

---

# Introduction

## Media Education: Dilemmas of Perspective, Policy, and Practice



Robin R. Means Coleman  
*University of Pittsburgh*

JoEllen Fisherkeller  
*New York University*

**It is cliché to argue** that media are pervasive aspects of contemporary experience. All media are experienced on multiple levels: functionally, aesthetically, narratively, and ideologically. Functionally, people use different media according to their habits and patterns of consumption, their social and cultural situations and material circumstances, and the requirements of meeting day-to-day responsibilities. In turn, people's uses of media are constrained by institutional aspects such as targeting strategies, as well as the accessibility and relative convenience of technologies (e.g., time slots, program schedules, delivery methods, phone access, etc.). People's engagement and interaction with media are not just about uses but also about their preferences for a form, its craft and style, and its production values. For example, different people variously appreciate special effects, or music, or humor. These forms, styles, and production values are themselves the result of the media industries' economic structures. This is evidenced through budget constraints, the capitalization of popular trends, and the multiplicity of material. Similarly, people's attractions to media as a craft may also be around media's narrative elements. We see this particularly in television, radio, or film ("old" media). Here, character, plot, and the conventions of genre often are familiar if not comforting. "New" media also have these narrative elements, though the features of computers and online networks are reconstructing notions of narrative so that some traditions of chronology, logic, and a sense of linearity are affected. Herein we

see the institutional limits, where commercial efficiency favors formulas, stereotypes, and content that have a broad, nonprovocative (read, normalizing) appeal. Therefore, media as social normalizers or ideological messengers have the potential to inform people's evaluations of issues and ideas, values and beliefs, as well as assumptions and ideals. The concern is that with media's increasing globalization and corporatization, there comes an increasing homogenization of people's evaluations that may reflect Western ideals. But even non-Western and local media are imbued with "isms," of race, gender, class, sex, religion, and nation.

Those who study media (be they scholars, analysts, or creators) have variously engaged these functional, aesthetic, narrative, and ideological concerns via different theoretical, methodological, and critical frames. For example, media scholar Toby Miller examines old and new media narratives as ideological cultural expressions of race, sexuality, and gender. Peggy Charren, founder of Action for Children's Television, developed and then drew on analysis and policy expertise when she concerned herself with youth's media consumption habits and with making the stories of media of higher quality and with specific educational content. Bill Cosby, as actor and creator of media, understood people's attraction to family situation comedy and instituted specific kinds of humor, topics, and messages to appeal to a multiplicity of target audiences while also having an impact on discussions of race in America.

When referring to media education, a claim can be made that education happens when people write and talk about media. That said, media scholars are media educators when they lecture and publish. Media analysts are media educators when they move their messages into the public sphere. And media creators are media educators (for better or worse) when they offer up their creations for consumption. However, media education as discussed in this issue calls for the cooperation of those who engage in examination, critique, analysis, and creation of media alongside those who focus on issues of pedagogy, curriculum, and educational policy when they take on media's role in our society.

The subtitle of this special journal issue—"Media Education: Dilemmas of Perspective, Policy, and Practice"—reflects our belief that there is much to explore about media education, about its role, purpose, and usefulness for media studies practitioners. What remains relatively unknown worldwide is whether media education actually makes a difference and how. Even in those countries that have instituted media education at all levels of schooling, research into students' learning is limited and often not published, and whether students' learning in these programs effects changes to media systems and forms is even less well known, much less investigated. For example, in the United States (see Kubey, Tyner) as well as in Australia, Britain, and Canada, there is still hesitancy about media's institutional

legitimacy alongside, say, classical literature. Then there is the question of what media should be incorporated into education and when. These concerns reflect the values of high culture or tradition. For media studies practitioners, be they inside or outside of the classroom, we hope to make clear that too often the emphasis is on “media”—its critique, analysis, and study—and less (to nil) on the import of “education.” Admittedly, issues of education are not resolved in the discipline of education itself. Educators themselves do not necessarily agree on, or understand, the best ways to teach. More, whether people actually learn and change can be even more mysterious than how to teach. With this in mind, the title acknowledges that media education as a field is not without its complexities and debates.

In an effort to map the complex terrain of media education, with the interests and concerns of media studies practitioners in mind, we offer what we believe are three necessary entrées into discussions of media education:

1. overview of media education as a field—local and global principles and problems,
2. issues of critically integrating old and new media into education and societies, and
3. research on media audiences and technology users as learners and citizens.

This issue begins with the “overview” as presented by Robert W. Kubey, a professor of journalism and media studies, who has devoted ten years to researching media education around the globe. In this issue, while he does point out that countries are engaged in media education in some form, he focuses on how, somewhat ironically, the United States continues to encounter barriers as it seeks to establish and broaden media education in schools. These barriers are important to reflect on as they suggest areas in which media studies practitioners might focus their own inquiries.

The next section of this special issue, “Issues of Critically Integrating Old and New Media into Education and Societies,” picks up on Kubey’s argument that efforts to employ media education discussions, be they around “old” and/or “new” media, have not yet realized their full potential globally. Hence, both Kathleen Tyner and Chika Anyanwu acknowledge the drive to install new media technologies into classrooms and school practices and identify the problems encountered when instituting new media technologies. Tyner examines issues around the digital divide and access, the use of technologies in the classroom, and curriculum development given the availability of these technologies and the structures of schooling in the United States. Anyanwu explores how new media technologies are used for instruction in higher education institutions in Australia. He also presents a case study that reveals both teacher and student reactions to a physical versus virtual learning environment.

This section is followed by "Research on Media Audiences and Technology Users as Learners and Citizens." An extension of Anyanwu's admonition to be aware of student performance and learning outcomes is found in three authors presenting exemplars of media education in practice. Robyn Quin provides a historical analysis of how the media audience has been conceived of and represented in media education syllabi over the past thirty years. She also provides practical recommendations for teaching about audiences. Horst Niesyto, David Buckingham, and JoEllen Fisherkeller present research conducted with youth in five countries who learned to produce audiovisual expressions so that they could exchange and interpret them across regional borders. The authors examine these audiovisual creations and interpretations as they suggest media learning as well as understandings (or misunderstandings) about other youth as producers and audiences. Robin Means Coleman presents two case studies, the mediation of Ebonics and the NAACP network TV boycott, to illustrate how African American-based discussions can be used to diversify media education curricula but also to deepen our understanding around media activism, cultural bias, and media corporatization.

This issue concludes with the commentary of Oscar H. Gandy Jr., an Annenberg School scholar of media with a wide breadth of understandings and perspectives. His interests range from agenda setting to privacy and the use of personal information, structural analyses of organizations' discriminatory practices around race and ethnicity, the digital divide, and the role media play in shaping our sense of the world. His response synthesizes thinking about a broad range of issues and concerns presented by the pieces included in this issue.

The future is on us and taking shape in the convergence of TV and new media, as demonstrated by continuing industry mergers and the synergy between traditional media forms and new technologies. Media educators must anticipate and attend to information and entertainment technologies as a whole or unit and deal with the synergistic condition of computers and other media. Also, media forms and systems are increasingly undemocratic; thus, media education has to create the spaces and times of democracy. Media education cannot afford to be just about good media versus bad media, production versus analysis, text domination versus reception pluralism, and politics versus culture. Media education needs to encourage critical analysis, production, and new forms of communication that can help all of us imagine as well as implement systems that embody and encourage equal access, opportunity, expression, and power—systems that do not currently exist.

Our charge is that media studies and media educators come together. We need to bring together these different constituencies, to merge their interests in texts and contexts, pedagogy and production, in an ultimate quest

for democracy. We hope people read these articles and consider how their media analyses, reflections, remaking, and actions might all create new forms and systems of communication and interaction for the good of all—as defined by all.

*Robin R. Means Coleman is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Pittsburgh. E-mail: colemanr@pitt.edu.*

*JoEllen Fisherkeller is an associate professor in the Department of Culture and Communication in the School of Education at New York University. She has many publications that examine young people's cultural experiences of media and media education projects. E-mail: jf4@nyu.edu; department Web site: [www.nyu.edu/education/culturecomm/](http://www.nyu.edu/education/culturecomm/).*