The Journal of Social Media for Learning 2021

It is all about the Drama!
The Necessity of Critical Media Literacy in Public Education.

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Abstract

This paper draws on the experiences of pre-teens and teenagers and their relationships with reality television. Using the lenses of liquid modernity and critical media literacy, I will examine interactions with reality television, and the ways in which young people construct their own meaning and understanding of different forms of media.

Introduction

Today the lives of youth everywhere are shaped by a variety of texts and incessant media exposure. The media that they consume and the ways in which they interact with it in all forms underscore their world. According to Nielson, during the 2007-2008 television season, 77 percent of viewers watching the top ten television programs were choosing to watch reality television shows (Nielson, 2011). Additionally, from 2000 to 2010, the number of reality television shows on the air increased from four to 320 (Ocasio, 2012). In spite of these numbers, there are some viewers and critics who choose to dismiss media and electronic texts as simply entertainment. However, there are researchers and scholars such as Jennifer Pozner, Susan Murray, Shirley Steinberg, Jeff Share, Douglas Kellner and more who realize the direct and indirect impact these texts have on the lives, thinking, and even well-being as global citizens of young people. Because media saturates the world in this way, the need for a greater understanding of the ways in which youth interact with media, as well as the deeper effects that media may be having on these young viewers, has never been more imperative. Unless educators want to allow the media to continue to "control the 'bewildered herd', meaning the U.S. citizenry, in a state of quasi-perpetual stupidification" (Macedo, 2009, XXV), it is important to explore the ways in which youth make meaning out of media and specifically, reality television.

The purpose of this study was to critically analyse the ways in which youth interact with media and how the images and lifestyles that are portrayed on reality television may be affecting the manner in which youth view both themselves and others. Because adolescence is a time of self-discovery and identity formation, there is much to be discovered in terms of how the viewing of reality television may be playing a role in this process. Shirley Steinberg (2009) makes clear that media affects all of us, for better or worse, and the goal of this study was to gain a clearer understanding of those effects on young people, their identities, and their views of others.

Theoretical Framework

Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity framed this study. Bauman describes the liquid modern era as a time "in which time flows, but no longer marches on. There is constant change, but no finishing point" (2007, p. 121). No longer are there important oppositions that aid in understanding and defining life as we know it; instead, we live in a time when, for Bauman, creation and destruction are the same. Because there is no longer a beginning or an end, but rather a "society in which networks replace structures, and an uninterrupted game of connecting to and disconnecting from those networks" (Bauman, 2011, p.14), we are engrossed in a time where we do not stand still long enough to make any solid bonds. This constant movement and refashioning of ourselves and our world, along with the lack of any feeling of belonging has resulted in human bonds being seen as a threat, rather than as something positive.

The lack of bonds, of secrets, of sacred knowledge, and of a lack of a proverbial centre has led Bauman to describe the world as one where we have blurred the lines between public and private spaces and lives to the point that there no longer is a line. Bauman makes a powerful statement that we are living in a "confessional" society, where,

> A heretofore unheard-of and inconceivable kind of society in which microphones were fixed inside the confessionals, those eponymical safeboxes and depositories of the most secret of secrets, the sort of secrets that would be divulged only to God or his earthly messengers were perched on public squares, places previously meant for the brandishing and thrashing out of the issues of common, shared interest, concern, and urgency
>
> (2012, Pg.21)

This confessional society and the blurred lines between public and private spaces lend themselves well to exploring reality television and the ways in which these shows may be affecting young people.

The confessional society described by Bauman perfectly illustrates the types of television shows that all people, but young people especially, are viewing. On many of these shows, characters or contestants often find themselves in small rooms, monitored by a camera and a microphone, pouring out their private thoughts and feelings. However, instead of spilling these secrets to one best friend or one trusted advisor, this person is instead divulging their innermost thoughts to however many viewers are out there watching. What were once considered private, special thoughts and feelings, meant to be shared with a select few in private spaces are now readily shared for the entire world to see and hear. Because of this, Bauman theorizes that we currently inhabit a space where everything is meant for public consumption, yet we are lacking a concept or definition of what 'community' means anymore. Today's liquid modern time focuses more on the next best thing and how quickly people can dispose of whatever they now currently possess, view, or take interest in.

This concept of disposability speaks to reality television. One look at some of the most popular shows such as *Big Brother, Survivor, The Voice, The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette,* illustrates how disposability has not only made its way into mainstream television, but is also embraced and celebrated by today's viewers. As Bauman explains, "All these shows are public rehearsals of disposal: the disposability of humans and things" (2007, p. 123). With this in mind, that everything and everybody can be and will be disposed of, the trials for youth of navigating their own identity and attempting to understand others becomes that much more difficult.

In trying to understand the ways in which youth are interacting with reality television and the effects of the blurred lines between public and private spaces, Bauman's work is indispensable. By using this lens to better understand the contemporary phenomenon that is reality television, I can dig deeper into how this type of media is intertwined with the shifting idea of community; the chaos and struggle between the public and private; the lack of value for anything secret or sacred, and the conflict between autonomy and belonging. Reality television is invading our private spaces, our homes. It is touting the "confessional society". Thus, Bauman's liquid modernity will aid in providing a deeper, more distinct understanding of how youth are both engaging with reality television, as well as potentially being affected by it.

When one thinks of the way that young people are interacting with different forms of media and specifically reality television, critical media literacy must be considered. Critical media literacy has been defined by Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share as a method of instruction that, "focuses on ideology critique and analysing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality; incorporating alternative media production; and expanding textual analysis to include issues of social context, control, resistance, and pleasure" (2007, p. 62). While this approach to classroom instruction has become prevalent in places like Australia, Great Britain and Canada, it has not reached the United States yet. Yes, there are pockets of amazing teachers scattered throughout schools, working hard with their students on different types of critical thinking and questioning, but the reality is that this approach to media literacy is not status quo in schools in the United States.

Instead of critical media literacy, what is often in place are three other approaches to media literacy instruction that simply do not support the necessary development of critical thinking skills that our students need in order to become informed consumers of media, as well as critical global citizens. Kellner and Share (2007) describe three approaches to media literacy that all fall short of engaging students in critical thought. While each may have elements that contribute to the field of critical media literacy, as stand-alone practices they are not enough. The first approach is the protectionist approach, which works to protect kids from the power and dangers of media. The second approach is described as the media arts approach, which helps students develop an appreciation for the aesthetics of the arts and their own ability to create new media. The third approach has taken the shape of the media literacy movement, which focuses students' attention on accessing, analysing, evaluating, and communicating.

Critical media literacy, however, pulls a thread from each of these approaches, but takes them a step further by critically questioning and engaging with ideas of power and control in various forms of media.

Methods and Methodology

Critical Qualitative Research and Case Study Inquiry

I used a critical qualitative case study model for this project. This approach, along with Phil Carspecken's (1996) methods of data analysis and interpretation aided my exploration of social issues and human phenomena. Critical qualitative research allowed me to explore aspects of youth identity and their relationship to reality television in a way that quantitative research would not allow. Additionally, because there is an element of power in terms of the relationship between media and those who interact with it in various ways, taking a critical qualitative approach lent itself well to examining the deeper layers of reality television and its potential effects. I view this work as that of a critical scholar because, as Phil Carspecken writes, "Criticalists find contemporary society to be unfair, unequal, and both subtly and overtly oppressive for many people. We do not like it, and we want to change it" (1996, p.7).

Generation of Data

Focus groups and one-on-one interviews with 8th grade students grounded this study. Seven students met as a focus group over three different days to begin the study. Within this time, I led semi-structured focus groups, where the students directed much of the dialogue around reality television by responding to each other, as well as to my questions. The dialogue during this time was completely confidential, within the confines of a classroom, and all students knew that they were recorded for data collection purposes. Following the focus groups, I met with each student for an approximately 40-minute interview, where we followed up on some of the comments that he or she had made during the focus groups. Once all data was collected, I analysed and interpreted it, first creating a primary record, then using both low and high coding methods. Finally, I used Carspecken's methods for meaning reconstruction and horizon analysis.

The participants for this study were diverse in a number of ways, including the make-up of their family, the location of their home, their race, gender and social class, and even their cognitive abilities as they relate to academics. All seven of the participants were eager to have these conversations, but some participants were more vocal than other participants. A brief description of each participant is provided here.

Jasmine was a 14-year-old African American female who came from a two-parent household. She watched a great deal of reality television, specifically those that are on MTV. Jasmine was quite vocal during the interviews and worked to start pushing back against stereotypes, specifically those around African Americans. Malaysia was also an African American young woman, who was 12-years-old at the time of the study. Her background was quite different from Jasmine's though. Malaysia lived in a single-parent household, with a mom who was significantly older than her and she had no siblings at home. Malaysia's neighbourhood was the type that did not allow for safe playing outside, so reality television made for a great after-school companion. Marty was slightly different from some of the other participants, specifically because he did not have as strong of a relationship with his peers as the rest of the group members. Marty was of Mexican descent and shared a home in a working class neighbourhood with his brother and two parents. In terms of emotional maturity, Marty was not quite at the level of his peers and this disconnect came through in some of the focus group interactions. Also of Mexican descent was Brian, who lived with both of his parents and a college-aged sister in a nicer, middle-class neighbourhood.

Another of the young, male participants was John, who lived with his single mother in a working class neighbourhood. John did not possess much in the way of capital – social, cultural, or financial – and so his fixation with reality television focused on the potential to win prize money and the ways in which people can and will interact with others in order to win. This view appeared to facilitate his desire to one day appear on a reality television show. In addition to John, Jake and Brittany were the other two Caucasian participants. Jake was a 13-year-old male who was well liked by his peers. He lived with both of his parents in a middle class home and was one of the more active participants in our discussions. Brittany, on the other hand, lived with her mom in a working class area and she was an avid watcher of reality television with her mom. Brittany seemed to form very personal bonds with reality show characters, to the point that her friends remarked that she talked more about these characters than about her real life. All of these participants and their various backgrounds and interests made for very rich focus groups and interview sessions.

Analysis and Conclusions

"So I'm like, why do they automatically assume they're like these stereotypes? I don't understand, like—you should come to my house, because my house is very clean. And my father's in it. I only have two siblings. My mother is not a crack head."

- *Jasmine, 14-years-old*

"I think girls are trying to be the people they see on T.V."

- *Malaysia, 12-years-old*

"Reality is not as exciting as it is on T.V."

- *Brian, 12-years-old*

"I feel that they feed the stereotypes so that people believe that stereotype even more."

- *Jake, 13-years-old*

". . .and it's like, that's how kids are going to think they're supposed to be when they get older. So it's just making our society worse."

- *Marty, 13-year-old*

". . .how there is stereotypes on Hispanics and, you know, their speaking and their personality and sometimes even their intelligence, and their drinking habits, or their family traditions . . ."

- *Brian, 12-years-old*

"I think that's actually how they are in real life."

- *John, 14-years-old*

"Well, it's like, in most shows it's mostly drama, and I feel like when you watch it, like you – I don't know. It's kind of funny to watch how people act in their TV life, and its like, when you watch drama, like, you get entertained by how they act and it's like – when I watch them, I laugh at it. So I feel like it's funny to most people and it's entertaining."

- *Brittany, 13-years-old*

"A lot of people my age, I feel like when they see that, they're like, oh, this is how the world's supposed to be and this is how people are supposed to act."

- *Brittany, 13-years-old*

> *"Because it's easier for someone to believe something – or to – yeah, to believe something on TV that they already know or think is true . . ."*
>
> - *Jake, 13-years-old*

The above statements came directly from the young participants in this study. All of these statements were made during either our focus groups or the one-on-one interviews, and they are indicative of the main ideas that came to life as we discussed reality television programming. Interestingly, as I prepared to conduct this study, there was very little research in terms of young viewers of reality television. Studies exist that show a link between adult viewers of reality television and potential implications, but little research focused on pre-teen and teenaged viewers of reality television.

Throughout the course of the study and the subsequent coding and analysis of the transcripts, six major themes emerged. All participants addressed each of these themes, either during the one-on-one interviews, during the focus groups, or both. While some respondents were more passionate about one topic over another, each of the following six themes appeared often enough to warrant further discussion. The themes are notion of drama, extent of reality, influence on lives and identity, concept of disposability, creation of media selves, and emphasis on stereotyping.

The two most dynamic, frequently discussed concepts were those of stereotyping and drama. Both of these garnered the most emotion and input from all participants, and they were especially interesting because not all viewpoints were the same when it came to these ideas. The notion of drama was the driving force behind viewing reality television shows. While the participants never distinctly defined their concept of drama, this term was used repeatedly when describing shows that capture the interest of viewers, the participants included. Additionally, while characters that were shown in stereotypical ways stirred up some of this drama, the stereotypes had the kids talking. For the pre-teens and teenagers I spoke with, the stereotyped portrayals of certain groups of people on these television shows brought about emotional reactions, confusion, and frustration.

In addition to the recurring themes of drama and stereotypes, the respondents also often discussed how real they felt these shows were, with debate at times over differing opinions. Whether real or not, it became clear through discussion that the participants felt as though reality television does, in fact, have a certain level of influence over viewers, their perspective of other people and the world around them. Additionally, while the terms "media selves" and "disposability" were never uttered by the young participants in this study, through dialogue and careful discussion it became clear that these are issues that come to light when viewing and thinking about reality television. The participants mentioned how some of these characters act a certain way on the show and then realize that, when they go off the air, they may still be in the spotlight, which means that they need to carry on with the character that they enacted while on the show. Additionally, many of the students showed very little empathy, if any at all, for the characters on these shows. One participant even remarked that, "every reality star crashes and burns". This was said with no regard who this person may be outside of the television show or what this production may mean to his or her life. Characters on these shows are disposable, just like the disposability we see of marginalized folks in the world outside of television.

Significance

The importance of this study is paramount to understanding the ways in which young people are relating to others and making meaning out of the constant media messages that consume their daily lives. By gaining a greater understanding of the effects that reality television has on young people, scholars can continue to develop tools based in critical media literacy that may act to arm youth with the critical thinking skills that they need, in order to make sense of the message at the site of consumption and analyse how certain television shows may be affecting the views that they hold of both themselves and others. Additionally, by acquiring a clearer understanding of how youth engage with reality television, educators can gain knowledge that might better allow young people to engage with social realities and the knowledge that will serve to both help them deconstruct their own lives, as well as enrich the lives of others.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.