Ingrid Geretschlaeger

Media literacy wanted

Giving support in tackling the war in the media

Particularly during world crises pedagogues have to find a suitable way of enhancing media literacy. In addition to an analysis of content, above all this implies a close consideration of reporting in the media and the provision of opportunities to express and actively create individual perspectives.

War, terrorism, natural and other disasters – all an intrinsic part of our lives – are experienced either directly or via the media. In the media they are couched within fictional and "real" contexts, in entertainment and documentary programmes. Subsequently, their contents are viewed and discussed in the home, at school and at work by people who have endured wars and catastrophes themselves and by those who know them from reports and films, which form our ideas of what they are like.

It is necessary to come to terms with situations and subjects of this nature; children in particular require some assistance here. With regard to the reporting of the Iraq War – or rather, the staging of the war in the media – parents quickly received advice on how to handle the images of the war within their respective families. The reality behind the images was called into question, the manner of dealing with these pictures portraying violence was analysed, parents received appeals not to leave their children alone with impressions from the media. Lessons from the first Gulf War and the attack on the World Trade Centre had been learnt, and the necessity of taking the child audience into consideration had been recognised, an audience that had been used to stumbling across round-the-clock war reports when searching for their programmes.

The demand for media literacy

Using the Iraq War as an example, I would now like to present a model of media literacy for educators. The intention is to pave the way for an appropriate course of action and, if necessary, for preventive measures enabling the media to assume appropriate significance in children's and young people's lives at times of crisis. "Media literacy in the narrow sense means the ability to move about in the media world with a critical, reflective viewpoint, independently and responsibly, and the ability to use the media for autonomous and creative expression. Media literacy signifies active viewing, effective use and creative employment of media. The term 'media literacy' and its aspirations refer to concepts such as the politically mature citizen, the self-determined consumer or the creative and active work or leisure user.

It is not only this individual but also a social dimension of media literacy that must be considered: basic conditions and flexible structures have to be created, granting virtually all social groups the opportunity to inform themselves on relevant media trends, to learn new tasks consciously and to take an active part in the creation of the information society." (European Centre for Media Literacy, 1997)

On the one hand, media-literate individuals are expected to be able to protect themselves more effectively from possible effects arising from mass media and to handle media messages more autonomously and creatively. On the other hand, they should be able to develop their own quality standards and to come to terms with images of violence so that these trigger no undesirable effects. In order to achieve this aim, initially the media are called upon to play an active role in securing a democratic, humane society by a responsible approach towards children and young people, who are equipped with fewer social skills and a lower level of media literacy. Secondly, politicians must create the basic conditions for maintaining corresponding minimum standards, as well as media independence from the powers that be. The third demand is for media education of the population in the form of life-long learning, commencing as early as possible, preferably in the family, and effectively creating a high awareness level.

Media education, as defined by the delegates of the UNESCO Conference *Educating for the Media and the Digital Age*, enables people to comprehend the media employed in their

society, to acquire the abilities required for using them in their own communication with others. This media education ensures that people learn how to analyse media texts, reflect on and produce them with a critical eye, as well as to identify sources and their political, commercial and/ or cultural interests, in addition to their contexts. Moreover, it enables them to interpret messages and values transmitted via the media. It endows people with the ability to select media suitable for disseminating their own messages or stories, for reaching a certain target group; it also creates the ability to access these media – for both reception and processing (cf. Recommendations for UNESCO - the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 1999). Apart from being media literate, educators have to have transmission skills and social competence. Furthermore, in addition to possessing a high degree of information competence, they have to be able to practise multi-perspectivity. Without granting subjective opinion too much scope, educators are challenged as recipients, critical citizens, media/social educators and activists.

Perception competence/ sensibility

Recognising the potentially problematic nature of events and the news situation

The use of the media is controlled by the interests of all those participating in the communication process. This starts with the producer, but equally applies to the receiver, the field of the medium itself, and the societal and media system. Therefore, media education cannot be based on normative criteria but only on explorative and awareness-broadening lines. Sensibility – cognitive and emotional – has to be enhanced by appropriate basic conditions. Training the

senses promotes a differentiated form of perception, which allows a constant critical analysis of the environment. Knowing the conditions for human perception, how reality is constructed is a *sine qua non* for media designers and educators. This knowledge permits a critical, reflective consideration of current social life and the "performance" of the media and politics. Those who encounter events with a vigilant eye will recognise potentially problematic situations; they will be prepared for taking the right action, for taking precautions for themselves and for others for whom they bear responsibility. They must also be equipped with the ability and willingness to ask unconventional questions, to create awareness by taking a provocative approach. As regards the Iraq War, the beginning was foreseeable – as a result of the ultimatum, for example. The preparations were reported in the media on both sides, correspondents and soldiers.

Competence related to the issues and the contents

Background knowledge of the war
With regard to the media, a fundamental insight into the organisation and the ways in which it functions is necessary. Concerning the principles of the media, which all educators should be aware of and consider constantly, the main issue is *how* the media create messages: namely that contents are selected by people with specific interests against the backdrop of their experiences and that the contents are correspondingly evaluated, interpreted and translated into action in a variety of forms. A part of society, the media are enterprises that offer services and sell products. They have political, economic, social and cultural meanings, and disseminate images of the world – ideologies and values. Educators must not only comprehend

the media, but must also have the competence to understand the issues in question – in our particular case the war. Children want and need concrete answers to their questions; educators should be in a position to reduce anxiety and take precautionary measures where required. It is vital to take into account the possible perspectives and viewpoints of all those participating and those directly concerned. What is required here is a high level of information competence, the opportunity and willingness to find information, to come to grips with it and adapt it for children's use.

Reflection competence

Tackling reports presented by the media
Closely linked to subject competence is a conscious approach to tackling the issue, i.e. that of reflection. Once an awareness of the significance of an issue, made possible by openness and flexibility on a daily basis, has been developed, a critical appraisal of the media has to be pursued: the possible effects of selection, content and design must be analysed; the strategies employed should be exposed. This will lead to a confrontation with the interests implicitly transmitted. During this phase, findings about perception must be included; similarly, media studies findings concerning the organisation of the media and the path taken by news into the media should be given. In the case of the Iraq War, this was rather obvious, being handled very transparently: US-friendly countries were permitted to post their correspondents right at the front, the others were excluded from information acquisition. What "eye-witness reports" are actually worth, in order to be accurately informed about the facts, is a highly interesting topic for critical analysis. The reflection phase serves to differentiate between reality and media

reality (cf. Doelker 1979). Here ethical questions, questions about responsibility, youth protection and human dignity (e.g. the display of POWs) must be asked.

The responsibility of the media and their interconnections with the power structures in society would also be an interesting subject, with a special focus on the example of biased reporting on trouble-spots and the theatre of war. The press activities and the PR of governments and industrial enterprises represent another goldmine for media-critical analyses related to current events.

Social and pedagogical competence

Ways of overcoming anxiety (partly induced by the media)

Children grow up with images they cannot forget which, however, help them to find their bearings in their everyday lives. Adult concern intensifies their anxiety even further. The lack of distance from the events in question – after all, they take place in the living room and cannot be pinpointed by most children as occurring in a remote part of the world – enhances their fear of events taking place somewhere in the world, and which are always seen as impinging on the children themselves. Media are also used by children to overcome their anxiety. They develop their own strategies in this regard; however, specific services unfortunately few and far between in this area as well as adult assistance are imperative.

Children experience their world through the lens of active behaviour. Their environment must provide them with experiences permitting them to relativise new experiences and those transmitted by the media. Children can only comprehend items that can be integrated into their network of relationships and the context of their experiences.

A change in pedagogical thinking has already come about. Increasingly the emphasis is placed on the conscious creation of an environment for children (specially prepared surroundings in Montessori pedagogy, forest kindergartens, toy-free kindergartens, etc.) in an endeavour to create an ideal-typical landscape. The aim is to combat the known problems of unfavourable child development conditions related to possible addictive and media behaviour.

Educational scientists must know about ways in which children cope with problematic situations, with emotional stress in their real lives (e.g. sexual abuse, parents' divorce, the demise of a loved one) as well as with anxiety induced by (media) reporting. Here, knowledge of the change potential of an event for a child's everyday life in the family and at school is vital. We know from previous wars and catastrophes and from studies and therapeutic programmes with children, the effects of media reporting on children. Thus, in order to spare children similar experiences in the future, we are in a position to conclude which preventive and accompanying measures are meaningful. The first steps for parents and educators – aimed directly at children, too – were ventured by offering the corresponding services on TV and the Internet during the Iraq War.

Competence to act

Expressing one's own perspective on the events

In view of the pedagogical measures deriving from the reflective phase, the question arises as to how the media themselves may be induced to fulfil their responsibilities more effectively. Educators are required to take an active part in the media, for example as children's advocates who, with the children, will then make demands of the media and the politicians. The

method used to formulate and express one's own position must be designed to attract attention and reach the ears of those responsible.

Educators must similarly find ways of helping children to express their sensitivities via the media, and enable them to access other groups. In the process of coming to terms with what has been perceived, with one's own feelings, with the information, the outcome can be expressed and designed in a way that makes it possible for children to digest media content and to introduce the children's ideas to a broader audience. Children must be in a position to present their ideas. This in turn increases the awareness of other population groups and here and there may spark a sense of responsibility, thus entailing more careful consideration of our youngest fellow citizens.

One example is the documentary series *Hallo Krieg* (transl. *Hello war*) on the Iraq War produced by Medienprojekt Wuppertal e.V., Germany, with young people aged between 18 and 19 years. Guided by media educators and film-makers, young people from Germany, Iraq and America document their lives and thoughts in the time before, during and after the Iraq War. The aim of the project was to familiarise young people in these three countries with the war and its effects from various perspectives and experiences. The series was distributed as a political education aid in schools, youth institutions, at events and to private individuals.

Summary

Visual perception constitutes the most significant element in communication. Successful production hinges on knowledge about perception. The design is a decisive factor in the effect created; reception ability can be enhanced or restricted by the design factor. However, the effect is largely determined by the recipients, by their

disposition, knowledge and experience as well as their willingness to become involved.

It is important to know how children form perceptions, how they use the media and how they process the impressions they gain from the media. The media must not encourage unnecessary fears; they should afford a highly realistic view of the world. A high level of responsibility is attached to the transmission of knowledge, because knowledge protects; also in the domain of media representation: the more I know, the more I perceive. In retrospect, it becomes clear that some events may seem surprising now, but their fundamental nature features a transparent strategy. Their impact on us is due to the power of the images transmitted. Power is linked to domination. Dominant forces are prompt in delivering corresponding images of an event in order to impose the particular subject on us all. The images captivate our interest; they cast their spell. They remain embedded in our memories. The so-called "best" press photographs are rarely of pleasurable events but are repeatedly dramatic images of warfare, disasters, rescues. It is necessary to develop an awareness of this problem.

Staging events is no longer a novelty. The same scenes, which fulfil specific criteria, are run again and again. For those of us teaching and studying visual communication the application is a tool of the trade. The image selected for the media depends on the interests pursued. What do we expect from images shown in the media? What do the images expect of us? Who was responsible for the images? Who offers them to us and with what intention? These are the basic issues in media communication. Images are deployed for a whole variety of purposes: as evidence, as a justification, to give a debate an emotional note.

Visual education, coupled with emotional education, has long been neglected for the sake of literacy with the emphasis being on writing and the development of cognitive skills. This has dire consequences now. We have not succeeded in integrating into the educational sector what began in the 1970's as criticism of the consciousness industry resulting from the analysis of visual communication, in integrating a self-evident approach to a comprehensive literacy drive in the sense of promoting maturity and the acquisition of skills and abilities required to handle all the means of communication available in society. Only once this has been achieved will we be able to concentrate on the content in such events – without having to relativise the reporting mode in order to reach the content and comprehend what should really move us. The goal of media education is to enhance an understanding of how the media operate, how they produce messages, how they are organised, how they design reality. But a further aim is to make as effective use as possible of media for their own sake – for entertainment and information purposes, for transmitting one's own messages. Media literacy, which is achievable by confronting these issues, constitutes a key qualification in the information and knowledge society, and is a challenge for us all. ■

REFERENCES

Doelker, Christian (1979). Wirklichkeit in den Medien. Zug: Klett u. Balmer.

Empfehlungen für die Organisation der Vereinten Nationen für Erziehung, Wissenschaft und Kultur (1999). UNESCO, verabschiedet von der Wiener Konferenz "Educating for the Media and the Digital Age" 18.-20. April 1999. Medien Impulse, vol. 7 (11), 71-73.

Leitbilder und Aktionsplan (1997). Marl: Europäisches Zentrum für Medienkompetenz (European Centre for Media Literacy) vol. 11.

THE AUTHOR

Ingrid Geretschlaeger, Dr. Phil., is a university lecturer and Head of the Medienpädagogische Beratungsstelle (Media Pedagogical Consulting Service) in St. Pölten, Austria. She conducts research and practical projects on media pedagogy, on media and the protection of youth and on children's media.