

Children as consumers of news

Learning by simulation

Ivan Said

This article describes a simulation exercise which can be carried out in a class of students aged between 11 and 13. It is meant to help the students become educated consumers of TV news. By means of a simulation of a news conference the children become educated according to the "Key Aspects" of media education as explained in Cary Bazalgett's paper "Key Aspects of Media Education" published in "Media Education - An introduction" (Edited by Manuel Alvarado and Oliver Boyd-Barrett) and in strict relation to one specific media area: TV news.

"Children are widely exposed to the news media"



IVAN SAID holds a BA in Communications and Maltese and is currently following an M.A. Qualifying course in Communications at the University of Malta. He has studied journalism in Berlin and Malta. He is a former features editor of The Times and is at present Programming Officer with Radju ta' l-Università.

Why TV news?

Students of the 11-13 age bracket frequently follow news. According to a "Children Now" poll, entitled "Tuned in or tuned out? - America's children speak out on the news media" children are widely exposed to the news media. The telephone poll was conducted by Fairbank, Maslin, Maulin & Associates between January 24 and 29, 1994 in the US. The survey reached 850 children aged 11-16 throughout the United States.

The first key finding that emerges from this survey is that children are widely exposed to the news media: 65 per cent say that they watched a television news programme the day before being interviewed: 36 per cent watched local news; 17 per cent national news and 10 per cent watched both local and national news. 44 per cent of the children interviewed said they read a newspaper the day before being interviewed. 44 per cent said they listened to the news on the radio, 33 per cent watched MTV news and 31 per cent watched a television tabloid show. The survey shows that children are more inclined to think television, rather than the other news sources, does the best job covering the issues they care about, with 44 per cent making this statement.

Moreover, telefilms and serials popular with our study age group include or are based upon events surrounding news organisations. Thus they can watch the police chief addressing a news conference, the MP talking to the media etc.

The Key Aspects of Media

According to Bazalgett, these are the key aspects of media:

Agency

"Media texts are produced by people, some by individuals, some by groups."

Category

"Any categorisation makes difference to interpretation. A media text can be categorised in ; number of different ways."

Technology

"Any technology choice makes a difference."

Language

"Everything in a media text has meaning."

Audience

"You can make a media text for people you don't know"

Representation

"Media texts relate to reality in different ways"

First stage

In this initial stage the educator propose to students to watch a news conference in the 8 p.m. news bulletin.

Ideally, the teacher should check whether any press conferences are scheduled for the day from press notices or other sources in order to make sure that the evening's news bulletin will contain a report of a news conference.

He also asks them to count the people in the event and identify the role they are playing. He asks them to name the TV and organisation airing the news, the organisation holding the press conference, the speaker addressing the conference etc. He may also ask them to time the TV report of the news conference in question. He may also pinpoint the difference between TV and other mass media.

Also, the teacher tries to define "news conference" and explain what usually happens in such events. He may also define "news", what makes "news" different from "features", what makes current affairs programmes different from entertainment etc.

Second stage

This is the first meeting following the watching of the TV news by the students. Here the teacher asks for the answers of questions put in the previous stage. The students might turn up saying that they watched a press conference organised by the Association of Hunters, Trappers and Conservationists. So the listing of the players of the event starts.

The teacher might crystallise the role of each player and list players who, perhaps, could not be seen in the TV report. He might give information background about the TV station and the organisation running it; the association calling the press conference and the issue raised in the press conference.

By now these two stages should cover the first four Key Aspects: Agency, Category, Technology and Language.

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Agency: “Learning about media agencies inevitably involves accumulating information about production roles, professional practices, institutional hierarchies, sources of finance, systems of circulation, and so on. But the key issue here is the developments of an understanding about what difference it might make to the meaning, significance, or authenticity of a text if it is made, say, Disney rather than by the Black Audio Film Collective, or financed by Macdonalds rather than by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.”

Category: “Categorisation provides the initial understandings of which audiences become able to recognise typical features such as the forms and conventions of a particular medium. But the point of Category as an aspect of media education is not merely to identify texts in different ways. It is to understand how media categories produce expectations about texts and hence affect how they are understood.”

Technology: “‘Technology’ can include any tools and materials used in the processes of producing meaning, from crayon and paint to video cameras and mixing desks. The essential conceptual point about technologies in media education is that technologies affect meaning, not just ‘quality’ or ‘finish’. Therefore, any technological choice, constraint, or opportunity involves a decision about the meaning, not simply the appearance, of a text.”

Language: “One of the fundamental assumptions of any version of media education is that every medium has, to some extent, its own ‘language’ through which its meanings are constructed. It is asserted that media texts are actively ‘read’ by audiences: that people hardly ever just passively view television programmes or look at photographs in the same way as they look at things in real life. It is a basic premise of media education that even the most idle glance through a magazine or flip through the television channels must draw upon skills that have been learned, as does taking holiday snaps or playing with a video camera.”

Before finishing this stage the teacher should split a class of 30 students into three groups: the first ten students should be assigned the role of media people; the second ten students should be assigned the role of holders of the press conference and the officials of the organisation holding the press conference; and the third ten students should be the audience.

Stage 3 - Simulation

Julian Bowker defines simulation in his paper “Classroom Practice” as such: “Simulations are sometimes understood in a limited sense as packaged, preselected materials through which children follow a set of predetermined activities. We mean simulation here in a broader sense - the idea of creative and analytical activity which allows not only approximation of real media practice

but also reflective space. Simulations start from the question ‘What if?’...They do not, as is sometimes assumed, demand acting skills, but usually group work will involve a presentation or exhibition of ideas and outcomes, sometimes in ‘role’, for ex., as a media producer or editor.

“Teachers can use simulations to explore a range of media processes, systems, and practices. In turn simulations can help to illustrate institutional, technological, and economic aspects of media. It well constructed they provide staged learning experiences, which can be assessed and used for self-evaluation and evaluation by teachers. Pupils can learn through simulations that professional products involve finance, materials, and technology, as well the combined world of professional producers in the construction of the real product.”

But before starting a simulation Bowker gives us this advice: “The teacher will need to create an atmosphere which fosters purposeful work and movement within this organisation. Pupils should be introduced to and encouraged to develop a sense of personal responsibility for the success of the following activities:

- research and investigation (print/visual/audio texts);
- drafting/evaluating/redrafting in a variety of media;
- sharing/showing/displaying work;
- collaborating in groups of varying sizes;
- discussion/talk for a purpose; - experimenting/testing hypotheses; - using media technologies;
- producing texts for specified audiences.

The teacher acts as the producer and/or director and/or organiser in other words he must assume a role of a truly democratic leader. He or she has to motivate and encourage his or her students, show true trust in them and thus, after defining the role of each member of the group proceeds with the simulation.

The teacher must be careful in carrying out his or her role of a leader: he or she must not impose on the students but let them decide what role they want to assume after a healthy discussion among all group members.

Stage 4

Here comes the part of the 10 student audience. They must evaluate what they saw and the processes involved.

It is very important that a discussion is held soon after the simulation and the evaluation the exercise by the “audience”. In this way students discover the difference between real life and TV.

Tail end

The teacher should organise an educational tour to a TV station in order to follow the process starting from when the press conference finishes up to the airing of the news item.