

Educating in an Era of Orwellian Spin: Critical Media Literacy in the Classroom

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Canadians live in a world of mega-spin where public relations corporate lobbyists play an increasingly larger role in news-making. To resist this trend, I have studied political ideology to understand the relationship between corporate media and systems of social, economic, and political power, and their hegemonic function, and indicate the bias inherent in the media, a contention that assumes the epistemological position that all knowledge is socially constructed. I demonstrate how preservice education students can acquire this understanding by reframing political discourse from different ideological perspectives, and how teachers can integrate critical media literacy into high-school social studies courses.

Key words: social studies, teacher education, ideology critique

Les Canadiens vivent dans un monde où lobbyistes et spécialistes des relations publiques d'entreprises jouent un rôle de plus en plus prépondérant dans les nouvelles qui leur sont présentées. Soucieux de résister à cette tendance, l'auteur analyse l'idéologie politique en vue de mettre en lumière la relation entre les médias et les systèmes de pouvoir sociopolitique et économique et leur rôle hégémonique. Il fait en outre ressortir la partialité des médias, une affirmation qui repose sur le principe épistémologique selon lequel le développement de toute connaissance est de nature sociale. L'auteur montre comment des étudiants en sciences de l'éducation peuvent se sensibiliser à cette réalité en resituant le discours politique au sein de diverses perspectives idéologiques et comment les enseignants peuvent intégrer l'initiation aux médias et la promotion de l'esprit critique dans les cours de sciences humaines au secondaire.

Mots clés : sciences humaines, formation à l'enseignement, critique des idéologies

Teaching by its very nature is a political act, and teaching media literacy is especially so. Knowledge is socially constructed, of course, including what is in the curriculum (Apple, 1990). The issues the media focus on, the language used to frame the debates, and what is omitted from these debates are also socially constructed. It is my contention that the general public in Canada has a limited understanding of the role of the media in influencing and controlling discourse, particularly around important social, political, and economic issues. The changing North American political climate, particularly with the rise of a corporate conservatism in the United States, presses upon me the urgency for educators to help students understand powerful social forces and the role that the media play in all of this. Through my experience as a teacher of high-school and teacher-education social studies courses, I have found that ideology critique has been a most useful concept to illuminate the media's hegemonic function.

For 18 of the past 20 years, I have taught in primarily working-class schools in rural British Columbia and Vancouver's multicultural east end. I am currently teaching social studies in a high school made up of mostly privileged middle-class students, a school that Jean Anyon (1981) would characterize as "affluent professional," located in Vancouver's west side. As well, for the past six years I have been an instructor of social studies methods in the Teacher Education Program at the University of British Columbia. Six of the courses I have taught there have been to preservice social studies teachers.

A BRIEF DISCUSSION ON CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

In *Media Education*, Buckingham (2003) has mapped out the evolution of the field in the British context. He stated that the starting point for media education began with *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (Leavis & Thompson, 1933), which made a case to resist popular cultural forms emanating from the United States and the British working class. In other words, their project was to protect the literary heritage of British high culture. Cultural studies came to the fore in the 1950s, challenging this elitist view, positing that culture was much more inclusive and central to everyday life. By the 1980s, the central tenet of media education had evolved into what Buckingham refers to as

“demystification,” in which the “fundamental aim ... was to reveal the constructed nature of media texts, and thereby show how media representations reinforced the ideologies of dominant groups within society” (p. 8). Buckingham further argued that teaching students to become critical of media messages is flawed unless they are also taught to be creative and engage in media production (p. 122). Although I agree with this assertion, I am not able to include student participation in media production where I teach. My conception of media literacy (linked as it is to social studies and its purpose to foster critical thinking, resistance, and action) solely focuses on the hegemonic role of corporate media.

In *News, Public Relations and Power*, Cottle (2003) mapped the media education field somewhat differently than Buckingham. He noted that much of media education is concerned with traditional liberal democratic concerns of diversity and voices of dissent. Once again, I agree with such concerns. Yet, I consider the major goals of media literacy to be focused on what Cottle calls critical “media-source interaction and participation” approaches (p. 7). One approach, the sociological paradigm, is concerned with how various sources consciously strive for a “definitional advantage” by utilizing media access, a point that is crucial for students to comprehend how dominant groups control discourse. By comparison, the cultural paradigm is focused on issues of representation and “symbolic power” (p. 7). Both of these critical paradigms assume the social construction of knowledge and the media’s relationship to “wider structures and systems of power” (p. 3).

In this article, I make a case for the importance of educators to step up efforts of teaching for critical media literacy in the social studies classroom, particularly at this juncture in sociopolitical relations, a period that Cottle (2003) describes as “increasingly promotional times” (p. 3). Many of the examples I use are American, an obvious result of living in a country inundated with American sociopolitical news and viewpoints. A focus on political ideology is essential pedagogy for students to gain an understanding of the hegemonic function of corporate media.

I am part of a significant number of educators who believe in the

capacity of public education to help make a better world for everyone, a source of hope, a site where it is possible for the seeds of positive transformation to take root (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1973; Sleeter & Grant, 1994). Critical media literacy fosters the transformative potential of public education; yet, many remain unconvinced that this is a role for the school.

THE CASE FOR CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

The two main sources of information in society are the mainstream corporate media and the public education system. Because Canadian corporate media have moved to the right, as some have suggested (e.g., Martin, 2003), I believe it is the responsibility of educators to provide a counterbalance by providing a venue for counter-hegemonic discourses to take root and develop. It is imperative that, as a society, we support the Deweyian notion of developing a critically thinking citizenry capable of understanding what is in the best interests of everybody. Feinberg (1990) explains this “moral responsibility”:

There is another important role that teachers need to play in helping to constitute a public; this involves their collective ability to identify conditions that inhibit children from developing the skills needed to become participants in a self-forming public. This role involves the recognition that as important as the school may be in helping some youngsters enter the public conversation, ultimately it is but one agent in the process of public renewal. The quality of other institutions, such as the media, the courts, and the instruments of income distribution, have much to do with the quality of public discussion. Thus, *the responsibility of teachers must extend beyond the school to a collective critique of the institutions that contribute to the quality of the public-forming process.* (p. 83, my emphasis)

Feinberg is calling for teachers to develop students’ analytical skills around the ways the media influences the quality of public discourse and, in many cases, controls it. He is taking sides in the old debate around the role of the school: to maintain the status quo or to transform it? The current situation with the Canadian corporate media provides a great sense of urgency to Feinberg’s appeal.

In *Media Think*, Winter (2002) makes a powerful case that the concentration of Canadian media ownership to a shrinking group of

powerful corporate entities has resulted in a blatant shift of the media toward championing the interests of the elite by a consistent and constant repetition of hegemonic discourses. In fact, the concentration of media ownership so easily marginalizes counter-hegemonic discourses.

Winter bases his notion of *media think* on what George Orwell, writing in the 1940s, referred to as the *prevailing orthodoxy*.

At any given moment there is an orthodoxy, a body of ideas which it is assumed that all right-thinking people will accept without question Anyone who challenges the prevailing orthodoxy finds himself silenced with surprising effectiveness. A genuinely unfashionable opinion is almost never given a fair hearing, either in the popular press or in the highbrow periodicals. (Orwell, cited in Winter, 2002, p. xxvi)

According to Winter, Orwell made it clear that hegemonic discourses were entrenched because of the concentration of media ownership. Winter claims that the corporate media have applied this Orwellian orthodoxy to a massive list of topics pertinent to Canadian social relations: free trade, feminism, national debt, tax cuts, various wars, First Nations issues, labour unions, poverty, and protesters (p. xxvii). Buckingham (2003) contended that the media have overcome the family, church, and school to become the dominant socializing influence in society. In other words, the "media are embedded in the textures and routines of everyday life" (p. 5).

Vancouver is home to the most concentrated newspaper ownership in the country. The Winnipeg-based CanWest Global Corporation owns both the *Vancouver Sun* and *Province* newspapers, as well as one of two national newspapers, and several local papers. In fact, CanWest Global owns 11 of the 20 largest papers in Greater Vancouver (www.ccna.ca/ownership), and television and radio outlets in the region. CanWest Global trumpets the interests of big business, Israel, Christianity, and a socially conservative United States. Identical editorials with this conservative bias often appear in many CanWest newspapers across the country. In comparison to its overt ideology, CanWest Global includes progressive journalism to an increasingly miniscule degree. In *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, McChesney (1999) argued that the media have become a powerful anti-democratic force in the United States and in

other Western nations, an assertion that is becoming true of Canada.

In addition, and mirroring developments in the United States (see Lakoff, 2004; Mahoney, 2005) Canadian “think tanks” like the Fraser Institute and the C. D. Howe Institute, which exist primarily through corporate and wealthy individual support, promote neoliberal and conservative discourses through their publications and through the CanWest Global media empire. In fact, the corporate backers of the Fraser Institute include the ownership of the media giant in Canada, CanWest Global, which sometimes hires Fraser Institute staff to write for its newspapers (Winter, 1997).

A few examples of how the Fraser Institute influences the public discourse on social issues illuminates this process. Communications professor Donald Gutstein (2005) exposed a Fraser Institute division, known as CanStats, as another pro-industry lobby group that purports to serve the public good. Even the moniker CanStats is an Orwellian twist on the much-respected StatsCan organization. Whereas StatsCan is a long-standing federal government initiative, Gutstein asserts that CanStats “is an American-inspired organization with an American director, an American agenda, advisors from the [arch-conservative] American Enterprise Institute and a Canadian target audience.” Gutstein further contended that CanStats uses pseudo-science to twist findings in favour of industry. Their position on the contentious debate in support of B.C. fish farms demonstrates their anti-environmental agenda.

The Fraser Institute has also been engaged in neoliberal attacks on the public education system for close to 30 years. They routinely publish their *Report Card on BC Schools* in the CanWest Global newspapers. These report cards tend to pit one school against another in competition based on academic performance on standardized tests. Critics of the Fraser Institute’s work claim that “the Fraser Institute thinks that public schools should be rewarded because they happen to be in an affluent neighbourhood” (Repo 2005, p. 24). The Fraser Institute highlights the merit of the private school system over the public system, a smokescreen for what Repo says boils down to the measure of the “socioeconomic intake of the school” (p. 24). Although this program might be beneficial to these students, Repo states that “purpose [of this report] is to act as propaganda for spending public money to send students to private

schools" (p. 25).

Indeed, this situation serves to at least partially explain why Canadians have witnessed the significant swing to the right in press coverage that Martin (2003) described. It also points to the oft-repeated conservative claim that the media is too liberal to be nothing but a myth. A recall of the dominant discourses that we have all been subjected to in recent years because of the media's practice of manufacturing consent should be enough to dispel any notions of media objectivity. Winter (2002) stated that during the 1980s, the media supported the Progressive Conservative government's drive and corporate desire for free trade; in the early 1990s, once free trade was secured, a deficit hysteria appeared. Winter contended that this manufactured fear of government spending provided the impetus for "reducing the role of government in society, increasing unemployment, driving down wages, emasculating welfare programs, undermining public healthcare and public education, and otherwise attacking the young, poor, and downtrodden" (p. xxvii). Winter argued that the media conspired to manufacture consent around the next issue: globalization, which has provided the green light to lower the corporate tax rates. Laxer (1998) has pointed out that working-class people across the country have had their lives significantly disrupted by this agenda of free trade, debt reduction, cuts to social programs, and globalization.

THE MEDIA IN AN ERA OF MEGA-SPIN

We need to understand our particular historical moment as one of what I will call *mega-spin*. Spin is one of the most effective mystifying hegemonic strategies in society. A group of British scholars explains spin as the power of persuasion coupled with some combination of rhetoric and propaganda.

The term 'spin' is conventionally used to refer to the process and products of purposively managing information in order to present institutions, individuals, policies, practices and/or ideas in a favourable light and thereby mobilize support for them. Attempts to manage news and political communications are not new. (Gewirtz, Dickson, & Power, 2004, p. 321)

Much has been written about bias and propaganda in both state-owned

and corporate-owned media sources for well over a century. (George Orwell's *prevailing orthodoxy*, mentioned earlier, is a sophisticated conceptual framework that encompasses media bias and its function as a tool for propaganda.) So why have spin and its derivative term, *spin doctor*, become so contentious in recent decades?

Part of the reason lies in what spin doctors actually are: "Political advisors responsible for policy presentation and information management" (Gewirtz, Dickson, & Power, 2004, p. 324); they are political ideologues. Moreover, for the past two decades or so we have been witnessing the "rise of the 'public relations state'" (Deacon & Golding, 1994, cited in Cottle, 2003, p. 6). In fact, according to Davis (2003), "[p]rofessional public relations has been a developing profession for most of the twentieth century" (p. 28). In fact its growth has been exponential since the 1970s. According to the industry's figures, worldwide revenues of the top 50 public relations firms tripled between 1990 and 2001, rising from \$1.1 billion to \$3.7 billion (Council of Public Relations Firms, 2005).

We are living in a time in which bias, or spin, in its commonly understood form has been hyperbolized to grotesque proportions. Lakoff (2004) points out recent legislation that the first George W. Bush administration passed. He has claimed that *The Clear Skies Act*, despite its name, enables polluting corporations to increase the amount of toxins they produce. Likewise, *The Healthy Forests Act* allows for more forests to be clear cut, some within formerly protected parklands. As a further example of current spin, numerous educators have criticized President Bush's *No Child Left Behind Act* for leaving behind too many marginalized, underprivileged children (Meier & Wood, 2004).

Large segments of the American public, at least in the short term, have acceded to these regressive pieces of Republican legislation because of the power of language. In recent decades, American conservatives have come to exploit their understanding of the power of language to their benefit, beginning in 1980 with the presidency of Ronald Reagan to the second term of George W. Bush. The success of strategic conservative use of language and framing of social and economic issues in the corporate media has caught liberals and radicals off-guard. The billions of dollars emanating from ultra-wealthy American conservatives to their

think tanks have given them a considerable advantage in these ideological struggles (Lakoff, 2004). The shift to mega spin has reached new heights (or lows) with the recent finding that the Bush administration has been engaged in a “political payola scandal” in which the U.S. Department of Education paid influential journalist Armstrong Williams \$240,000 to write columns in support of the controversial No Child Left Behind Act (Goldenberg, 2005).

No evidence that I am aware of suggests Canadian politicians actually pay journalists to write articles in support of certain policies. Yet, Canadian conservatives are using a few other bold mega-spin strategies to affect social relations (see Gutstein, 2005; Repo, 2005). As a case in point, the 2005 throne speech from Victoria, contained the phrase that the current Liberal neoconservative provincial government will work “to lead the world in sustainable environmental management, with the best air and water quality, and the best fisheries management, bar none” (Tieleman, 2005, p. 14). Yet, for the past three years, this same government has promoted the use of coal-fired electricity plants, increased the number of polluting fish farms, and pushed to end the moratorium on off-shore oil drilling. It is clear that the mega-spin strategy has appeared in Canada.

CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY AND TEACHING ABOUT IDEOLOGY

In teaching about ideology and media, educators need to be acutely aware of the heterogeneity of values within their classrooms. What makes classrooms particularly difficult terrain for progressive educators is that many people consider conservative values and beliefs as common sense precisely because they figure so prominently in the discourses that mainstream media use. Anyone seen as challenging those values is vulnerable to the charge of having an agenda. From my experience, however, teaching about the concepts of positionality and political ideology can offer protection from these charges.

The first stage in the process of teaching media literacy is to help students become aware of their own social location or positionality. My use of the term positionality involves the idea that people from differing social backgrounds often have different ways of perceiving the world, constructing knowledge, and making meaning. In other words, each

individual's social positionality is influenced by the social groups to which they belong, either by birth or by choice. A person's experience is central to their positionality. As well, one's positionality is always in relation to others. A person's experience combines with other attributes, either ascribed or socially constructed, to create their *shifting* positionality. Their positionality, in turn, often influences the political ideologies that filter their ways of seeing. I make students in both my high-school classroom and teacher-education classrooms well aware of the ideologies that influence me. They understand why, as the child of working-class immigrant parents who benefited from growing up in a relatively strong social-welfare state, I am concerned with the current trend toward privatization. I am upfront with them because I feel it important that students should understand the importance of taking a stance on complex social issues, rather than attempting to appear neutral.

In my classrooms, I expect each student to have some understanding of the three main political ideologies that emanated out of modernity: liberalism, socialism, and conservatism. I make students aware that radical ideology in Canada today has evolved from its socialist roots to social democracy. That said, the NDP has members who ascribe to both of these ideologies (Whitehorn, 1992).

Students are expected to understand the ideological positions on both the social scale and the economic scale posited by conservatives, liberals, and the radical left. The distinction between the economic and social spectrum around political ideology arose after a conversation I had with a teaching colleague almost 20 years ago. After I mentioned that I considered the *Vancouver Sun* to be too right wing, he responded, "Well, lots of other people say it is much too left wing. So they must be doing their job in a fairly balanced way." The subsequent discussion made it clear to me that although I was lamenting the newspaper's position around the economy and distribution of wealth, my teacher colleague was commenting only on social issues. This realization led me to develop unit plans based on distinguishing between the ideological differences on both the economic and the social scales.

The two social cornerstones of liberalism are democracy and the emancipation of the individual. Inclusion is at the core of what drives

liberalism socially. Over time, liberalism has been successful at developing civil, political, and consumer rights for more and more groups of people. Laxer (1998) argued that many current liberal governments are increasingly adopting neoliberal, laissez faire economic policies of reduced government intervention.

On the social scale, socialists agree with the liberal drive for inclusivity. Even in its original form, socialism articulated a vision for a socially just world in the same vein as its liberal predecessor. Yet, as Marx (1867) pointed out in the first volume of *Capital*, from a broader, historical perspective, the liberal idea of freedom is unattainable for most people within capitalism because of the basic contradiction that workers cannot be free when they are vulnerable to the capitalist tendency to exploit them and sell products at exorbitant prices. For Karl Marx, liberalism's major flaw was its emphasis on the individual as the most important unit in society. In the Marxist interpretation of the social relations of the mid-nineteenth century, social class was the crucial aspect of a person's identity because of the great disparities in wealth and opportunities with which the working classes had to contend.

Over the course of the twentieth century, a colour-blind racial discourse became part of liberalism (Frankenberg, 1993; Lewis, 2001), and with this appeared another cornerstone of the ideology, namely, meritocracy. Meritocracy refers to the social system whereby individuals reach a social and economic status commensurate with their individual talents and their hard work. This term also explains why some individuals "excel and others flounder" (Lewis, 2001, p. 799). Although the concept of meritocracy reinforces the inequalities in society, its existence makes people unconscious of any notion of privilege. In other words, meritocracy works as a hegemonic device. In Canada and in much of Western Europe today, socialism and liberalism have spawned ideological progeny of their own, namely, social democracy. Social democrats espouse liberal values on the social spectrum. In economics, they accept capitalism but support much stronger laws to help those who are falling through its cracks than their liberal colleagues.

Conservatives believe in "the idea of an organic and hierarchical society, in which people knew their place yet are related to each other as part of a totality" (Schwarzmantel, 1998, p. 110). In other words, tradition

and progress are directly at odds with one another; conservatives cherish the former while fearing the latter. Kincheloe (1999) has pointed out that conservatives want schools to promote “the uncritical acquisition of a neutral body of knowledge” (p. 79). Thus, conservatives are more likely to support the positivist notion of school knowledge being produced in a value-free, objective manner. Throughout the history of liberalism, socialism, and social democracy, conservative ideologues have fought against every progressive social and economic breakthrough (Lakoff, 2004; McGovern, 2002). It is important for students to understand that progressive transformations in western society have appeared not accidentally but as the result of intense struggles.

On the economic scale, conservatives have accepted the meritocratic principle from liberalism. This strategy makes sense today because support for meritocracy enables racial and class hierarchies to remain intact, without facing the charge of racism or economic privilege. As a corollary, most conservatives support the pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps philosophy. In other words, they do not believe in government aid in the form of social programs, believing that such programs lead to dependence, lack of self-esteem, and lack of morality. Lakoff (2004) has explored the logic that links conservative positions on the social and economic scales. Conservatives believe that “a good person, a moral person, is someone who is disciplined enough to be obedient, to learn what is right, do what is right and not do what is wrong, and to pursue her self-interest to prosper and become self-reliant” (p. 8). In other words, children who learn internal discipline, best learned from a strict father figure are better able to pursue their self-interest and become both prosperous and independent. Such a philosophy has a clear connection between patriarchy and issues of wealth distribution. It goes a long way in explaining what has been a perplexing problem for progressives for several decades: that working-class people often vote against their own best interests (Frank, 2004).

These somewhat brief descriptions comprise the basic tenets of each of the major political ideologies in Canada. I expect my students, then, to determine how ideology influences the work of journalists. Luke (1999) explains one premise of my approach to teaching media literacy: “[W]e need to evaluate narrative structures, language, and images in use across

media; to interpret meaning for different purposes; and to evaluate what is trustworthy and reliable information" (p. 622). In other words, students need to comprehend the bias or spin that is inherent in all forms of media, a contention that assumes the epistemological position that all knowledge is socially constructed. By corollary, all knowledge serves the interests of some groups of people, often to the disadvantage of other groups of people. Put succinctly, all knowledge is ideological and, therefore, has political implications. They come to understand how the media has a hegemonic function.

IDEOLOGY AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL FOR MEDIA LITERACY

The way in which I help students understand how ideology affects the media and, by corollary, social relations, differs somewhat depending on the classroom level. The preservice teachers get a more in-depth grounding in political ideology; the high-school students get a slow methodical approach that takes most of the school year.

For several years, I taught about political ideology in Vancouver's predominantly working-class, multicultural, east end high schools by using the binary of the social and economic value system. I listed on the blackboard the spectrum for both social issues and economic issues of conservative, liberal, and radical positions. The list remained on the black board and, as they read an article, students placed the position advocated by an individual or group on the appropriate spectrum. Eventually, students learned to talk about political elections, parties and value systems in a more sophisticated manner. Throughout the year, they had to analyze current newspaper articles of their choosing and present their analysis to the class. During a class discussion last year about media coverage of federal parties and platforms, I recall a 17-year old Filipino student pointing to the spectrums while explaining, "My mother is a right-wing conservative on the social scale – she's pro-life. But she's left-wing on the economic scale – she thinks the government should help out poor people. But there is no party that represents my mother's views." As an educator, I found success in the fact that this student diagnosed and articulated his mother's political frustrations.

Students demonstrate the degree to which they have become adept at explaining cultural struggles in ideological terms in their current

events presentations. Each chooses an article from one of the mainstream newspapers or from an alternative news source, most of which come from the internet. The chosen article must address a cultural issue, namely, race, class, gender, sexuality, or war. Each student provides a one-page written analysis to address issues of bias, ideology to show which groups benefit and which ones lose from the given perspective, as well as their thoughts about who was quoted and which excluded groups should have been quoted. Each student must also present his or her findings to the class with a four-to-five minute presentation. I provide the classes with the names and websites of the mainstream newspapers and of the alternative news sources. Some students choose only articles from mainstream sources, while others willingly, even enthusiastically, search the alternative sources. This has worked well, pedagogically speaking, because students often choose articles on similar topics – federal and provincial elections and American Middle East policy have been favourites – and the ideologies emanating from mainstream and alternative sources are not difficult to discern. These assignments offer students a framework in which to critique the article in terms of the ideological influences on the journalist, and in the process, allows them to develop an awareness of the ideologies influencing their own thinking, as well as how mainstream media often reflects the views of powerful interests.

One example of a student deconstructing a *Vancouver Sun* article on panhandling demonstrated that she could connect the media to outside economic and political interests. The article, entitled “Aggressive beggars back off: Panhandling complaints are down since new law was passed; street people say the situation has improved,” was clearly supportive of the right-wing B.C. government’s recent *Safe Streets* legislation (Ward, 2005, p. B1). This law allowed aggressive panhandlers and squeegee kids to be “handed fines ranging from \$86 to \$115.” After presenting a summary of the article, the student mentioned that all the people quoted supported this contentious law, including a “polite panhandler.” She also made reference to CanWest support for the economic and social agenda of the current neoconservative government, including its assault on welfare recipients and cuts to social programs. At the end of the presentation, a classmate added, “This [newspaper] chain

actually gave money to the Liberals for the last election.” This student analysis is precisely what Cottle (2003) argued for in media literacy classes (p. 3) – to have students make connections between the media and outside political and economic interests. During the ensuing class discussion, the student presenter and some of her classmates exhibited a critical analysis of the media by stressing how this article presents “panhandlers [only] from a business point of view,” with no mention of how “desperate homeless people are these days, especially after the cuts” to welfare. According to Cottle, these students were demonstrating an awareness of “how the news media ... access and privilege elite ‘definitions of reality’ ... [that] serve ruling hegemonic interests, legitimize social inequality and/or thwart moves to participatory democracy” (p. 5).¹

Students have become quite adept at understanding the Orwellian spin inherent in commonly used media terms like labour flexibility (code for union-busting and downsizing) and President Bush’s *Right to Work* legislation, which virtually allows for the elimination of the minimum wage (Winter, 2002, p. xvii). Indeed, when students challenge the language and the assumptions that many journalists use, they see how the hegemonic function of the media works in the interests of large corporations and other privileged groups.

The recent anti-feminism backlash has also been at the centre of the way I use the media in both educational settings. The lesson plans on ideology are successful in helping students understand conservative support for patriarchy, as well as the different kinds of feminism – liberal, socialist, and radical – supported by progressives. Female conservative journalists are becoming a ubiquitous entity in North American newspapers. To demonstrate media backlash against feminism in my high-school classroom, I have used several articles by *National Post* columnist Donna Laframboise. A few examples are “Domestic violence isn’t a gender issue” (July 18th, 2001); “End the breast cancer hype” (June 27th, 2001); and an earlier one she wrote for the *Globe & Mail*, “FEMINISM: You’ve come a long way, baby ... And for what? Most women love their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. No wonder they feel little attachment to a women’s movement that is plagued by anti-male hostility, intolerance and extremism” (July 26, 1997). Laframboise’s

article about breast cancer hype has always garnered the most student outrage, from both female and male students. When I asked why there were so many anti-feminist articles written by female journalists, one grade-11 female student answered: "It's easy – because the papers are owned by conservative rich guys who hate feminists!"

I also use film as part of the resources for teaching for media literacy. I recently used *Bread & Roses* in my west side high-school classroom, a 1999 fictional release about actual union-organizing activities among immigrant Los Angeles janitors. I had two objectives for showing this film: it clearly explains the risks to working-class people of organizing, as well as the benefits of belonging to a union. Moreover, it addresses the issue of media access for marginalized groups – the organizing drive was successful only after the janitors hijacked a celebrity media event. The subsequent written assignments and discussions indicated to me that the students, most of whom will never need to belong to a union, understood the plight of workers who have little in the way of human rights.

I have also brought in guest speakers to augment media literacy lessons on important, current social issues. For example, in the run-up to the signing of the historic 1998 Nisga'a Treaty, the first treaty between a First Nations people, the federal government, and the B.C. provincial government, I organized a presentation by Premier Glen Clark in our high school. There were over a hundred students in the packed room, as well as several media outlets. Clark's reasons for negotiating the treaty were placed against the corporate media's very negative coverage of it that we had examined the previous week. One front-page *Vancouver Sun* headline screamed, "BC Indian chiefs lay claim to entire province, resources" (Ouston, February 2nd, 1998). (For other *Vancouver Sun* articles I used, see "How to make Indian land claims go away," by T. Lautens, February 28, 1998; "Native leaders reject public referendum on Nisga'a deal," by D. Rinehart, July 23rd, 1998; "Cost of the Nisga'a deal: \$490 million and counting," by V. Palmer, July 23rd, 1998; and "What you get from behind closed doors," by B. Yaffe, November 10th, 1998.) By comparing the content of these articles to Premier Clark's position, the students in my Social Studies 11 and First Nations Studies 12 courses clearly understood how difficult it was for supporters of the Nisga'a

treaty, including the (NDP) premier, to get their voices heard in the corporate media.

In the Teacher Education Program, I also bring in guest speakers to help the preservice teachers understand the relationship between the corporate media and outside powerful interest groups. During this 2004 winter semester, after an ideological discussion about Canadian tax rates and competing visions of the good society, I brought in two speakers with opposing views on taxes. The first speaker was economist Marc Lee from the progressive *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*. On the next night, these preservice teachers listened to a presentation by Sara McIntyre, the B.C. director for the libertarian *Canadian Taxpayers Federation*. I was impressed with the quality of questioning the students posed to the speakers, as well as the high level of discussion after the presentations. For example, student questions focused on funding for each organization, indicating their awareness of the possibility that these speakers were public relations spokespeople for particular political agendas. In this contextual approach to media literacy, the students came to comprehend the "media text [as] a stage in a process of ideological production" (Lewis & Jhally, 1998, p. 2).

In the lead-up to the 2001 provincial election in British Columbia, another guest speaker appeared in one of my teacher-education classes, a right-wing columnist with the CanWest-owned *Province* newspaper, who covers B.C. politics. After an e-mail exchange over clarification of one of his columns, he surprised me by offering to present his philosophy around political issues to the preservice teachers. I situated his presentation by suggesting to the class that this columnist's agenda is to have the Liberals form government, to which there was much skepticism among the group as a whole about my pronouncement. During the 90-minute presentation, the journalist accepted numerous questions from the group. One yielded this answer, "Hey, I am writing my columns to get the NDP out of government. I think they tax and spend way too much." Later on, he answered a question about Liberal educational policy by stating, "You are all going to be teachers. I suggest that you vote in your own best interests, which means: Don't vote Liberal." When he eventually left, the group was remarkably quiet until one of them said, "You were right, Paul. He sure is biased."

IDEOLOGY AND REFRAMING MEDIA DISCOURSE

In the Teacher Education program, I have been experimenting with a more sophisticated kind of media literacy, one based on reframing political discourse from different ideological perspectives. Reframing techniques have come from the work of linguist George Lakoff (2004) and the Rockridge Institute (www.rockridgeinstitute.org). The basic theory behind reframing is to address the observation that people who are strongly influenced by one ideology cannot hear certain facts that might shake their beliefs. The facts do not seem to matter; they seem to bounce off the intended listener. Rather than go on the defensive, progressive ideologues need to use positive discourses on policy that rely on progressive values and language. In other words, rather than using the frames of the conservatives, they use ones based on progressive values.

An example of this that the class attempted in the 2004 winter semester was around the current debate about why boys are falling behind girls in high-school academic achievement. The first article the students read was a Fraser Institute publication entitled *Boys, Girls, & Grades* (Cowley & Easton, 2002) in which the journalist largely blames the feminist influence on teachers. The follow-up discussion of the article led me to believe that this article resonated with about a quarter of the class. The following week, the same students read an academic article entitled "Boy trouble: Rhetorical framing of boys' underachievement" (Titus, 2004) in which the main points were the pro-patriarchal backlash that is part of the resurgence of social conservatism and connections between academic performance and outside social forces. In other words, it seemed to me to be a perfect counterbalance to the Fraser Institute article. I assigned these teachers the task of reframing the gender gap in academic achievement from a progressive standpoint and a conservative one as if they were journalists. One female student, who earlier had thought there to be something to the Fraser Institute's reasoning, posed a satirical headline that particularly drew my attention: "Girls too successful in school: Send them back to the kitchen." She, as well as most of her classmates, became acutely aware of the power of language, and consequently, the power of the media.

Another experience from my teacher-education course may help to

explain the value in reframing. For corporate conservatism to continue, it requires that significant numbers of poor and working-class people vote against their own best interests—or stay away from the polls. The necessary reframing efforts on the part of conservatives were successful because a commonly held belief today is that conservative ideas are populist, while liberal or progressive ideas are elitist. Part of the media literacy strategies I use with the preservice teachers is to have them reframe conservative arguments using progressive values. Instead of defending an increase in the B.C. minimum wage, one student focused on the value of “prosperity for all who work hard.” Another student took on the current conservative slogan of “small government is best” by distinguishing between the role that government should have in society. Conservatives do not necessarily desire small government. They want government for the military, for CSIS, for the Ministries of Justice, Revenue, and Finances. Left liberals and social democrats, on the other hand, want government to focus on caring, nurturing aspects of people’s lives like education, health care, social programs for those in need, and a healthy environment. In other words, a progressive response to the matter of government is to present a more humane role for government, rather than the tough-minded one that conservatives assign it.

On the related issue of tax reform, one student produced a defense of taxes not by buying into the conservative frame as “taxes as burden,” but by reframing them as an investment for future prosperity for everybody. Of course, media access and media compliance are important obstacles to these progressive frames becoming commonly accepted. For now, however, if teachers can comprehend what is happening with current media concerns, they should be better able to help their students deconstruct the Orwellian spin that they are being inundated with.

CONCLUSION

My experiences as a veteran high-school social studies teacher have led me to develop what I consider to be an effective way to teach a more critical media literacy. Students must understand that knowledge is socially constructed and therefore political. They must understand that certain groups benefit from the way that knowledge is organized and presented, often at the expense of other groups. In short, they must

understand how political ideology is at the root of these struggles.

There are tensions and dilemmas with my approach to media literacy. An obvious one is the debate around teachers pushing a particular agenda. I do not see what I do as brain-washing; rather, I contend that media literacy, as part of critical thinking in general, is a necessary component in a student's education toward becoming an informed citizen. Moreover, epistemological concerns about the social construction of knowledge assume that a teacher who follows the formal curriculum is also engaged in pushing a particular political agenda, an insight that has particularly important implications for progressive educators. For example, on a rare occasion a preservice teacher has indicated on an end-of-term evaluation sheet that they found me to be insufficiently supportive of the conservative agenda. This is a charge I accept. After all, progressive people have also had to endure relentless attacks by social conservatives and economic neoliberals that fill corporate-owned media stories. I believe that it is impossible for any social studies educator to be neutral in their teaching. Indeed, I agree with the contention of Kelly and Minnes Brandes (2001) that teachers who consider their teaching to be apolitical or objective because they rigidly follow the prescribed curriculum to be naïve. After all, as Apple (1990) points out, the curriculum is not an apolitical document. Neither is the news in the media.

NOTE

¹ During parent/teacher interviews in recent years, I have been taken by how many parents express gratitude that their children had become interested in local, national, and international news since the start of the school year.

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