

Foreword

During a recent debate over the Brazilian government's move to adopt free access software as its operating standard, a Microsoft official commented, without any apparent irony, that his firm defended the right of "free choice". During the heady days of the 'digital revolution' and advent of the 'information superhighway', could any of us – educators, bureaucrats or otherwise – have imagined the future of the world wide web and digital technologies as anything other than one co-opted by capital and the market? I think not. Throughout the 1990s a powerful discourse on advertising, social and academic commentary began to explicate developments and promises of 'cyberspace'. Government and industry promises of universal access to a global library of knowledge were met with arguments that both cautioned against the hype, optimism, and opportunism and those that celebrated the democratic potential of global information access, of new social and intercultural relations, diverse virtual communities, and a truly emancipatory educational tool.

In the history of 20th century media of communication, 'moving' pictures, radio and TV all heralded great educational potential but all quickly succumbed to commercialism and the logic of capital markets. Regardless of their cultural and social effects and consequences, these three 'big media' of the last century became powerful modes for teaching consumerist values and behaviors, combining to make the largest global forum for public pedagogies of mass culture – itself largely steeped in the American dream factory of popular culture: image, identity, lifestyle. Whatever's on the screen, microwaves or airwaves is purchasable – a buy button or shopping cart is never far away.

Bettina Fabos brings to the research and theoretical task a communications background. Her instinct here is to situate educational issues in a larger economic, socio-cultural and historical communications context, to show that no knowledge or communications medium is outside ideology, political and economic interests. This is still an important lesson for educators, particularly as developments like *No Child Left Behind* have the effect of re-instilling an ideology that media and modes of learning – whether reading series, textbooks, or new media - can be objective, scientific and neutral. As research in the 1980s pointed out, there is substantial evidence that educational print media have long been dominated by corporate interests and ideological subtexts (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991).

This situation, of course, extends to the political economy of mass communications media, well documented in neomarxian communications studies (e.g. Schiller, 1989). It is in this tradition that Fabos depicts the commercialization of the internet, its incursion into everyday life, and its educational implications – not as a Luddite but rather as a means to push past the acritical 'enthusiasm' that seems to dominate educational debates over media. As she argues, "a political economy perspective offers a platform from which to ask important questions about information access, content control and the future of the internet as an educational and democratic information tool".

Advertisers have always pushed the educational potential of high speed computing, connectivity, and the web – families could learn together, play together and anyone anywhere could communicate with others or access information at the click of the mouse. Learning, entertainment, (home-based) business were all rolled into one screen-

based experience. Parental moral panics about kids' attitudes and wayward tendencies could always be bought out by promises of home learning centers and happy families logging in together, learning together. A host of 'net nanny' software promised children's protection and parental control and surveillance. But, something happened along the way from early innocent and idealist visions of the global community, the global classroom, the connected learning community. Not only was it kids that taught parents how to navigate the web, how to use e-cash, set up software, browser preferences and so forth, but advertisers quickly picked up that kids didn't mind advertising since their entire life experience was based in commercial and multimedia culture – from MTV, to console gaming and the massive range of cross media marketed e-toys. On-line commercial pitches to kids and teens – who are in fact the frontline at the screen – bypass if not mute parental concerns over commercialization altogether. Teachers and librarians too often can just sit in witness of students' preferences for and trust in commercial search engines over more sober and less glitzy portals, and for the brash marketing, indeed narrow-casting, techniques of commercial search engines that lure users down specific and narrow information pathways.

The internet is the new frontier of mass culture. It has become the new library, ticket office, shopping mall, auction house, doctor's office, classroom and office. Along the way, from an online stop to shop then pay bills, next a click to get the weekend weather and over to the latest sports scores, we now encounter the old 1950s billboard clutter – 'side of the road' gateways peppered with ad site banners, pop-ups and pop-unders, commercial portals with seductive sponsored links, often to 'mousetrapped' sites that lock us in much like stores lure us into the 'sale' trap through promotional enticements. If anything, the web today mirrors, if not exceeds, our mall cruising experience – its sophisticated visual and multimedia menu provides a lavish consumer fest where knowledge, information, consumer products and pop culture all melt into the one common denominator of the market. And one doesn't have to dig deep to discover the profitable synergies between established corporate giants in the media, telecommunications, and computer industries who are in fact shaping web content, access, its cartography and future.

Fabos draws out these issues in ways that should not only alert us to the traps and risks of commercial e-culture and of educational hype, but in ways that highlight the theoretical and empirical value a cultural studies and communications approach can offer mainstream educational research. This interdisciplinary lens frames the questions she asks of educators and students in her year-long case study of three mid-western schools. Her concern isn't with teacher and student 'IT literacy', competence in web search techniques or webpage evaluation skills. Rather, she asks *why* most of the teachers in her study were not alarmed by encroaching privatization and commercialization of the web.

Arguably, the commercialization of net culture was inevitable. Yet that should not stifle scholarly debate and strategic resistance to government policies that encourage market incursions into educational content and, by association, the 'new' learner-centered e-pedagogies. There *are* alternatives – EdNA or Education Network Australia (<http://www.edna.edu.au>) is a good example of the possibility of a non-commercial education portal. It is owned, managed and funded by Australian federal and all state government education departments reflecting government commitment and involvement

– indeed, a ‘hands-on’ approach -- that would not appeal to American political sensibilities.

In the US and elsewhere, media education has been one longstanding, although sporadic, alternative educational approach to the impact of mass media and consumerism on youth. However, efforts to equip students with critical literacy skills to challenge media messages often serve as end-of-unit curriculum add-ons, and the focus of most media literacy curricula remains fixed on traditional broadcast media, videogames, or music videos. Where media literacy programs include a ‘unit’ on the web, the analytic focus tends not to go beyond website evaluation of operational features and, at best, skills for verifying the ‘truthfulness’ or trustworthiness of a site. As Fabos shows us, in light of the probably irreversible commercialization of the internet and the increasing amount of classroom time spent on-line, we need now more than ever a strong critical literacy component structured across the curriculum and grade levels. Beyond school, so much of everyday life has already migrated on-line -- clearly educators have a responsibility to teach this and subsequent generations to ask the critical questions of the one medium of communication, sociality, and information that is today and will invariably be even more central in their lives. Students have a right to be equipped with evolving meta-analytic skills with which to consider how they are being positioned, how their consumer-learner identity is crafted, what their role and choices are, how pathways to, and the form and content of, knowledge are shaped by the commercial interests of marketer knowledge brokers.

In *A Commercial Highway in Every Classroom*, then, Bettina Fabos offer much more than a critique of capital’s colonization of the internet and brash incursions into education. It is, importantly, a call to recuperate some ground in the ‘culture war’ between those who still believe in the liberal democratic principle of education as a public good, and those corporate and government interests that want to unleash the vagaries of capital and free-market principles on education. So, where do we want to go today – and tomorrow? Where there’s no commercial clutter, no forced off-ramps or mousetraps dragging us off to some dead-end information abyss where the only bright lights are a shopping cart and buy button.

We might want to build an information environment and, indeed, economy, where there is a focal place for teaching and learning critical educational practices – for students and teachers to dialogue about how these media work, who owns them, whose interests they serve, what they and their texts try to do to us, our communities and our lives, their potential for building minds and communities, and for control and deception. As citizens and educators we may, ultimately, not be able to alter the patterns of ownership, the collaborative relationships between corporate media business, government and globalization in ways that we would like. But we can indeed continue to work to stake out curriculum and pedagogy as sites where audiences, websurfers, viewers, and others explore how these systems work, their ideological auspices and cultural consequences. To do so, we need more analyses of the depth and critical eye that Bettina Fabos offers us here.

References

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