

# Media Competency as a Challenge to School and Education

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A German-North American Dialogue

Compendium of a  
Conference Held by  
the Bertelsmann Foundation  
from March 18–20, 1992

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# Table of Contents

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<b>Foreword</b> .....	7
<i>Reinhard Mohn</i>	
<b>Media Competency as a Challenge to School and Education</b> ...	9
<i>Horst Teltschik, Ingrid Hamm</i>	
<b>Globalization of the Media – Globalization of Educational Objectives</b> .....	12
<i>Fritz Schaumann</i>	
<b>Media and Society</b> .....	19
<i>Ulrich Saxer</i>	
<b>Media as Shapers of Society</b> .....	21
<i>George Gerbner</i>	
<b>Who Tells All the Stories?</b> .....	31
<i>Elihu Katz</i>	
<b>The Legitimacy of Opposition: On Teaching Media and Democracy</b> .....	37
<i>Hertha Sturm</i>	
<b>Media Effects: The Dominanc of the Emotional as a Pedagogical Problem</b> .....	47
<i>Klaus Haefner</i>	
<b>The Old, the New and the Interactive Media – Increasing Challenge of Information Technology to Education</b> .....	63

<b>On the “State of the Art” of Media Education in the USA and Germany – Expert Opinions .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<i>Aimée Dorr, Craig Brannon</i> Media Education in American Schools at the End of the Twentieth Century .....	71
<i>Gerhard Tulodziecki, Katrin Schöpf</i> Media Education in German Schools: Concepts, Materials, Practice and Problems – Summary .....	106
<b>Media Education in Schools – A Deficit Analysis .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<i>Ingrid Hamm, Sabine Mooren</i> Media Competency: An Attempt at a Characterization – A Survey of Experts .....	113
<i>Ulrike Six</i> Media Education – an Unmet Challenge .....	121
<i>Christian Doelker</i> “Visual Pedagogy” – The Chronic Deficit of Media Education	138
<i>Jacques Piette</i> Teaching Television Critical Viewing Skills: From Theory to Practice to Theory .....	147
<i>Silvia Charp</i> Information Technology at Schools .....	166
<i>Michael Kerber</i> Computers in Schools – A Practice without Concept? .....	170
<i>Bettina Hurrelmann</i> Reading as a Key to Media Culture .....	177
<i>Horst Dichanz</i> Media in the Teachers’ Professional and Personal Environment .....	194
<i>Gary Bitter</i> Technology – New Roles for Teachers .....	210

<b>Media Competency – Attempts at a Strategy Design</b> .....	215
<i>Aimée Dorr</i>	
Media Literacy for Modern America .....	217
<i>Gerhard Tulodziecki</i>	
Media Education as a Multi-Subject and Integrating Assignment .....	237
<i>Barbara Eschenauer</i>	
Media Competency as an Educational Target .....	249
<i>Ulrich Engelen</i>	
Media Education in Schools – The Pedagogic-Didactic Concept of the Media-Project, Gütersloh. ....	255
<i>Barry Duncan</i>	
Media and Popular Culture in the Classroom: Perspectives on Media Pedagogy .....	267
<b>Media Competency in Educational Planning</b> .....	279
<i>Frank B. Withrow</i>	
Schools in an Information Rich Society .....	281
<i>Georg A. Knauss</i>	
Fields of Action for Media Education .....	295
<i>Peter Schermer</i>	
Strategic Thoughts on Media Education .....	298
<b>Summary of the Discussion</b> .....	302
<i>Ingrid Hamm</i>	
<b>The Authors</b> .....	315
<b>Participants</b> .....	330

# Who Tells All the Stories?

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George Gerbner

I would like to make the following contribution to our proceedings. I'd like to present our task and indeed our challenge in what I think is a broadest human perspective. In three steps. First, I'd like to reflect on some unique characteristics of human life. Secondly, I'd like to sketch in a few minutes that's available not only the history of civilization from a communication point of view but the current predicament we face. What is the challenge of our age of telecommunications? And third, and here I need the help that I can get, I would like to reflect on our roles as educators, as professionals, as parents, and as citizens.

Most of what we know or think to know, we have never personally experienced. We are the only creatures that live in a world evected by the stories that we tell about it. Unlike any other animal, we are not in this room to savour the very pleasant environment, to taste the wells or try to make firewood of the table. We are here to exchange stories about aspects of life and of education that are of interest to us. So it is the great human storytelling process that socializes us, that humanizes us, that makes us more or less recognizable human beings.

That process has undergone two critical transformations. For the longest time in human history it was oral, face to face, as indeed it is now. This has enormous advantages and, I needn't tell you, enormous costs. This is the most expensive undertaking that human beings can ever contemplate, and I want to thank Bertelsmann Foundation for assisting us.

I often wonder why we do that? Why to we undergo that expense? Why do we undergo the investment of the only truly non-renewable

resource we have, our own life, our own time? My answer in one word is: risk. That is, we understand that a face to face encounter has certain risks because it's not scripted, it's not in a can, it's an interaction.

The reason we are willing to invest this time and to undertake this risk, is the hope that something will come out of it that is also not yet scripted, that is greater than the sum of its parts, some new creative syntheses, something original and useful. The face to face oral communication process, of course, demands a great deal of memory, demands a great deal of human capacities. I think that pre- or non-literate human beings have demands on their mental capacities far beyond what we have. They have to remember all useful knowledge. They can't just look it up. For many, maybe hundreds of thousands of years, human beings have not had the opportunity to accumulate knowledge except in their memories. And the way we try to do that is, in one word, ritual. It is the ritualistic reiteration of useful knowledge in celebrations, in holidays, in aphorisms, and stories of which so-called primitive human beings have a much greater storehouse than most of us do.

The first major transformation is printing. I see printing as the industrialization of storytelling. It is the first time that stories became cumulative and transportable across previous boundaries of time and space. In the way in which printing industrializes and changes storytelling, builds the foundations of our civilizations, of our education, and of our governments. Printing makes possible to exchange stories not only across wide distances of time and space but among people who never meet. That had never before been possible.

If we can share a large chunk of our consciousness through exchanging and sharing stories with people whom we never meet, we can begin to build loose aggregates of people, called modern mass publics. A public is created by publication.

We can build these publics, we can select representatives, can meet and adjust differences of interest, the competition and conflict of interest that used to tear societies apart. The concept of self-government, and every theory of modern governance is based on the ability to build publics.

The coming of publics breaks up the ritual. It breaks the power of the priest and the minister, the interpreter, that one in the tribe or community who can read the text or remember it and can interpret it

to everyone else. It ushers in the reformation and it builds the basis for modern theories and the modern practise of government, of education, of religion, of social life.

The next great transformation is the electronic. It creates the age in which we live. Its mainstream is television, the most pervasive common environment. And, in my opinion, the proliferation of channels, cable, cassette, satellites etc., is not accompanied by any diversification of content.

This brings us to the nature of the television age. Here we have a great deal of evidence from our research. We have been now studying the kind of world that television presents to most of our people. The reason we've been studying that is very simple.

For the first time in human history a child is born into a home in which television is on an average of 7 hours a day. There has never been anything like that. Most of the stories, most of the time to most of our children are not told by the parents, not by the school, not by the church, not by the neighbourhood and as we travel around the world, we find out, not even by the native country, but essentially by a handful of global conglomerates who have something to sell. A 10-year old child in the U.S. knows more names of brands of beer than of American presidents.

The world that television presents to all of our children and parents and grandparents at the same time (which, again, has never happened before) is a very peculiar world. As I only have a few minutes, I will discuss casting and fate. That is means, what social types are presented and what kind of fate is associated with different social types such as men and women, young and old, rich and poor, different nationalities, races etc. Well, we find that in the world of our television system men outnumber women 3 to 1 in entertainment, 6 to 1 in the news, 12 to 1 in children's programming.

Young people under 18 comprise about one third of their actual proportion in the population. Older people, 65 and above are about one fifth. Nearly half of all characters are white males in the prime of life.

This is not only a question of numbers. If you are growing up in this kind of storytelling environment and find people like you overrepresented, you find that there are many more roles, many more opportunities and many more types of activity, a much broader scope of life chances. If you see people like yourself underrepresented, you

grow up with a much more limited conception of your own possibilities. That is how we become socialized to our fate.

If you put a certain cast on a stage, there are certain types of stories that you can tell best with that cast. Other types of stories become much more difficult. With the type of cast that we put on the stage of our national and increasingly global storytelling, dominated by males, by males in the prime of life, the easiest story to tell is the story of power, a story of struggle and domination, a story of conflict, a story of violence. The amount of violence we have is dictated by certain imperatives of global marketing. Of course, there has been violence in history, there is violence in Shakespeare and in fairytales and in folk stories. But all of that is handcrafted, much of which is legitimate and necessary. It shows the tragic side of violence, the pain and the suffering, the destruction.

But the mass-produced violence that inundates our homes, that invades every home with choreographed brutality, is happy violence. There is no pain, there is no suffering. It is simply a demonstration of power. And its lessons are primarily the lessons of power or vulnerability. Who can do what against whom?

If as you are growing up you see yourself more likely to be victimized than to be able to put something over on somebody else who is unwilling, which is a pretty good definition of violence, you'll feel more insecure, more vulnerable. Functionally speaking, violence is a demonstration of power whose ultimate function is to put people in their place, to establish a structure power. Television can do it more cheaply and, needless to say, much more entertainingly, than real-life violence. The task is still that of intimidation, control and terror.

The amount of violent imagery that we have is totally unprecedented. Our studies of more than 25 years show between 6 and 8 violent acts per hour in prime time, and an average of two entertaining murders a night. In children's programs we have between 20 and 25 violent acts per hour. Of course it's supposed to be humorous. That makes it the more effective. Humour is the sugar coating of the pill. The message of power comes through loud and clear.

Before I go on the other aspects, let me note that television is potentially an enormous enrichment of cultural horizons. I don't believe that television destroys other media. It reorganizes our culture, but, in fact, it's the greatest seller of books. One appearance on our daytime talkshow called "Donahue", means that the next three days

you're going to sell about 30.000 copies of your book. The problem is that it also changes the nature of book publishing.

The great strength and power of television is that it abolishes provincialism. People who have never read before, who have never gone to a concert or an opera before, people who have never participated in the mainstream of cultural and political life, are now all in the mainstream. And that is an enormous enrichment that you cannot take away. But what kind of mainstream? Let's talk about health.

Most of what ails us today in advanced industrial societies is not a lack of medical delivery or a lack of medical knowledge. Most of what kills us and hurts us is culturally supported, health-related behaviours. It is manufactured on an assembly line.

There are an average of nine times an hour some mention or portrays of eating or drinking on television. There is no other health-related information that even comes close. That is the information with which our children grow up: an average of two episodes of alcoholic drinking per hour. All very pleasant, hardly ever have any consequence. If you see people suffer some consequence, it is usually comic, not tragic.

Television is governed by the clock. It's essentially a ritual. Its predecessor is not radio, not movies, although it has aspects of all of these, but pre-industrial tribal religion. It presents a very coherent mythology in which all parts are related to one another. It forms a new type of environment.

The reason that we have never before confronted this question is that never before has the cultural environment been mass-produced and globally distributed. It used to be handicraft environment, made in the home, made in the neighbourhood, made in national or regional communities. But for the first time it's highly policy-directed, policy-controlled, highly-centralized, highly-coherent. Therefore it now for the first time demands an educational and policy-related approach.

It seems to me that for those of us who are professionals in education, this presents an enormous opportunity of extending teachers' power and skills to a new area. It's the area of the analytical, critical understanding of the everyday cultural environment. And this is not a marginal enterprise. This is a fresh approach to the liberal arts.

The liberal arts are the *liberating* arts. The original and reason for liberal arts general education was to liberate the individual from a

kind of unquestioning dependence on the local and very often limited cultural environment, to put the individual in touch with the great art, the great science, the great philosophies, the great religions of humankind. Well, today science, art, religions are represented in our everyday mass culture. The liberating function of the liberal arts today is to liberate the individual from an unwitting and unquestioning dependence on the very environment in which she and he has grown up.

As parents, we have to participate enough that we can express our point of view and convey the idea that there are other ways to look at the world.

As citizens, we have to build a new cultural environment movement. An international cultural environment movement should build a constituency which is willing and able to enter into participation in educational and cultural policy-making. An increasing number of people are anxious and ready, even though it seems impossible. Well, of course everything that's worth-while seems impossible. If it not seems impossible, it's probably not worth doing!