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PULLING BACK THE CURTAIN: CORPORATE MEDIA LITERACY AND MEDIA EDUCATION

Everyday life in most countries is saturated with media: advertising, communication, information and entertainment. The mass media reinforce their influence through their prevalence and the way they configure audiences' ideas and values. We have created a world where most interests, whether financial, political or social are filtered by corporate media for the masses. The drift toward oligopoly in the media industry has led to a concentration of media ownership and control in fewer corporate hands. Media corporations have not only gained control over content through selectivity and framing, but have also secured the entire communication sector (i.e. advertising, cable, film, radio, publishing, recording, retailing, television), which was once constituted by separate entities.

Education is not immune from corporate media. Along with many other private corporations that market to students through advertising and the sponsorship of curriculum and programs, media corporations have entered schools by broadcasting directly into classrooms (Molnar, 2005). Moreover, recent trends include the inclusion of media education into media corporations' business strategies. The media are often faulted for negatively impacting children's behaviour with depictions of sexuality and violence. Media education, therefore, was originally introduced to schools as an antidote— a measure of inoculating and protecting students from the media's negative influence. Many educators have moved away from this inoculative/protectionist approach and now take into account students' ability to critically analyse the media. Criticism of commercialism and violence in the media, however, has not disappeared. As such, the entrance of the media industry into media education serves as a strategic response to such criticism.

This new phenomenon of media corporations supporting media education immediately raises questions. What is the media industry's incentive for its involvement in media education? What are the intentions and benefits for the media to actively pursue media education? Is media literacy education credible when the commercial provider is also the producer of the curriculum? What consequences result from the media industry's active participation in media education? This paper examines the case of Channel One, which broadcasts to more than 12,000 middle schools and high schools with an eight-million-student audience, or about 40% of the entire teenage population in the United States. Channel One provides twelve minutes of news (including two minutes of advertisements) for grade 6-12 students everyday during the school term, and partners with organizations to produce media literacy resources for classrooms. In addition to its prevalence in classrooms, some argue that Channel One initiated the media industry's entrance into the production of media education materials (Tyner, 1998). Channel One studies have been associated with advertising content analysis

(Barry, 1994; De Vaney, 1994) and privatization of public education (Apple, 1993; Buckingham, 1997; Molnar, 2004, 2005). The focus of this article, however, is to examine the means by which the media industry expanded its financial agenda into public education and acquired significant influence over media education, and how the power and functions of corporate media present new challenges for media education and researchers.

WHAT IS CHANNEL ONE?

Channel One Network produces a daily twelve-minute news program (including two minutes of advertisements) watched by students in 400,000 classrooms throughout 12,000 middle and high schools in the U.S. It is currently broadcasted in 48 states (Alaska and Hawaii being the two exceptions), with an especially strong base in southern states. It is watched by over eight million students each day, or about 40% of the country's entire teenage population. This is about five times the number of teens who watch ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN news — combined (Manning, 2000).

Channel One provides schools with a satellite dish, two VCRs, classroom 19-inch television sets (1 per 23 students), a preview monitor, and hookups for free. Students in return are required to watch Channel One nearly each day over a three-year term contract. Schools are also provided with Channel One Connection, which offers an average of 100 minutes of commercial-free educational programming per day during the school year. Each school must enroll at least 300 students in grades 6 through 12 in order to qualify for the program.¹ Channel One transmits news at least 180 days per year and students must watch the news on a minimum of 90% of school days. These programs must be viewed in a “controlled classroom setting,” therefore excluding times before school, after school, and during lunch time. Students and teachers may choose not to watch, but a school will be in violation of its contract if the number of students watching the program declines more than 25% from the number at the beginning of the 3-year contract or falls below 300.² If a school breaches any part of the contract, Channel One terminates the broadcast and charges for the equipment and wiring, which could prove costly, as Channel One provides an average of \$50,000 of equipment to each school.³

Channel One originated in 1990 with Christopher Whittle's Whittle Communications. Broadcasting began with 400 schools and quickly spread to nearly 12,000 middle schools and high schools (Molnar, 2005; Walsh, 2000).

¹ Detailed information on the terms and conditions can be found in *Terms and Conditions of Network Participation*, included in the sign-up kit obtained from Channel One Network.

² This opt out option was created due to criticisms raised by parents and many interest groups. However, such opting out has been negligible (Ferrara, 1999).

³ Critics believe that the value of the equipment is much lower, at about \$17,000 per school (Shaw, 2000).

Channel One was closely linked to Whittle's Edison Project, through which he planned on creating a for-profit company to run private schools through a sophisticated technology infrastructure (De Vaney, 1994). Whittle's idea was to provide schools with multimedia equipment to reduce the need for teachers. Students learned from educational software provided by communications and electronics corporations. One should keep in mind, while examining Channel One, that Whittle's primary interest was in creating a new business model in the educational industry that used technology as a means for controlling and delivering information. Although Channel One became profitable, it was not enough to save Whittle's media enterprise. He sold channel One in 1994 to K-III Communications (now called PRIMEDIA) for \$250 million, which according to Whittle, was approximately what the company spent to wire nearly 12,000 schools (Hays, 1999).

PRIMEDIA⁴ is a leading magazine publisher that expanded into business information and commercial education markets. It is the largest special interest magazine publisher in the U.S. and publishes 250 magazines, including *Motor Trend* and *Automobile*. It owns 650 websites, 280 events, 45 subscription data products, and 165 educational programs. PRIMEDIA markets itself as "Targeted Media Specialists" (PRIMEDIA, 2004). Under its new owner, Channel One underwent significant changes. First, the headquarters and sales force were moved from Knoxville, Tennessee, to New York City. Servicing of satellites and television sets was outsourced to local vendors, which cut more than 20% from the budget (Levine, 1997). The news programming itself also changed. During the Whittle era in the early 1990s, celebrity interviews, rock music, and advertisers' products dominated the program (Manning, 2000). Although the program retained its basic settings— youthful news reporters and anchors with casual fashions and mannerisms, featuring MTV-style graphics and rock music— the content became more serious (Manning, 2000). As Morgan Wandell, the executive vice-president of programming states, Channel One aims "to be smart enough for 'Nightline' and hip enough for MTV" (Kaufman, 2003). Channel One has arranged alliances with established media giants such as ABC News, U.S. News & World Report, and 60 Minutes (Gwynne, 1995), as well as with other organizations for public service such as the Partnership for a Drug-Free America and National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which enhanced Channel One's image and credibility both to advertisers and the general public.

Channel One has also undergone a process of branding. The reporters often talk about Channel One and invite students to join the network's campaigns by sending videos of their schools or a school T-shirt for the news anchors to wear. Channel One is marketed as a new trendy community for teens. As William Hoynes (1997) describes, one of the major components of Channel One is the creation of a "self-contained circle of discourse that is for and about Channel One schools" (p. 5).

⁴ PRIMEDIA is controlled by buyout firm Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co., which owns 51% of PRIMEDIA's shares.

Criticism of Channel One

Channel One has faced criticism from liberal groups and educational organizations, such as the National Parent-Teacher Association and the American Federation of Teachers, of its practice of broadcasting advertisements for two minutes during each news program. Channel One is funded by sponsor advertisements, which cost up to \$200,000 per thirty-second spot. Major advertisers include Gatorade, M&M/Mars, Nintendo, J.C. Penney, Pepsi-cola, Reebok, Sears, the U.S. Navy, the Air Force, and the U.S. Marines. Only one sponsor for each merchandising category is accepted to advertise in the program, thus private corporations pay tremendous fees for ads to gain monopolized accessibility to teenager-targeted markets. Concerns about commercialism in the classroom are not new, but the media directly controlling curriculum design and delivery, and ensuring reception by a captive audience of students is quite novel. Not surprisingly, most criticisms against Channel One are directed at the advertisements aired during the news.

Battles between critics and Channel One have even involved courts and congressional intervention. Most of the criticism against Channel One news early on originated from the political left, which argued that corporations should be prohibited from marketing products to students in a captive audience format. In the mid-1990s, however, conservative organisations such as the Family Research Council, the American Family Association, Focus on the Family, and Eagle Forum began to join the campaign against Channel One, objecting to ads for junk food and R-rated movies containing scenes of sexuality and violence. The protest movement involves a curious coalition of religious conservatives and liberal activists, led by Eagle Forum's Phyllis Schlafly and Ralph Nader. The issue was introduced into congressional hearings on May 20, 1999, after repeated interference by Channel One and conservative activist Ralph Reed to delay the hearings (Mokhiber, 1999). Motivation for opposing Channel One might have differed, but both conservatives and liberals complained that Channel One was freely marketing advertisers' products to captive students. Students with perfect attendance watch 700 commercials in one year. In the hearings, Republicans opposed federal control of commercial activity and insisted that decisions over Channel One news rested with school boards and parents (Lawmakers plan, 1999).

Although the campaign failed to take Channel One programming out of schools as the coalition had hoped, criticisms of and campaigns against the network continue. For example, Channel One is barred from public schools in the state of New York, where Channel One is headquartered, and is shown in only a handful of parochial schools (Hays, 1999). In California, public schools are prohibited from signing a contract with Channel One unless the district holds public hearings first and justifies the network as an "integral component of the students' education" (Manning, 2000). Also, non-profit organizations such as Commercial Alert and Obligation, Inc., have stopped Channel One's cash-incentive plan, through which the network offered to pay teachers \$500 for every referral (Golden, 2001; Trotter, 2001).

Channel One supporters claim that the benefits of equipment donations and programming outweigh the negatives from two minutes of commercials (Shaw,

2000; Kaufman, 2003). However, the educational benefits from Channel One have yet to be proven. For example, results from two research projects released in 1997 did not find any educational benefits. Johns Hopkins University's Mark Crispin Miller claims that the program's "real function is not journalistic but commercial, for it is meant primarily to get us ready for the ads" (1997, p.1). Hoynes (1997) reviewed thirty-six programs from Channel One news and found that only 20% of the time is devoted to breaking news stories, while ads, sports, weather, and natural disasters made up the remaining 80%. In response to these studies, Channel One's spokeswoman at the time, Claudia Peters, claimed that schools were pleased with its programming and that 99% of schools renew their contracts (Honan, 1997). Yet, Channel One's own research indicates that its news programs have an educational benefit only when teachers integrate the program into the daily lesson plan, which is rarely the case (Brown, 1998; Manning, 2000). In fact, various research on television programs' effectiveness in developing students' knowledge suggests that "however much people may *feel* they are learning from it, television news actually contributes very little to viewers' knowledge, and that it is a comparatively ineffective means of communicating information about the world" (Buckingham, 1997, pp. 13-14).

Despite criticisms against the content as well as the inclusion of advertisements in news programs, Channel One is thriving. Not only has Channel One successfully established itself as the leading news provider for a significant percentage of teenagers throughout the U.S., but it has also been increasing its influence on education as well as students' perceptions of the world by branding itself. In the remainder of this article I explore how Channel One, along with other major media corporations, uses media literacy to realize specific interests.

DEFINITIONS OF MEDIA LITERACY

The term 'literacy' has been typically associated with reading and writing. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it means "the quality or state of being literate; knowledge of letters; condition in respect to education, esp., ability to read and write." The term 'literate' for people who can read and write was first used in the late 19th century. Simple though it may seem, notions of literacy are far more complex in reality than the mere acquisition of reading and writing skills. Three primary theoretical perspectives— functionalist, interpretivist and critical— frame interpretations of literacy.

The functionalist view construes literacy as a technical skill and focuses on an individual's empowerment in acquiring this skill. It presumes "the existence of a societal consensus of values, a social system reflecting meritocratic principles" and takes "a cultural assimilationist posture" (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, pp. 81-82). The interpretivist view takes social contexts into account but does not consider the political power behind inequalities in society. Critical literacy, finally, questions power relations, discourses, and identities through which practices of reading and writing are constructed. Critical literacy, rooted in Paulo Freire's work on repositioning the politics of literacy (Anderson & Irvine, 1993; Petrina, 2000), is

directed at “understanding the ongoing social struggles over the signs of culture and over the definition of social reality, over what is considered legitimate and preferred meaning at any given historical moment” (McLaren & Lankshear, 1993, p. 424). Critical literacy, then, ultimately seeks to challenge social inequalities.

While definitions of and approaches to media literacy are closely linked to these three theories, there are of course diverse notions of how media literacy should be conceptualised (Alverman & Hagood, 2000; Bazalgette, 1997; Christ & Potter, 1998; McLaren, Hammer, Sholle & Reilly, 1997). Definitions of media literacy range from comprehensive to more teaching and process-oriented descriptions of skills that are necessary to be media literate. Similar to general theories of literacy, there are three perspectives on media literacy: inoculative/protectionist, ideological, and critical.

The inoculative/protectionist perspective reflects the conventional, default approach to teaching about media. Here, media are powerful and have harmful influences, especially on children. Moral panic and social concerns that children are more violent and out of control due to the media’s negative effects reinforce the logic that children must be protected from media influences. This approach regards audiences as mere passive receivers of media messages. Media literacy’s focus centers on analyzing media content and differentiating various media formats. In this context, media literacy represents the acquisition of skills for understanding “the grammar” and genres of media, and the ability to identify media stereotypes, which is similar to the functionalist view of literacy. Although many educators have retreated from this approach to media literacy, it is still popular in the U.S. since protectionist media literacy programs are seen as a direct response to concerns regarding the media’s portrayal of violence, drugs, and other social problems, and are thus more likely to receive governmental funding and popular support (Heins & Cho, 2003).

The ideological approach is influenced by structuralism, especially semiotics (Masterman, 1993). Media, in this approach, are not only regarded as a means for conveying information about the world, but also as a way for understanding the world. The media represent a consciousness industry that accumulates the power to directly influence society. Thus, according to Len Masterman (1985), the aim of media literacy is to develop in students the ability to demystify and criticize media messages. This approach is concerned with the social contexts that produce media texts, though the primary focus is still on media products, which is similar to interpretivist views of literacy.

Critical media literacy is not, by contrast, a skill-based or text-based approach. It is a cultural, political, and social practice (McLaren, Hammer, Sholle & Reilly, 1997; Sholle & Denski, 1993). Students critically interpret and produce media texts, and question the power of the media. As Justin Lewis and Sut Jhally (1998) argue, media literacy teaches students to “engage media texts, but it should also... teach them to engage and challenge media institutions” (p. 109). As such, critical media literacy aims to use media to alter social conditions as well as to empower individuals with the ability to dampen media influence.

UNDERSTANDING CHANNEL ONE'S MEDIA LITERACY

At ChannelOneTeacher.com, a website for teachers, Channel One describes its mission: “to empower young people by keeping them informed of current events, by broadening their view of the world around them, by sharing stories about teenagers who have demonstrated the Power of One, and by teaching young people how the media works” (ChannelOneTeacher.com, 2004).⁵ The expression “Power of One” implies not only the potential power of individual students, but also the power of Channel One to provide information and a medium for students to witness this power. It claims that its programming focuses on hard news based on events selected by criteria such as whether stories are appropriate for grade 6-12 audiences and whether the event provides “information that teenagers need to be productive citizens” (ChannelOneTeacher.com, 2004). At ChannelOne.com, a website for students, Channel One describes itself as a source of “information and advice ranging from teen life to music to sports to homework help” (ChannelOne.com, 2004).⁶ Clearly Channel One programming aims at providing students with a certain kind of information. But who decides what news is appropriate? Channel One does. It is according to Channel One’s standards and judgements that news will be provided to students as *the* information and advice. Of course, every news agency selects news according to its own biases and standards; however, Channel One constructs its views and values as “answers” for students. Channel One’s executive vice-president of programming, Morgan Wandell, states that: “A lot of times they [students] are looking for the answers to their questions and they don’t know who to turn to. I think Channel One can help provide a lot of answers to them” (Channel One Network, 2004).⁷ Channel One construes its relationship with audiences as a provider of answers to passive recipients of information, a classic functionalist approach to media literacy. Given that Channel One’s values and views are represented and marketed as a brand, it can present the news as answers for teens, but the brand trust that arises from self-marketing leads to an antithesis of critical media literacy.

For example, in the program of April 10, 2003, entitled “Fall of Iraq Special Report,”⁸ its perspective on the war is quite clear. The news program begins with the scene of Iraqis taking down a statue of Saddam Hussein in the city of Baghdad. But the program’s focus demonstrates that only with the help of U.S. Marines could the statue be taken down. Another clip shows Iraqis thanking the Americans

⁵ Retrieved September 21, 2004, from <http://www.channeloneteacher.com/about/purpose.html>

⁶ Retrieved September 21, 2004 from, <http://www.channelone.com/common/faq>

⁷ From “Channel One Overview: Optimizing the Power of One” from the video included in the sign-up kit.

⁸ From “Channel One News 4.13.03: Fall of Iraq Special Report” from the video included in the sign-up kit.

and calling out the name of President George W. Bush. The program then moves on to a clip of Donald Rumsfeld saying “we will not stop until Saddam’s regime has been moved from every corner of that country.” After explaining how much it would likely cost to rebuild the country and settle the uncertainty of leadership in Iraq, the program cuts to interviews with Iraqi-born American immigrants in California, who thank the U.S. and exclaim that every American should be proud of U.S. troops. As Channel One’s Wandell states, Channel One “worked hard to deconstruct the news to rebuild it for our audience without breaking the rules of journalism” (Kaufman, 2003, p. 18). Oftentimes, when Channel One is criticised for its commercial interests in schools, it responds that its programs “teach” students about the world. It appears, though, that rather than letting students deconstruct the news, Channel One provides a “reality” for students.

Not only does Channel One deconstruct and rebuild the news, it makes sure that it provides the “one” and only news program for its audience. According to the Terms and Conditions of Network Participation,⁹ schools may use the equipment for other purposes as long as Channel One News is aired, but includes a clause barring schools from showing another televised news program with advertisements to students. This policy effectively excludes competitors like CNN Student News, which also targets students and includes commercials. The network also maintains control over content and delivery. Although Channel One encourages teachers to screen the news before showing the program to students, only designated equipment operators in a school can operate the VCR (which is locked in a cabinet) that records the news program received by satellite dish every day. The news is transmitted during the night or early in the morning, leaving teachers little time to preview the programs before classes commence. In most cases, teachers do not have any control over the content in the news programs. Channel One created an opt-out option for individual students and teachers, after much criticism suggesting that the program was taking over the role of educational curriculum in schools. However, Channel One has set strict terms and conditions regarding how many students need to watch the program in order to uphold the contract as stated earlier. Exemption from watching the program is, therefore, not a realistic option for most of students and teachers.

Channel One’s Media Literacy

Channel One’s engagement in media education was initially discrete, but then surprised media literacy educators who attended the 1999 National Media Education Conference in St. Paul, Minnesota, by stepping forward as a major conference sponsor. Its \$25,000 contribution nearly provoked a boycott of the conference by Canadian educators who opposed the entrance of Youth News Network (YNN) into schools, Channel One’s equivalent in Canada (Golden, 1999). The donation was solicited by Renee Hobbs, a leading media literacy scholar and paid consultant for Channel One. Considering the criticism it had encountered, the

⁹ The document is included in the sign-up kit.

contribution to a national media education conference was a great opportunity for Channel One to demonstrate that it cared about children and education.

Also, Channel One has produced free media literacy curriculum, “Media Mastery,” since February of 2000 (Branch, 2000). The curriculum consists of a 30-minute video and lesson plans that can be downloaded from Channeloneteacher.com.¹⁰ Five lessons are dedicated to news and another five to advertising. Each lesson plan has detailed description of focus questions, goals, instructional processes, and worksheets for distribution to students. The lessons instruct the basic skills required to analyze media messages. Most lessons, except one which uses a script from a Channel One news broadcast, do not deal with Channel One news programming directly. Therefore, its programs are unlikely to be critically analyzed if teachers decide to use this media literacy resource kit. Not surprisingly, this curriculum was developed by Renee Hobbs, Channel One’s paid consultant.

In addition to creating the media literacy kit for teachers, Channel One also partners with the Center for Media Literacy, a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting media literacy education in the U.S. Although Channel One advertises that it partners with the Center and provides the latest support materials for media literacy, links to resources are currently unavailable.¹¹ On the Center for Media Literacy’s website, Channel One is not mentioned, even though Cable in the Classroom and ABC Family were listed as media industry alliances. Hence, the nature of this partnership between Channel One and the Center is not clear.

Since the late 1990s, Channel One has actively sponsored media education and media literacy organizations and produced media literacy curriculum. But its official engagements with media literacy serve public relations interests by putting forward demonstrations of concern for education, rather than an actual contribution to media literacy education. Its approach media literacy remains within the functionalist/protectionist model of media literacy, focusing on acquiring basic skills to understand media content. Channel One’s media literacy practice is, in a sense, more obvious in its daily news programs. By selecting, de/constructing, and re/building news, and then providing it as an answer for a targeted audience, it leads students to become passive recipients. Although it encourages students to actively join its campaigns and events, students’ engagement with Channel One remains within Channel One’s agenda and framework.

MEDIA TEACHING MEDIA?

Channel One is not only a leading news provider for its teenage audience, but also represents a trend in the privatization of information in democratic society. Channel One originally began with news programs, but gradually became a larger

¹⁰ The curriculum can be found in
http://www.channeloneteacher.com/tw_pages/media_mastery.html

¹¹ <http://www.channeloneteacher.com/connection/index.html>

media agency, expanding communication to websites and educational materials. In addition to inroads into schools, Channel One builds alliances with other prominent media corporations such as ABC News and AOL. Its parent company provides the groundwork for these networks to form, illustrating how oligopoly in the media industry develops. In effect, Channel One is a prime example of how media corporations attain power in society.

Figure 1 captures the mechanism of corporate media in society and their role in media literacy. Media literacy, especially when it takes a critical form, is a counterforce to the media corporations' power and influence. Critical media literacy enables us to question unequal social relations and conflicts of interest, and motivates activism. When corporate media, however, control media literacy and exerts influence over media education, the motivation for activism is dampened. Anything that could be potentially harmful to the media industry is unlikely to be included in media literacy materials provided by the industry. Therefore, instead of serving as a counterforce, media literacy merely becomes part of a self-contained circle of corporate media. Once media literacy is appropriated by the media industry, the loop is closed and will likely remain closed.

Why and how did the media industry manage to gain control over media literacy? There are two reasons: the lack of funding in public education and the coinciding of interests between the media industry and media education. Firstly, the Channel One case illustrates how the lack of funding has opened the door for the media industry to participate in public education. It was launched when U.S. schools were suffering from reductions in public funding (Molnar, 2005). Channel One's offer of a satellite dish and television sets was too good to resist for many schools that could not afford such equipment. In this sense, it is not surprising that Channel One programs are mostly in low-income and African American districts rather than upper income and predominantly white districts (Buckingham, 1997; Brown, 1998). Schools subscribing to Channel One were unlikely to replace such equipment on their own and became permanent Channel One schools. Secondly, media literacy is a relatively new field and still does not hold secure status in K-12 education. The back-to-basic movement during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as shortages in educational funding, left various problems in media education unresolved, such as limited access to high-quality resources and a lack in teacher training (Buckingham, 1998; Coghil, 1993; Wulff, 1997). Media literacy resources provided by media corporations proved useful for teachers to incorporate media literacy in school curriculum, especially since they offer original up-to-date media source materials. Under these circumstances, Channel One and other prominent media corporations were provided with an untapped market to introduce media literacy resources. For media corporations, supporting media education is a perfect public relations opportunity to show the public their enthusiasm for education and to escape criticisms against program content and business tactics. Also, for major media corporations, producing media literacy resources is a low-cost investment since they can fit previous programming into educational materials (Tyner, 1998). Although a White House report recommends media literacy education be free of corporate influence or control (Heins & Cho, 2003), the U.S. government sanctions

media corporations' involvement in media literacy and supports Channel One by paying for U.S. military branch advertisements on Channel One news.

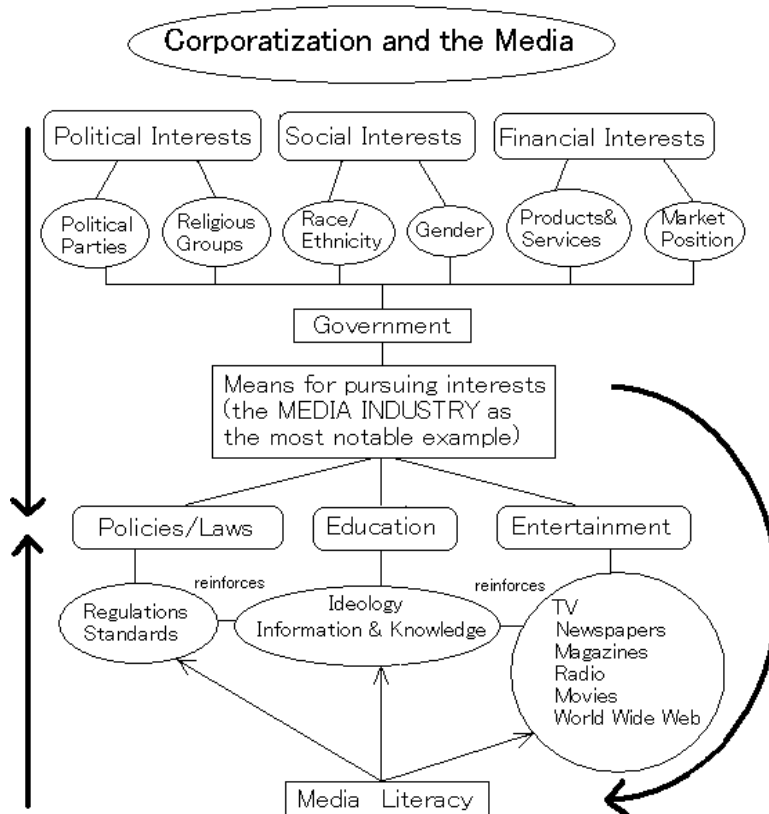


Figure 1: Corporatization of Media Education

What can be done to contradict this corporate media circle or circuit of power? The key lies in the introduction of systematic media education training for teachers. Even today, media education is in most cases taught by a few enthusiastic teachers who are concerned about the media. Given the prevalence of media in and influence over various aspects of society, once teachers are equipped with critical media literacy, they can even make good use of media-provided materials to critically analyze media content and the industry itself. Only after this balance between media education/educators and the media industry is re-established will the media's self-reinforcing circle be broken.

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