4

ethics/bias

Ethics, Bias, Controversy

<< The handicam revolution began in 1991, and brought with it new ethical dilemmas.

INTRODUCTION

In previous units, we have seen examples of the problematic or controversial aspects of communications technologies in the context of human rights. We've considered questions like: How do we know when information is reliable? What should we do about harmful uses of technology? Unit 4 provides a closer look at ethical issues and the question of media bias through an examination of "nefarious" uses of technology, the example of video as evidence in court, and an introduction to the media theories of Marshall McLuhan. We conclude with an exploration of future trends.

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>> During his time, McLuhan was considered a visionary, but rather psychedelic. Time has proven him right. Today, his analysis of media on society is far from fantasy, ringing hauntingly true.

key **quotes**

Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which humans communicate than by the content of the communication.

— Media guru Marshall McLuhan in **The Medium is the Massage**, written in 1967.

Technology has advanced to the point where the only limitation is in the imagination of the correspondent. Given access by the military and willpower of the people, we can pretty much go live from wherever we want. It's a scary thought.

— CBS News vice president for operations Frank Governale, commenting on journalism during the Iraq war, in **The New York Times**, March 24, 2003.

As a result of data overload from global e-mail, cell phones, computer faxes, Palm Pilots, the World Wide Web and 24-hour news operations, it's quite likely that we're both better-connected and less well-informed than ever in history.

— Gene Policinski of the **Freedom Forum**, an American organization dedicated to the promotion of free speech and freedom of the press, expresses a provocative view of the impact of technology.

There is a potential downside to this tidal wave of bad things that these little cameras allow us to experience. There are always going to be people with camcorder material who are flogging it to you with nefarious purposes.

— Documentary filmmaker Leslie Woodhead in **Seeing is Believing**.

Video technology can put in the hands of hundreds of thousands of people one of the most powerful fact-finding tools in the arsenal of law enforcement.

— Alan Tieger, prosecuting attorney at both the trial of the officers in the Rodney King case and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, in **Seeing is Believing**.

1. MARSHALL MCLUHAN AND MEDIA BIAS

McLuhan's Legacy

Legendary Canadian scholar and pop-culture icon Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) is responsible for many of the terms and ideas that we associate with communications technologies and the media. In fact, he popularized the term 'media' in reference to 'the means of mass communication'. What's really remarkable is that he imagined communications technology turning the world into a "global village" before the existence of personal computers or cell phones or even widely available television broadcasting.

"The medium is the message" is probably McLuhan's most famous quote. He believed that media are more than just passive systems that deliver information; they shape how we experience the world. Furthermore, each medium has its own characteristics that affect how we hear a 'message'. For example, reading a newspaper story about the war in Iraq is a different experience than seeing live video transmission of battles on CNN or from hearing the testimony of witnesses on a radio programme.

In the context of human rights, the choice of media used to communicate information has an important impact on both the participants in a campaign and their intended audience. Hundreds of thousands of people protesting in the streets — the 'medium' for delivering a message to the government—is a more powerful message to political leaders than the slogans on the protestors' placards. In the case of Nakamata members, their use of video affects both how they try to fight human rights abuses and how their situation is perceived by government officials and the public.

Activity 1: McLuhan said: "In an electronic information environment, minority groups can no longer be contained-ignored. Too many people know too much about each other. Our new environment compels commitment and participation" (The Medium is the Massage, 1967). It's true that media coverage of humanitarian crises has helped bring aid, for example, during famine in Ethiopia. But an ongoing bombardment of stories and images of suffering may lead to 'compassion fatigue', where people are no longer moved by the information. Use the following questions for reflection and class discussion:

1. Do you agree with the idea that knowing about injustice compels us to act? Explain your point of view. Besides information, what else might be needed engage people in a campaign?
2. In the case of human rights advocacy, what are your suggestions for avoiding 'compassion fatigue'?
3. Gene Policinski's quote at the beginning of this unit offers a darker view of the impact of having so much information coming at us via our technology. Explain his perspective. Do you agree with his point of view? What's your opinion?

Media Bias

McLuhan wrote about the 'bias' inherent in every form of media. Every media 'text' (the term used to describe any kind of communication), from Web sites to news reports to documentary films, also comes with a point of view or bias that is often not explicitly stated. In all of the units, we have seen examples of individuals or groups using media to advance a particular political or social goal, sometimes for harmful purposes.

Many media makers do try to provide two sides to a controversial issue. However, the reality is that there are frequently dozens of points of view. Here is a checklist of questions to help you critically evaluate any media 'text' and detect the bias or viewpoint of the media-maker:

1. What are the sources of the information? How would you assess their reliability and authenticity?
2. To what extent does the text present the beliefs of one particular group?
3. To what extent do the producers disclose their motives? What are the producers trying to achieve with their work?
4. Are there political, ideological and social points of view that a close analysis would reveal? Are different opinions or points of view presented? If so, how?
5. Who is in a position of power? Who is not?
6. Who is excluded? Why?
7. What stereotypes, if any, are used? What kind of impact do they have?

Activity 1: Apply the media bias checklist to either the film or Web site of **Seeing is Believing** and discuss your analyses. (Note: If you are not working with the film or Web site, evaluate the text, questions and activities of the **Teacher's E-Zine**.) Describe your reaction to whatever biases you may have detected. If you disagree with how information was presented, describe how you would have preferred that the producers present the material.

Activity 2: The last war on Iraq has provided a striking illustration of the "global village" experience as well as the 'bias' of different media outlets. Video phones, high-speed Internet links in the desert, portable satellite dishes, and laptop computers allowed viewers from Qatar to Vancouver to watch battles as they were happening. But some critics caution that all of this technology places pressure on journalists to report continuously, resulting in a lot of communication but not necessarily a lot of information.

Use the following questions for class discussion or a short written assignment.

1. What was your experience of following the war in the media? What kinds of media did you rely on for information? Did you watch reports from European news sources and Al Jazeera as well as North American sources? What TV/Web sites/newspapers/radio stations did you prefer?
2. Did you react differently to information when you saw it on TV versus reading it in the newspapers or getting it from Web sites or listening to the radio? If so, how?
3. Did you post any of your own information or opinions about the conflict on Web sites or list serves? What message did you try to convey? How did you tell the story?
4. Did you notice evidence of the 'bias' of different media outlets?
5. In this war, the world public had unprecedented access to images of what war looks like as it's being fought. What impact do you think that had on public opinion? Do you think that had an effect on how the war was fought?

<< During the first set of Rodney King Trials, the defense used the video tapes to successfully ague that the police officers were following procedure.

2. VIDEO IN COURT

The reliability of media content has become an important issue in the realm of justice and human rights, as amateur video becomes a powerful weapon in courts of law.

(Note: Stories on the trials of the officers in the Rodney King case and of the International Criminal Tribunal of the former Yugoslavia can be found on **seeingisbelieving.ca** in the 'Video' section under 'Handicam Revolution' and 'Timeline'.)

Rodney King and the Tape that Marked History

The 'Handicam Revolution' really began in 1991 when an amateur videographer captured the beating of Rodney King by a group of Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers. The dark, grainy video was shown around the world and provoked outrage at what appeared to be undeniable evidence of extreme police brutality. But when the officers went to trial on charges of assault with a deadly weapon and excessive use of force, lawyers for both the prosecution and the defense interpreted the video in different ways. By slowing down the tape and breaking it into segments, the defense was able to convince the jury that the actions of the officers were justifiable reactions to the way Rodney King was behaving, which could be perceived as dangerous or threatening. The 'not guilty' verdict sparked massive riots in L.A. The tape was used again in a second trial, and this time the officers were convicted.

Activity 1: View the Rodney King video and do some research on the trials. (Note: The video clip is widely available on the Web, or you can view excerpts from the Court TV video *The Rodney King Case: What the Jury Saw in California v. Powell*. The story is also available on **seeingisbelieving.ca** in the 'Video' section.)

• Conduct a trial of your own based on the video evidence, with a defense team, a prosecution team, and the rest of the class acting as jury.

• Discuss how you came to the conclusions you did. How did your perceptions of the video change from the first time you viewed, if at all? What's your 'verdict' on the use of video as evidence in a court of law?

<< At the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, permanent video monitors have been installed in the high tech court rooms.

Video Evidence in War Crimes Tribunals

Photographs, satellite images, and amateur video have played a crucial role in the prosecution of war criminals at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). For example, video footage of the Serbian army invading a Bosnian Muslim town helped lead to the first conviction of genocide at the court in the case of General Radislav Krstic. Video also plays an important role in the trial of former Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic. But Milosevic and his supporters claim that the footage was faked or manipulated, and he has offered video of his own to counter the prosecution. He also says that the court is not 'legitimate'.

(Note: For more on this story, see 'Storyboard' in the 'Video' section of **seeingisbelieving.ca.** Detailed information on the case is available on the ICTY Web site at www.un.org/icty/pressreal/p609-e.htm.)

Activity 1: A permanent International Criminal Court (ICC) is now being set up with a mandate of promoting the rule of law and prosecuting international 'crimes against humanity' like genocide (deliberate extermination of a people or nation). Opponents of the ICC claim that it is not a legitimate way to bring criminals to justice.

• Research the background of the ICC and the debates over its purpose and legitimacy. Discuss your views, considering questions about the need for such a court, the universality of justice, and ways to ensure fairness.

• Examine some examples of famous international war crimes cases, such as the Nuremberg trials and the Milosovic case at the ICTY.

• Make a list of potential candidates that you think could or should be tried at the ICC.

• Divide the class into prosecution and defense and make the case for or against bringing each candidate to trial. Who did the class decide to try?

• Decide whether you would allow amateur video as evidence in your court.

(Note: Good research info is available at the ICC site at www.icc-cpi.int/, the ICTY site at www.un.org/icty/, and Court TV at www.courttv.com. Also view the Academy Award-winning 1961 fictional film *Judgment at Nuremberg* or the 2002 documentary *The Trials of Henry Kissinger*.)

3. "NEFARIOUS" USES OF COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES

Amateur video helps bring war criminals to justice, but it can be used for harmful or controversial purposes as well. Among the examples in **Seeing is Believing**: a right-wing militia group in the US makes educational videos that show how to arm one's child; Al Qaeda distributes videos to recruit young men to the cause; and Heaven's Gate cult members videotape their farewell messages before committing mass suicide. On **seeingisbelieving.ca**, examples of controversial uses of other communications technologies are also described: in the Middle East, Palestinian bombers adapt cell phones for use as triggering devices, and Israeli agents allegedly used an exploding cell phone to assassinate a leading Palestinian militant; in Turkey, the Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan is captured abroad and repatriated to face trial when intelligence agencies of several governments locate him by tracking his cell phone activity.

1. Can you think of examples of cell phones, video or other communication technologies being used in controversial or harmful ways in your community? Describe them. (Note: Some examples are hate sites on the Internet, or the monitoring of cell phone or Internet activity for the purpose of surveillance.)
2. What steps have been taken to address this issue, for example, through legislation? Do you agree with the approach that has been taken?
3. How would you like to see the issue addressed? Think of at least three methods of combating the use of communications technologies for harmful purposes and/or protecting people from their effects. Some examples are advocating for changes to legislation, using various media to educate people, organizing public protests, working with police to track down offenders.
4. What are the trade-offs that might be a consequence of addressing this problem? For example, in protecting people from hate messages, are you compromising the right to freedom of expression?

Activity 1: In his quote at the beginning of this unit, filmmaker Leslie Woodhead describes how some videographers try to have their footage circulated and shown for potentially harmful purposes. One current example is the broadcast of Osama bin Laden videos, which some US officials want to censor because they believe the tapes contain hidden messages to his followers to conduct terrorist attacks. Choose an example from **Seeing is Believing** or **seeingisbelieving.ca** of video footage intended for what you consider harmful purposes and use the following questions for class discussion:
1. What did the videographer hope to accomplish by distributing and showing this footage? What impact do you think this footage could have on viewers who see it on the nightly news?
2. Do you think this material should be censored (prevented from being shown, wholly or in part)? Are there some media contexts that should be censored more than others, for example, television news versus Internet sites? How do you judge what material should be censored and what can be shown? Who should decide?
3. In any media environment, video footage that is presented in a news story is placed in some kind of context through the use of narration or text. If your chosen footage is going to be shown on the news or through other media, imagine what kind of contextual info you would provide for it.
(Note: If you are not working with the **Seeing is Believing** film or Web site, students can research these stories on the Web.)

4. FUTURE TRENDS

Bridging the Digital Divide

Marshall McLuhan first talked about the way that communications technologies are turning the world into a "global village" almost 40 years ago. The advances of the last decades, from computers to cell phones to international television broadcasting, create more and more opportunities for people around the world to connect. However, not everyone in our global village has the same access to these tools.

The term 'Digital Divide' refers to the division between those who have access to modern communication technologies and those who don't. The term can refer to greater versus lesser-industrialized countries, urban versus rural populations, differences among people of different socio-economic classes, and even among people of differing levels of physical or mental abilities. These categories are often interlinked.

Human rights organizations like Witness aim to bridge the 'Digital Divide' by offering equipment, training and support to individuals and grassroots organizations (locally-based organizations of citizens) around the world that are doing human rights advocacy. (Note: The work of Witness is discussed in **Seeing is Believing** and in various locations on **seeingisbelieving.ca**.) The Grameen Village Phone program, discussed in Unit 2, is another example. In this case, a corporation, a non-profit organization and the government work together to provide technology in places without a well-developed communications infrastructure (the basic framework and facilities needed for a system to function). (Note: In the 'Technology' section of **seeingisbelieving.ca**, see the Bangladesh story in 'Cell Phones'.)

Activity 1: Divide up into small groups and do some Web research on the Digital Divide. Choose a group or population that faces barriers to access to communications technologies as a 'case study'. You can choose a group from your own community, or a national or international example. Some ideas: a local school that cannot afford up-to-date computer equipment; a lesser-industrialized country; a rural population or other community lacking the funds or infrastructure; people with physical or mental disabilities. (Note: There are many examples on the Witness Web site.)

• Provide a brief description of your group or population. What kind of communications technologies do they have access to and what can they not access? What are the barriers that prevent them from having access? What, if any, efforts have they made to overcome those barriers?

• Come up with a strategy to help overcome barriers to access, giving three or more suggestions for action. This could include: different kinds of efforts aimed at changing government policy; finding ways to raise money for equipment; identifying companies that could provide equipment or adapt their equipment to make it more accessible; partnering with human rights organizations like Witness, et cetera.

>> At a state-of-the-art trade fair in New York City, Gillian Caldwell, director of Witness, seeks out the latest in new communications technology.

Convergence and the Wireless World

Cell phones used to be just for talking. Now you can use them to send text messages, play games, get your e-mail, and transmit video. This is an example of 'convergence' – the merging and linking of different kinds of communications technologies. In **Seeing is Believing**, Joey Lozano is demonstrating the concept when he takes digital video footage of an attack on Nakamata in the Philippines, downloads it onto his computer for editing, and uploads the edited footage onto the Witness Web site in New York or gives it to a television show for national broadcast.

Digital technologies help convergence occur because information is stored in a format that is compatible on different kinds of equipment, like in the case of digital video being downloaded from a camcorder to a computer, or transmitted from a video-equipped cell phone. Wireless technologies are also contributing to convergence because it's easier and easier to send information from one piece of equipment to another without any physical link between them.

Activity 1: Research current advances in communications technologies. Look at what kinds of new products are being invented and what kinds of new developments are being predicted. Then take another look at one of the groups or communities that you researched in a previous unit and the human rights issue that they are fighting for. Imagine:
- how some of the technological advances might benefit that group's human rights campaign.
- what suggestions you could make to incorporate some of these new tools (or new functions on existing equipment) into the group's communication strategy.
- how convergence applies in this case.
- if you were to design a new piece of equipment or new function on existing equipment that could help that group, what would it be?

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE 1/3
We'd like your feedback about the Teacher's E-Zine to the Digital Revolution!

Course title:_____Grade level:_____ Number of students in your class:_____ .
Dates of term (dd/mm/yyyy): _____ to _____
City, town, region, or community that your school is located in: _____ .

Optional:
Your name:_____
Name of your school: _____
Contact information:_____

Which Units did you use? (Check all applicable)
❑ Unit 1: The Film   ❑ Unit 2: Democracy   ❑ Unit 3:Indigenous   ❑ Unit 4: Ethics/Bias

Did you use the Teacher's E-Zine in conjunction with the film Seeing is Believing and the Web site seeingisbelieving.ca? (Check one)
❑   Both the film and the Web site   ❑   Just the film
❑   Just the Web site   ❑   Neither

1. Objectives
1.1 The objective of the Teacher's E-Zine to the Digital Revolution is to help educators and their students explore the use of communications technologies in human rights contexts, and the social, ethical, cultural and political issues they engender.

How would you rate the Teacher's E-Zine in terms of meeting these objectives?
❑ Excellent ❑ Very Good   ❑ Good   ❑ Satisfactory   ❑ Unsatisfactory
Comments: _____
_____
_____

1.2 A secondary objective of the Teacher's E-Zine is to provide educators with a companion resource for working with the film Seeing is Believing and the Web site seeingisbelieving.ca. (Answer if applicable)

Was the Teacher's E-Zine a useful resource for working with the film Seeing is Believing?
❑ Very useful   ❑ Somewhat useful   ❑ Not useful
Comments:_____
_____
_____

Was the Teacher's E-Zine a useful resource for working with the Web site seeingisbelieving.ca?
❑ Very useful   ❑ Somewhat useful   ❑ Not useful
Comments:_____
_____
_____

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE 2/3

2. Content

2.1 Was the material appropriate for the grade you were teaching?

❏ Very appropriate   ❏ Somewhat appropriate   ❏ Not appropriate

Comments:_____

_____

_____

2.2 Was the material appropriate for your course curriculum?

❏ Very appropriate   ❏ Somewhat appropriate   ❏ Not appropriate

Comments:_____

_____

_____

2.3 Was the material presented in a manner that was easy to work with?

❏ Very easy   ❏ Somewhat easy   ❏ Not easy

Comments:_____

_____

_____

3. Activities

3.1 Relevance

Did you find the activities relevant for the subject matter you were teaching?

❏ Very relevant   ❏ Relevant   ❏ Not relevant

Which activities were most useful for the course you were teaching?

Which activities were least useful for the course you were teaching?

Comments: _____

_____

_____

3.2 Student Engagement

In general, were students engaged and interested in the activities?

❏ Very engaged   ❏ Somewhat engaged   ❏ Not very engaged

Which activities did students most enjoy?

Which activities were they least engaged in?

Comments:_____

_____

_____

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE 3/3

4. General

4.1 Do you think that it is important to teach students about communications technologies and human rights?

❑ Very important   ❑ Somewhat important   ❑ Not important

Comments:_____
_____
_____

4.2 Would you like to see more resources for teachers on the subject of communications technologies and human rights?

❑ Yes   ❑ No

If 'Yes', what kinds of resources would you like to see?

Comments:_____
_____
_____

4.3 Would you recommend the Teacher's E-Zine to the Digital Revolution to other teachers?

❑ Yes   ❑ No

If 'No', why not?

Comments:_____
_____
_____

4.4 Please suggest ways that the Teacher's E-Zine could be improved. Alternatively, please suggest ways that future guides on the subject could be improved.

_____
_____

4.5 General comments_____
_____
_____
_____

Thank you.   Please mail to:

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ADDITIONAL PROJECT AND RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

1. If you'd like to learn more about Marshall McLuhan, take a look at the following resources: biographies *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* by Philip Marchand or the short, fascinating and rather subjective biography *Wise Guy* by Judith Fitzgerald; Paul Levinsons' commentary *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium* (Routledge, 1999); NFB video *McLuhan's Wake* (Kevin McMahon, 2002). A good collection of his writings can be found in *Essential McLuhan* (Basic Books, 1996).

In many ways, McLuhan's theories and ideas are more applicable to contemporary society than they were when he was writing in the 60's and 70's. Read or view one of the works listed above and describe how his ideas apply to your experience with communications technologies.

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SHARE your opinion of
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Fill out our **QUESTIONNAIRE!!**
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