

***THE COVERAGE OF EDUCATION IN AMERICAN MASS MEDIA
AND ITS IMPACT ON PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF AND
ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL DEBATE AND DECISION
MAKING***

Application for a Media Studies Center Fellowship
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The purpose of this project is to examine educational coverage in newspapers, popular magazines, television sitcoms and on television news to identify the sorts of issues covered in American mass media related to education and to examine how the general public uses this information in their lives to participate in their local educational institutions or engage in the wider national debate about educational reform and educational policy.

Research will identify through content analysis the issues most covered by media on the local and national levels through selected programming and publications since 1992. A second tier of research will examine popular response to mass media and local coverage of education through focus groups and/or in-depth interviews with parents, teachers and media professionals in three cities where educational issues have been strongly in the news: New York, Chicago and Seattle. The goal of the research will be to ascertain what the public needs to know about education, what the obstacles are to a more comprehensive and coordinated coverage, and to create a new kind of reporting to enliven and re-think this often neglected "beat."

The resulting research will lead to a book on *Media, The Public and Educational Engagement: Coverage of Education from Pre-K to College and Its Impact on Public Life* and to the design of a prototype television news series on education that will incorporate the results of the research into its structure.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT:

For almost fifteen years, there has been a radical transformation in America of educational content, structure and public policy debate. Although there has been widespread popular interest and concern about the state of American education, there has been little public engagement in the decision making and policy issues that are perpetually being reported--albeit in a haphazard fashion and often without a context.

This project proposes to examine national and local media coverage of education over the past five years to identify key issues reported, the hows and whys of this coverage in three key American cities where education is often front page news--New York, Chicago and Seattle--and to spend time talking with parents, teachers and media professionals to see how education could be better covered to serve the public and create a deeper form of engagement in education across this country.

It is the purpose of the researcher to de-mystify the rhetoric of education and examine what the people need to know as well as to see what obstacles there are to more comprehensive and systematic coverage and representation of educational issues in media. With this information, the researcher will write a book and develop a television news program on education to address the issues identified.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Research will consist of two phases: examining the coverage of education since 1992 (when President Clinton was elected) in selected of popular magazines, local and national television news programs and sitcoms depicting education and doing a content analysis of the issues most brought to public attention. This will also include researching local newspaper coverage from three American cities where educational issues have taken the headlines: New York City, Chicago and Seattle. In each of these cities there have been issues such as changing leadership, community control vs. centralization of school administration, advertising in the classroom, and modernizing the curriculum.

After this first phase, a series of six focus groups in each city (two each of parents, teachers and media professionals) will identify which educational issues are of key concern and how and why they were covered the way they were, whether the coverage was perceived to be fair, accurate and timely, whether the coverage put educational issues in a context where they were understood and whether this coverage generated and engaged public interest and response. Some individual in-depth interviews in each of these sites may be conducted with key people as the research proceeds if it is determined that these persons are key "players" in the unfolding process.

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THIS PROJECT:

Since 1983, America has been deeply concerned about the quality of public education and there have been innumerable efforts at curriculum reform, school reorganization, addition of new technologies, multicultural inclusion, measurement and evaluation reform, school-to-work and corporate involvement and other efforts to establish an education that meets the true needs of American children. Yet, reports continue to identify overwhelming problems, gaps and failures to achieve "best practices" in American schools. When people talk about American education, there is, by and large, a sense of a system gone out of control and a loss of prestige and quality compared to educational systems abroad. Where is this information coming from? Who are the sources? Why has there been so little public engagement in education given these reports? And how have American mass media done the job of reporting on these issues so that they are intelligible and actionable within local communities?

I believe that this study is the first to link the coverage of education in media (which has been a low status beat) to public engagement in education. Many universities (Brown, Columbia, and Harvard among others) are beginning to examine the loss of "public engagement" and are seeking to find ways to restore civic participation in our country. Columbia, for example, through Teachers College is bringing reporters in to get better "educated" themselves on educational issues. I believe that by examining coverage of education--that seminal process which Americans of all classes still believe is the key to success in this country-- we will find keys to develop a new kind of coverage that will galvanize public interest in and response to education for the 21st century.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOME OF THE RESEARCH:

This research will result in two separate products:

(1) A book on *Media, The Public and Educational Engagement: Coverage of Education from Pre-K To College and Its Impact on Public Life*

(2) A prototype program for a proposed weekly half-hour television news show on education that will model new ways of covering education to be relevant, lively, interactive and policy-directed and to bring to public awareness the voices of those creating the emerging education for the 21st century.

WHY SHOULD THE MEDIA STUDIES CENTER SERVE AS THE VENUE FOR THIS RESEARCH?

There are so many reasons. First, New York is perhaps one of the best examples of a city that has not, until recently, been able to turn its education around despite extensive media coverage on the issue. New York City is also the hub of national news coverage and the site where the convergence of media and public policy can be most visible.

Second, the Media Studies Center is connected with Columbia University where there is enormous ferment in education as Teachers College reorganizes itself and where one of the best journalism schools in the country resides. To meet and conduct research with some of the best professionals in these fields throughout the University is another impetus to apply.

Third, the distinguished reputation of the Media Studies Center will guarantee that this research will be connected to a flow of excellent critique and analysis and have a chance to be widely disseminated and discussed. That, and the opportunity to be part of the distinguished community of scholars associated with the Media Studies Center, is the rationale for my application.