

# THE MAKING OF A



## Marketing threatens your children's psychological integrity. The best protection? Education.

BY ROB WILLIAMS

We live in the most **media-saturated** society in the history of the world. Americans spend between 10 and 12 hours a day **consuming** media through **ever-more sophisticated** technological delivery systems, including (for the average household) three televisions and radios, two VCRs and CD players, one computer, one video game player, and a **bewildering** variety of newspapers, comic books, magazines, books, and other print media.<sup>1</sup>

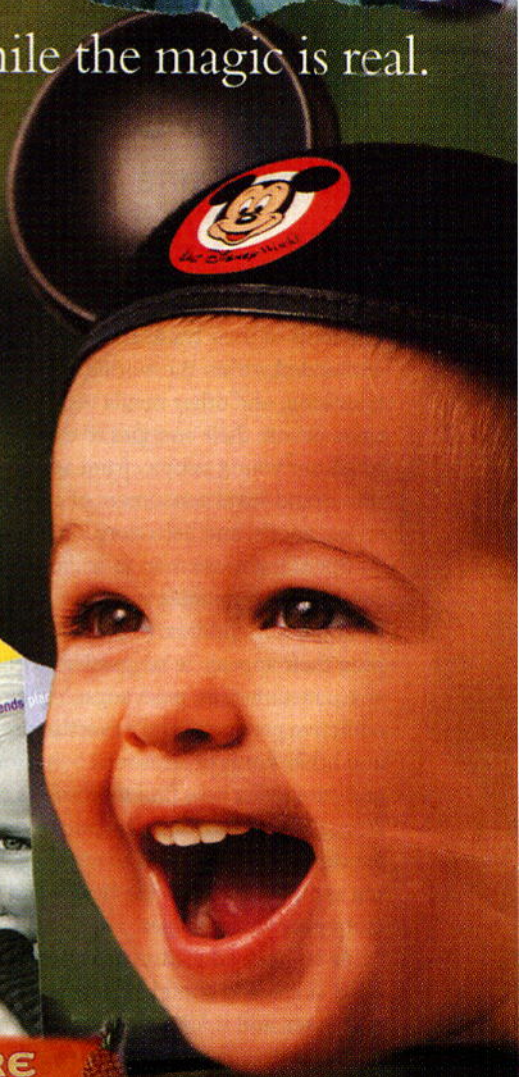
As we enter the **21st century**, this situation

might seem to call for celebration—more media theoretically means more **voices**, more diversity, more **channels** for information, entertainment, and **education**. A closer look, however, reveals a more **disturbing reality**. Most of the stories told in our media culture—by some estimates, as much as 90 percent of our **media content**—are ultimately **owned by a handful** of giant transnational corporations, including Time Warner, News Corp., Disney, Viacom, Vivendi, and Sony.<sup>2</sup>

ASK FOR MORE



Bring them while the magic is real.



KIDS EAT THIS STUFF UP



PLEASURE TO BURN



Get a Happy Meal® and get happy.

I'M A BIG KID NOW.®

Veteran media critic George Gerbner explains that whoever is telling the stories within a culture has enormous power to shape how people think, act, and buy. For the first time in human history, Gerbner notes, most of the stories about people, life, and values are told not by parents, schools, churches, and others in the community who have something to tell, but by a group of distant conglomerates that have little to tell and everything to sell.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, our 21st-century world has ceded much of the cultural storytelling process to a small number of large media corporations whose primary concern is not our society's

Americans **daily** witness as many as **3,000 ad messages**, and each one makes a devastatingly simple claim: **"To be, you gotta buy."**

health or our children's well-being, but to maximize profits. The tools of their trade are media messages and content embedded within the worlds of the Internet, video games, television, and other media technologies. These corporations devote their energies to expensive efforts designed to mold our young people, from as early an age as possible, into brand-loyal consumers of corporately produced lifestyles, goods, and behaviors.

Spending more than \$1 trillion in marketing each year, Big Media companies and their Fortune 500 allies use media to target our children with a wide variety of products, wrapping their appeals in suggestive stories that model compulsive consumerism; push sugar, caffeine, nicotine, and other addictive products; and advertise precocious sexual, violent, and other kinds of antisocial behavior.<sup>4</sup> Parents, teachers, and caregivers now find themselves on the front lines of a struggle over stories, as corporate media owners wage increasingly sophisticated advertising, branding, and marketing campaigns to win the hearts and minds of our children from ever younger ages.

At its best, education provides people with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to become healthier, wealthier, and wiser, and it fosters a sense of compassion and mission to do good work within the larger communities to which we all belong. How do we help ourselves and our children make sense of the troublesome nature of our 21st-century media culture without dismissing media's power and importance in our lives? One powerful answer is media literacy, an educational approach that seeks to give media users greater freedom by teaching them how to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media.

The word *literacy* traditionally refers to one's ability to read and write print-based media sources—books and newspapers, for example. This new century demands that we expand our definition of *literacy* to include a wide variety of media, including computers, video games, television, and

the Internet. All of us can practice "reading" messages and stories across multiple media platforms, as well as "writing" (producing) our own media in multiple forms.

We must also take the *media* in *media literacy* seriously, recognizing that most of our media outlets are owned by powerful industries that not only make products but also promote certain sets of values—including ones that often run counter to our own as parents, teachers, and citizens—and play significant roles in shaping our culture.<sup>5</sup> We can begin practicing media-literacy education in our classrooms and communities by daily asking fundamental questions about media, and by teaching our children to do the same. Asking questions helps demystify media's power, allows us to understand the goods and the bads inherent in any experience of media, and gives us the tools necessary to understand the deeply rooted ways media influence our thoughts and behaviors.

Let's begin by asking, early and often in our classrooms and communities, these five sets of essential media-literacy questions.

#### How does this media make you feel?

Remember the frightening flying monkeys in the film *The Wizard of Oz*? Or the first time a descriptive passage in a book made you chuckle? Or the thrill that came with playing a new video game for the first time? Media make us laugh and cry, and can often scare or even disorient us. (Think of Christopher Nolan's film *Memento*, a story told in reverse in ten-minute chunks of flashback, each one taking place earlier in the story than the one it follows; or the six o'clock news, a pastiche of disconnected events punctuated by ads for aspirin and automobiles.) Commercials, political advertisements, and other powerful media experiences operate primarily at an emotional level and are often designed to evoke certain sets of feelings, then transfer those feelings to the desired idea, product, candidate, or behavior. Asking

Coke's real thing: Using animation to sell sugar-laden soda to kids.



# media literacy:

## an operational definition



*Media literacy* is an overall term that incorporates three stages of a continuum leading to the media empowerment of citizens of all ages.

The **first stage** is simply becoming aware of the importance of balancing or managing one's media "diet"; that is, making choices and managing the amount of time spent with television, videos, electronic games, films, and various forms of print media.

The **second stage** is learning specific skills of crucial viewing: learning to analyze and question what is in the frame, how it is constructed, and what may have been left out. Skills of critical viewing are best learned through inquiry-based classes or interactive group activities, as well as from creating and producing one's own media messages.

The **third stage** goes behind the frame to explore the deeper

issues of who produces the media we experience, and for what purpose. In other words: Who profits? Who loses? And who decides? This stage of social, political, and economic analysis looks at how each of us—and, as a society, all of us together—take and make meaning from our media experiences, and how the mass media drive our global consumer economy. This inquiry can set the stage for various media advocacy efforts to challenge or redress public policies or corporate practices.

Although television and electronic media may seem to present the most compelling reasons for promoting media-literacy education in contemporary society, the principles and practices of media-literacy education are applicable to all media, from television to T-shirts, from billboards to the Internet.

—ELIZABETH THOMAN, CENTER FOR MEDIA LITERACY ([WWW.MEDIALIT.ORG/DEFAULT.HTML](http://WWW.MEDIALIT.ORG/DEFAULT.HTML))

young people to think more deeply about how media move them emotionally is a powerful way to help them understand media's unique power.

A little background on the human brain is helpful here. Music and images are processed in our brain's limbic system, the seat of our emotions. We consciously process eight frames of image per second, while our 21st-century media travel much more quickly. (US television moves at the approximate rate of 30 frames per second, for example, while film travels at 24 frames per second.)<sup>6</sup> Thus, much of our media travels too quickly for first-time reflection. Using a VCR or DVR (digital video recorder) to slow down, repeatedly view, and actively discuss media experiences can help children make more sense out of what they're feeling. Beginning with their emotions is a useful way to open up conversations about media's power.

### What kinds of realities does this media construct? What stories does this media tell? What are the "untold stories" here?

Begin by analyzing advertisements, the lifeblood of our media culture and, on a per-second basis, the most expensive media of all. Americans daily witness as many as 3,000 ad messages, and each one makes a devastatingly simple claim: "To be, you gotta buy."<sup>7</sup> Through constant repetition, advertisements work to "normalize" harmful ideas, products, and behaviors. Think of the ways in which the alcohol and tobacco industries use media—Hollywood movies, television commercials, Internet marketing—to glamorize beer and cigarette consumption.

Or take a more benign product, such as soda, which teens drink at the rate of two cans per day.<sup>8</sup> Coca-Cola's charming digital polar bear campaign, which has targeted young kids for a decade now, makes drinking soda look like a family-friendly bonding experience. Mountain Dew's edgier,

teen-targeted ads link consumption to a wide array of risky activities, such as heli-blading off a skyscraper. It all looks fun, but the ads don't tell us that drinking soda is linked to a whole range of unhealthy outcomes, from obesity and type 2 diabetes (each can of Coke contains 10 teaspoons of sugar, one of the world's cheapest substances to manufacture) to attention deficit disorders and mild addiction (courtesy of caffeine, an FDA-regulated drug) to tooth and bone decay (due to soda's displacement of more healthful drinks—water, milk, natural fruit juices—in growing bodies).

While we pay up to \$2.00 a pop (at the airport) for this unhealthy cocktail, it costs the soda industry only pennies per can to make, allowing them to pour their tremendous profits back into huge marketing budgets, including aggressively negotiating exclusive "pouring rights" agreements with cash-strapped public schools. By teaching our young people to explore and publicize these inconvenient realities in the media stories told by the soda, alcohol, and tobacco industries, as well as other powerful marketers, we empower them to make wiser choices about their own health and wealth.

### What kinds of production techniques and branding strategies does this media use?

Advertisers, the public relations industry, and other powerful media makers spend tremendous amounts of time, energy, and money carefully creating media to influence the ways we think, behave, and buy. One way of counteracting this influence is to "deconstruct," or analyze, branding strategies, such as the underwriting of *Sesame Street* by fast-food giant McDonald's. What does McDonald's have to gain from underwriting a popular children's educational TV program? The answer: plenty of public goodwill and, more important, children's attention while they watch.

Begin by examining an advertisement's production

