process. The country representatives will provide information and guidance on the design of the materials, and on country specific,

information about audience characteristics and distribution. We will also work with them to identify potential topics and source materials for the television series. The centerpiece of the materials will be a series of television programs that can be adapted and used in different countries and situations. We anticipate that supporting curriculum materials will also be developed to accompany these programs in school settings. These materials will be aimed at helping children relate the contents and the messages of the programs to their own experiences. The materials will enable youth to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of visual language, as well as help them exercise the newly acquired skills. The curriculum will include publication of an appropriate educational kit: videotapes of the entire television series; a teachers' manual; and, a students' workbook.

The realization of this project (the television series and accompanying materials) has two mutually related goals:

(a) Acquisition of basic media literacy, i.e., introducing children to the basic means of communication in the visual language of the television medium.

(b) Protection against media abuse, i.e. helping children to apply the acquired knowledge so as to protect themselves from being manipulated by means of (audio)visual language.

Therefore, the ultimate purpose of this project would be to assist children in developing the capacities to critically receive messages from (audio)visual media.

Planning activities

This is an ambitious project. We are requesting support for a six-month planning period to address a series of issues required for the creation of a detailed plan, and a full proposal and budget for the project. The overall issues to be addressed in the planning period include:

- (1) The specification of the design for the television series, including summaries for each segment;
- (2) Planning for the collaboration among the countries, including how the programs would need to be adapted for each of the cultural contexts;
- (3) Determination of how to handle the issues of language. We anticipate that substantial portions of the programs will be voice-over narration (and thus easily adaptable), and that the remainder will use the primary language of English (and thus requiring subtitles or dubbing);
- (4) Exploration of video source materials for use in the program (e.g. appropriate news footage), potential cooperative partners, legal issues and restrictions, political sensitivities;
- (5) Consultation with media and media literacy experts about key approaches and pedagogy;
- (6) Exploration and identification of appropriate production partners;
- (7) Understanding of audience characteristics, needs, and potential viewing situations in each of the collaborating countries;
- (8) Creation of detailed budget and production schedule;
- (9) Development of a full proposal for the comprehensive project;
- (10) Identification of potential sources of funding for the full project.

In order to address these issues, the following planning activities will be undertaken:

- (1) Dr. Korac will travel to the United States and to London meet with media and media literacy experts, and potential production partners for the series. Dr. Hawkins will organize the United States based work, and will help to organize and join Dr. Korac for the London work. For example, a small group of key

people will be invited to an intensive planning session with Dr. Korac in New York. A second session will be organized in London, as we expect that British television production groups are likely to be key collaborators in the production of the series. These intensive planning sessions will enable us to develop an initial outline of the project and treatments for the programs. These will be subsequently refined and tested with collaborators from participating countries through internet and telephone discussions.

(2) Representatives from partner countries will receive stipends to investigate and specify the audience characteristics for the project in their respective countries, the particular demands and restrictions concerning media literacy programming, and the potential viewing/learning situations. They will also consult on the development of the materials design, and contribute to topics and source materials. The results of these inquiries will be incorporated into the overall project plan.

Additionally, the country representatives will be asked to refine and critique the full proposal as it is drafted;

(3) Dr. Korac and Dr. Hawkins will investigate potential sources of existing video for use in the programs, and will negotiate with providers the conditions for their use. In this phase, we will focus on understanding the sources and conditions in each of our countries, and will explore these issues in the UK during that visit.

(4) Dr. Hawkins will take primary responsibility for identifying potential funding sources for the full project, in collaboration with Dr. Korac.

(5) Based on the inquiries, intensive planning sessions, and revisions by collaborating countries, a full proposal and budget for the project will be created.

Deliverables

Upon completion of the planning phase, a full proposal and budget will be completed as the deliverable for the planning project.

Timeline

March-April 1998:

Planning for New York and London intensive sessions

Inquiries undertaken by collaborating country representatives about audience and needs

Investigation of potential video sources

Identification of potential production partners

May-June 1998:

Key planning meetings with advisors, experts, and potential producers

Continuing investigation of countries ' needs and resources

Identification of potential sources of project funding

July-August 1998:

Development of full proposal and budget

Continuing conversations with potential project funding sources.

Budget

Project staff (as consultants)

Dr. Korac	\$5,000	
Dr. Hawkins & support staff at CCT		3,000
Consultants in collaborating countries (4 x \$1000)		4,000
Media consultants	2,000	

Travel

Dr. Korac: NY, London	6,000	
Dr. Hawkins; London		1,500

Administrative & direct costs (YCRC)		2,000
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Direct costs (CCT)		500
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Total: \$24,000