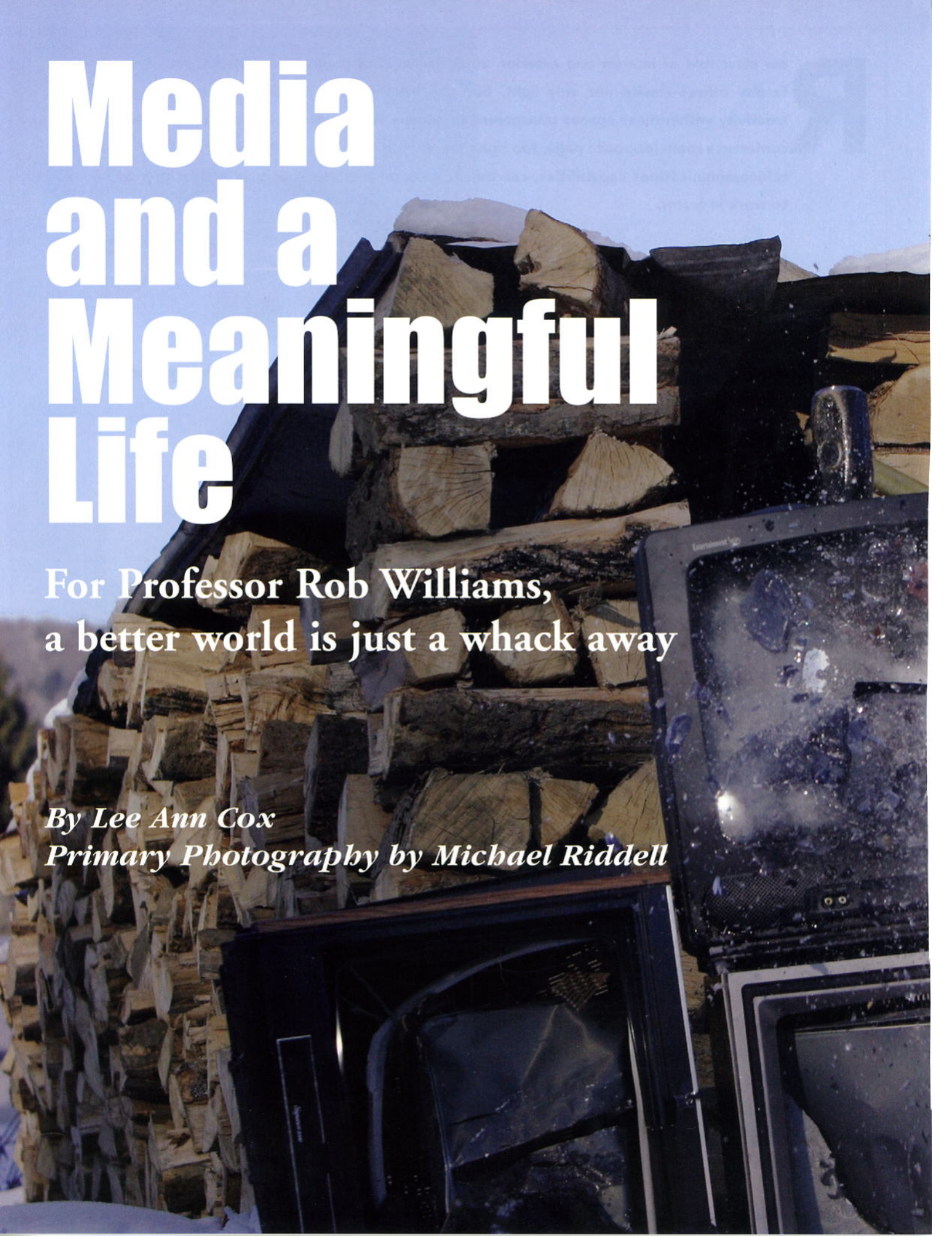


Media and a Meaningful Life



For Professor Rob Williams,
a better world is just a whack away

By Lee Ann Cox

Primary Photography by Michael Riddell



Sometimes you find yourself doing weird things. Like right now. It's an almost-unheard-of kind of beautiful February day, I'm headed south on Vermont's I-89 and thinking about what most people might be doing in the mountains on a day like this, with the glittery snow and the sun radiating so warm through the windshield that I'm tempted to leave my jacket in the car. Skiing or snowshoeing, probably. But I'm headed into the Mad River Valley to witness a guy smashing up televisions with a sledgehammer.

Probably you have to hear the song. Before I ever met Rob Williams, I downloaded "Kill Your Television" from his website. He combines these outrageous lyrics with a lullaby-gentle voice, offering myriad ideas for turning the "couch potato jester" into a "useless, harmless mass." It makes me grin whenever I play it, even now. Drop it from the highest building, bury it at sea, set it on fire, Williams doesn't care how you do it. But until today—and I have to admit I was something of an instigator—he's never personally done the deed. He hasn't needed to. Williams, professor of history and media education, hasn't watched television in 20 years. "Kill your TV now," he urges the rest of us, half-seriously, "and save our human race."

Of course, Williams is bucking one of the most powerful forces in the lives of most Americans, one we *like*. Even someone drawn to his message—me, say—comes to this with some solid journalistic skepticism. "Save our human race"? "Set yourself free"? Can *The West Wing* really be so insidious?

But if it all sounds like so much wild-eyed-radical-Vermont-hippie agitating, then a chat with Williams might just change your mind. Hang out with this Princeton-

REMOTE (MIND) CONTROL

It's not just me. "He inspires everybody around him," says Rian Devos '05, a student who does video production work with Williams. "When you get around him you just want to start doing stuff, taking some sort of action that has an effect. Not that he's pushing it; that's the greatest thing. It's just the way he is that makes you want to be involved in something."

For Devos it's shooting film and media-literacy work with kids. For someone else it might be newspaper writing or photography. Because what Williams is about is not totally tuning out media. He loves it, I think, in the right form and the right dose. He subscribes to Netflix, he uses movies—and moviemaking—as a teaching tool, he reads blogs and webzines, checks in on radio shows from Rush Limbaugh to Al Franken, totes an iPod loaded with 6,000-plus songs from country-western to classical violin.

What drives Williams to grab the nearest sledgehammer is that he believes Americans spend too much time consuming somebody else's version of reality, a media universe controlled by a powerful few transnational corporations with one overriding goal: maximizing profits. By some estimates we're hit with 3,000 discrete advertising messages every day, and the effect, he says, is a kind of violence against society, one that's particularly damaging to children, that endangers democracy and sends us—by design—into a soulless dissatisfaction that we rush to ease with mindless consumerism.

I know. Distilled like that, it's intense.

"We've essentially turned our media culture over to this handful of very powerful players who don't have our

"Let's reclaim the word 'activism.' Activism means replacing cynicism and apathy with hope and engagement. Activism means involving oneself in the community, carrying out the necessary work of building and sustaining our families, schools, communities and places of worship."

educated writer (with a Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico), filmmaker, father, musician—the list goes on and on—and you start to see what can happen when you fill those hours otherwise. Williams has created a life of engagement and community, with a soundtrack of live voices that are raised in real laughter, in song, in spirited debate. To meet him, I discovered, is to want in on whatever he's got going on.

health or well-being in mind," says Williams. And he's not alone in this concern. A broad coalition of conservatives and liberals, including groups as diverse as the National Rifle Association and the National Organization for Women, banded together in 2003 to defeat a Federal Communications Commission proposal that would have eased restrictions preventing large conglomerates from owning both a broadcast station and a newspaper in the

same media market. It would also have allowed a company to own three television stations in highly competitive markets.

That fight, Williams acknowledges, was great cause for optimism and an example of what can happen when the public tunes in to the problem. But the status quo concerns him deeply. One of his current peeves is the notion of a “red-state/blue-state” divide that’s now embedded in our political lexicon, a bit of shorthand most of us find rather handy. To Williams it’s a facile creation of the mainstream media that obscures the deeper reality.

“If we paint the election of 2004 as being about the red states versus the blue states, that gets the so-called news outlets off the hook for actually doing any in-depth analysis about what’s going on in these states,” Williams says, noting the sexy visuals the splashy maps make on TV. “The elections are always contested, often very closely; this is what politics is about. To say we can divide people, or states, into two camps, made absolutely no sense to me, yet now it’s a common reference point. It’s media shaping reality in a simplified way.”

One of the things that makes Williams so interesting is that you can’t necessarily assume where on the political spectrum he is going to come down. (Seriously. During one particularly animated exchange, he accused me of partisan whining.) Williams takes aim at any news organization (and he specifically accuses National Public Radio here) that he sees as offering propaganda as truth. According to Williams, whether a reporter says, “The Bush administration said today...” or “Ted Kennedy said today...,” if that’s the end of the story, we’re all being cheated.

“Anyone going to challenge that or at least go into a little more depth?” Williams demands. “That’s not news; that’s stenography. News is analysis, it’s context, it’s reporting, and there’s a way to do that and be fair to your story. But that’s not what happens most of the time on the radio and on television. It does in print and online. You can find great analysis of this stuff.

“What I would advocate,” Williams continues, “is, as much as you can, setting up your own media universe in terms of your news, to really balance images and words, to balance different kinds of sources—and to balance simply informing yourself with doing something about it.”

LESSONS OUTSIDE SCHOOL

And that’s where the professor puts his words into action. As Champlain gets serious about incorporating service learning into its curriculum, it could find no better model than Rob Williams. He champions media-literacy education at the national level as president and cofounder of ACME (Action Coalition for Media Education), on a statewide level



*“Grab the fire-starter fluid from
beside the Weber grill
Make sure adults are present,
put it on TV at will
Add newspapers and old kindling,
fireworks from last July
Do your patriotic duty, live TV free,
light up the sky.”*

from “Kill Your Television” by Rob Williams

through his video production company, Meme Films, and in the college classroom.

“The basic definition [of media literacy],” says Williams, “is teaching people to be more critical consumers of media and to have the courage, I think, to produce their own media, whatever that may be—haiku, song, dance, photos, books, movies, whatever—and providing them with the tools to do that.” In Williams’s Modern American Social History classes, that means reading books, watching films, listening to speeches, accessing the Web, and then engaging in critical analysis.

This year, in addition to requiring weekly papers, Williams assigned students a final video project, asking them to create a short documentary film exploring and analyzing the American dream. I sat in on several screenings and was impressed; students examined the theme through the lens of the immigrant experience, of baseball, of the never-ending drive for money, and in some appealing and provocative ways through the use of first-person interviews,

music and historical images.

And students in Williams’s classes have the option of writing only semimonthly papers in exchange for service-learning work, getting out into senior centers, schools and other nonprofits.

“I think education ought to be about engagement,” Williams tells me. “We need to get students out of their classrooms and into the world on a regular basis, engaging with people who are trying to make sense of the American dream and what it means to be a citizen. It puts students in a position of having to translate what they’re studying in class into meaningful experience—and then bring that experience back into the classroom, which provides more grist for the mill.”

Rian Devos has been doing just that, working alongside Williams in Meme Films, a grassroots effort to engage school-age kids around Vermont in media literacy by teaching them to make their own movies, letting them be the stars. The current focus is getting out an antismoking, antidrug message,



and helping young people understand how they're being targeted by tobacco advertising. Talking with Devos, I wondered how effective these efforts are.

"It's absolutely huge," he says. "If you show these kids how much money is being spent by tobacco companies creating beautiful movie scenes that entice them to smoke, it takes the glamour out of it. If you show a child that there is no reason that a character is smoking...that little piece of 'mindshare' is gone and it's replaced with truth and there's less chance that these kids will begin smoking...I don't have any issues with people who are 18 or 20 starting to smoke cigarettes, but you can't have an 11-, 12- or 13-year-old being targeted like they are and not be aware of it. It's not a fair playing field."

The reason Williams's approach works, Devos says, is that they aren't preaching to the kids, but helping them discover how to make healthy choices on their own. "The great thing about Meme Films," he explains, "is we're not telling a child what's right and wrong. Through making the media, they understand."

RIVER RUNNER

Even as you begin to get what drives Rob Williams, it's hard to comprehend his tirelessness. As a teacher, an activist, a friend, a churchgoer, he weaves together a life that's beyond busy; it's got a powerful grace that seems to be its own ever-present energy.

"I see Rob as a visionary," says Annemarie Charlesworth, a children's health researcher at the University of California, San Francisco, and former vice president of the ACME board of directors. What drives his passion, she believes, is a commitment to truth and justice and the very preservation of democracy.

Which brings us back to killing your television. I'm sure Williams knows that this symbolic gesture is unlikely to drive many people out into the snow with their TV and heavy tools, though he says it's really fun. His point is that we have to break the conditioning that lets us accept a world view handed to us by people who aren't acting in our own interest. The Kaiser Family Foundation estimates that by the time our children are 70, they will have spent 7 to 10 years of their lives watching television. Sure, it's easy and entertaining. But how many of us, Williams asks, get to our deathbeds and wish we'd only watched more TV. Because not only do we absorb a lot of suspect messages, we miss out on the chance to write our own new kinds of stories.

Williams likes to tell his students that history is a river we're all navigating and that if you want to make sense of the river, you have to understand how media work, because they tell our stories for us, determining how we remember who we are and where we've been, and guiding where we're going.

"What it's about, I guess, is trying to shape the course of that river to the extent that any of us can," says Williams. "I think part of our job as teachers is to present the case that another world is possible, that we can create a world even more democratic, even more humane, even more compassionate than the one we currently live in...and maybe we're not making as much money as we could be, but we're sleeping at night, because we've made some choices about how we live our lives that honor other people, not just in our own communities but globally."

So I'm thinking that weird stuff like spending an afternoon breaking up TVs can be a pretty good thing. It opens up a conversation. And if the dialogue isn't as glib or the actors as beautiful as they are onscreen, that's perfect. Now we're getting somewhere. ○

Listen to "Kill Your Television" and learn more about Rob Williams at www.robwilliamsmedia.com.

