

# U P D A T I D

P R I N C E T O N R E G I O N A L S C H O O L S

May 1994

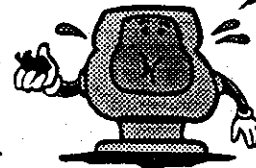
Published by Instructional Support Services

Volume 2 Number 3

## Media Messages...

by Mary Lou Huchet, PHS

WHERE IS GOTHAM CITY?



eight-inch computer their hands to the the energy. They casional sober game aptly named

Ten adolescent males hover around the hearth of an screen, reminiscent of primordial ancestors who hold fire, but it is the joystick and not the flame that creates stare, eyes barely blinking, mostly silent except for an oc- comment. The object of such intense concentration is a video "Mortal Kombat." The stakes are high; the loser faces decapitation, electrocution, disembowelment, or annihilation of equivalent brutality.

After the bloodletting, the students willingly answer my questions about their experience of the game. The answers vary: "It's a catharsis; helps me get rid of stress." "It's fun because it's different; not like reading or going to a movie." Another chimes in, "It's fast, tension builds; it's the mounting excitement."

I inquire, "What might it mean that the nine combatants are male and equipped with an array of death-dealing capabilities, while the lone female's lethal weapon is conveyed with a kiss?" No response from the group. I remind myself that it is early in their training and recognize that aware- ness of sexist typecasting and formula-driven storytelling are skills yet to be honed.

These are no video game junkies, often seen at shopping mall video ports, but Princeton High School students, advantaged, academically accomplished and socially responsible. Members of an after school media literacy program, part of the Community Service-Career Awareness project, these sophomores want to learn more about the effects of the mass media—both positive and negative. Willing to investigate their own media tastes, they ask to become more conscious and better in- formed about the image culture in which they are growing up.

The problem is that most media decisions are determined by business and sometimes political interests and that these concerns too often dictate media content. While many of us are aware of the media and violence issue, we might overlook another serious problem, the growing tendency of the media to blur the distinction between news and entertainment. The six o'clock news rivals soap operas and talk shows as popular programming, and equally disturbing, news commentators like Charles Osgood anchor TV news on Sundays and make commercials for other media on Mondays. Newsday's page one photo of Olympic skaters Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding sharing the ice the day before the event actually happened caused raised eyebrows among even the most cynical media watchers.

Preadolescent children, who have not developed the ability to distinguish fact from fiction, are most vulnerable. "Cops" and "Rescue 911," so-called "reality" shows, now receive high ratings among eight to eleven year olds. A tenth grade PHS student tells me of a little brother who tries to locate Gotham City on a map of New Jersey, while several second graders look for Ninja Turtles in storm drains.

(see...Gotham City, page 10)

(Gotham City...con't. from page 9)

These facts create problems for parents and teachers, but also offer opportunities for new roles for the schools. In addition to being able to read, write and do arithmetic, our children need to be media literate. Neither censorship nor turning off the set will work.

Media Literacy means developing a skeptical attitude toward all media products, being able to analyze and evaluate newspapers, magazines, billboards, radio, movies, television, and textbooks. The students are taught to question the source of information, to look for who or what is hidden or missing from the message, and to be aware of the intentions of the message sender. In addition, students receive training in critical viewing, learning how special effects, editing, camera techniques, lighting and sound are used to create compelling versions of reality.

A number of media literacy initiatives exist throughout the district. All ninth grade Language Arts students now receive media literacy training, teacher workshops are offered as in-service training, science teacher, Paula Jakalow,

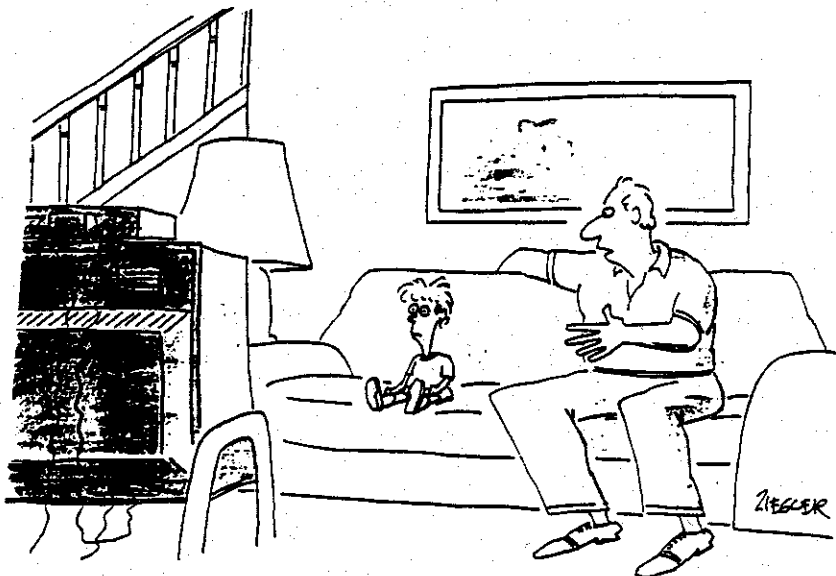
instructs students to discover the ecological and health issues embedded in advertising content, Linda Brushi discusses media issues with her kindergarten class at Riverside and Middle School teacher Suzanne Goida pilots a media literacy project through Internet. PHS teachers Jeff Lucker and Carole Joyce teach students to read the media with a critical ear and eye, while

Melanie Yost trains students to produce their own media literate videos. There are many other efforts, too numerous to name.

PRS teachers are to be commended for their efforts in the area of media literacy, but we must do more. Media influence, both good and bad, won't disappear. Using the

media to teach about the media is a common sense approach. We need to work toward providing equal access to media education programs for students at all grade levels, for parents and other community members. The goal is not to teach students what to think about the media, but to guide them to discover for themselves the hidden stories behind media messages and to teach them how to deal with them.

**"Most of us recognize that the mass media are no longer peripheral to our lives, yet, despite these facts, only a small number of schools provide curriculum acknowledging the impact of the media upon thinking and learning," according to Pat Thomas, district Language Arts Supervisor.**



*"You see? Once more, Wile E. Coyote is restored swiftly and miraculously to health. His potential trauma has been trivialized, and we are yet again amused."*