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Media Essentials: A Brief Introduction (2013)

Jennifer Hinkle

Patton College of Education, Department of Teacher Education, Ohio University, Athens, OH, USA

Media Essentials: A Brief Introduction, 2nd ed. Richard Campbell, Chris Martin, and Bettina Fabos. (2013). Boston: Bedford St. Martin's.

Media Essentials: A Brief Introduction, by Richard Campbell, Chris Martin, and Bettina Fabos, advances media literacy education by providing an instructional map for college-level media literacy education. With well-utilized text features and relevant, informative illustrations, *Media Essentials* provides an appealing and engaging read for both students and instructors, who will be able to use the text as the backbone of an introductory-level media literacy course.

From the first page of *Media Essentials*, readers are invited to think about media, defined as “songs, novels, newspapers, movies, Internet services, TV shows, magazines, and other products” (5) in critical and reflective terms. Does going without media mean “going without friends and family?” (3). What would a week without media feel like? “What roles and responsibilities do mass media have? What is our role in media processes?” (4). Such questions establish the crux of *Media Essentials*, a second edition to the 2010 version by the same authors, journalism professors with award-winning work in print and film.

The introductory chapter of *Media Essentials* briefly overviews the oral and written era of communication, and how these modes influenced the politics, religion, and socioeconomics of early societies. It quickly moves into contemporary times by addressing the digital era, media convergence, and theories about how we approach media in everyday life. In addition to getting students to think about life with and without media, the introductory chapter centers on the value of approaching media from a critical perspective, asking readers to consider issues such as the difference between

real news versus entertainment and the relationship between economics, media messages, and consumers. The introductory chapter sets the tone for the book by establishing media as a tool in the struggle for freedom of expression and democracy. Understanding media, then, requires understanding the often-inharmonious relationship among people, government, and business. *Media Essentials* tells that story.

Media Essentials divides sixteen chapters into three parts: mass media industries, which closely examines the history of media in its many forms; media framing industries, that is, advertising and public relations; and media expressions, which explores in-depth the culture of journalism, media economies, globalization, and research. The book's many illustrations are powerful and also tell a story about America and media, with images such as “The Soiling of Old Glory,” a black-and-white photo showing a white male using an American flag to attack an African American man in the 1970s, and a 1930s Walker Evans black-and-white portraying a Depression-era mother and child in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The inclusion of maps, charts, and tables, as well as a broadly diverse array of historical and pop culture icons ensures that *Media Essentials* stays relevant to the college demographic while providing multiple layers of educational content.

Media Essentials' emphasis on media literacy education begins at the end of the first chapter with a one-page direct-instruction lesson on “the critical process behind media literacy” which consists of five “overlapping stages” or skill acquisitions (25): description; analysis; interpretation; evaluation; and engagement. To reinforce these skills, each chapter includes practice prompts on media literacy processes and a one- or two-page media literacy case study highlighting the contributions of a person, group, or idea

to the field. Similar examples of media convergence are included in each chapter, with topics such as self-publishing, news aggregation, and fragmentation. These features complement the already dense content in each of *Media Essentials*' chapters.

The first chapters of *Media Essentials* present a comprehensive history of books, newspapers, and magazines, from papyrus to the development of online news and participatory journalism. More complex, though, is the relationship between publishing and democratic culture, which is the most essential purpose of media literacy. The authors weave together the many seemingly discrete parts of media and democracy—the technological revolutions that made media advancements possible, people's demands for and the processes of social and cultural change, and the sometimes dubious attempts to control these developments—into a story-like narrative burgeoning with themes of struggle, opportunity, and paradox.

Illuminating this narrative, for example, is the decline of the newspaper industry, which began as far back as the Great Depression. Describing newspapers as “still the most reliable source of investigative reporting and analysis” (83), the authors discuss the effects of shrinking readership (particularly among young adults), decreased competition, and the rise of digitized news on access to information and the political system. The discussion ends with questions that invite discussion and reflection: Will newspapers survive? Without newspapers, what does our future society look like? What does democracy look like?

The first four chapters establish media as a democratic force, reflecting the changing nature of technology and society. The theme continues into the next four chapters, addressing sound, radio, movies, and television—the mediums that changed entertainment and ushered in new forms of politics: pop culture as a form of expression; rock and roll as both a youth voice and source of conflict; and globalization in the form of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. Despite attempts to squelch the medium, pop adapted, becoming soul, folk, grunge, country, hip-hop, and a number of other genres. Similar to the print industry, the digital era introduced new possibilities, resulting in the decline of analog and changing the economic possibilities of music to pave the way for artists to share their music with the masses, but with risk to profit.

An important component of *Media Essentials* is the question of how new technologies, such as the development of the radio around 1900, was used to

control information. In many ways, questions about information control, ownership, stewardship, and the concern over profit, power, and the public good continue today, another theme deftly woven through *Media Essentials*' discussion of media in democracy. The medium critically manifesting questions about media in democracy is the Internet, the focus of chapter nine and said by the authors to have “transformed the way we do business, communicate, socialize, entertain ourselves, and get information” (265). Unique in its lack of regulation and ownership, the Internet spurred questions of security, privacy, and appropriateness in sharing information, while contributing heavily to the digital divide. The authors pose a critical question: “Does someone who lacks access to the Internet also lack access to the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities that come with living in a democratic society?” (284).

This edition of *Media Essentials* includes a new chapter on electronic gaming, a medium that is often overlooked or at best undervalued in media literacy discussions. The allotment of a chapter each to advertising and PR reveal the equally important contributions of these industries to a well-informed society. True to their background and ever focused on democratic values, the authors are even-handed and fair to the media framing industries, reporting for example, on journalistic skepticism of the PR profession—the omission of key facts—yet remind readers that, “deciding which facts to present is something journalists do, too” (374).

The last four chapters focus on “media expressions” through the culture of journalism, legal controls, the global marketplace, and approaches to media research. A few concepts, such as *conglomeration* and *specialization*, seem to be repetitive of earlier chapters. Overall, however, this section unites and elaborates upon earlier discussions. A chapter on “The Culture of Journalism,” for instance, deserves accolades for its own tying of the history of the press to the voices of democratic culture, further setting apart *Media Essentials* from other media literacy education books.

Although each chapter highlights legal milestones in the journey of free expression, chapter fourteen provides a deeper analysis of the most pivotal Supreme Court freedom of expression cases and their implications. The authors also offer interpretations of free expression and discuss topics such as censorship, libel, and the First and Sixth Amendments. The allocation of such important subjects near to the end of

the book does come as a surprise, but by understanding the industries so well first, the reader better understands the importance of these issues.

If there is any question about attention to issues of hegemony and imperialism, they are addressed in chapter fifteen, "Media Economics and the Global Marketplace," which explores the relationship between media economics and social issues. Setting the tone by establishing the transition to an information economy, the authors define terms such as *oligopoly* and *limited competition*. A deep analysis of media economics shows how business strategies, profit models, and government decisions affect not only money flow, but also the availability of entertainment, information, and indeed, values, lifestyles, and employment opportunities. Yet again, the delicate balance between money, control, and access follows a supply-demand pattern: if not laws, the dollar squelches attempts at control. Readers would be amiss to finish this chapter without a deep reflection on how their individual media habits influence not only their livelihoods, lifestyles, and values, but that of others as well.

Students will finish *Media Essentials* with a better understanding of the interplay of history, democracy, and media, and they are much more likely to recognize that their personal media choices are far from insignificant. If they actively participate in the media literacy practices and earnestly deliberate the themes and questions posed by Campbell, Martin, and Fabos, students will emerge with a transformed understanding of what it means to be both a media consumer and democratic citizen.