Mary Blanton

EAD 860 – Unit 8 and Final Essay

Prompt 1:

As Todd Gitlin reminds his readers many times throughout *Media Unlimited*, it is nearly impossible to escape media today. We are bombarded by images, news, and sound-bytes, so even trying to turn away and ignore media would be a full-time job. Instead, it is important to embrace its existence, but carefully choose the way media invades our lives. Gitlin tries to categorize certain types of people who navigate the media by various means. I imagine very few people solely fall into one category, though the majority are a mix of the varied navigational styles. While I have traits similar to those of "The Fan" and "The Content Critic," I have come to find myself most closely related to "The Ironist."

The Fan: Just recently I spent a crazed half an hour of my morning buying tickets to the Austin City Limits Music Festival. This three day festival happens in October, though the producers of the event have created such a buzz that tickets sell out quickly six months beforehand. Because I am a "fan" of music and I have attended this festival in the past, the promoters sent me an email telling me if I updated my online information, I could get in early on a pre-sale in order to obtain my tickets. Do I have any idea who is playing at this festival? No. The lineup of artists is not released until May – well after all of the tickets have been sold. Nevertheless, I signed up, got online early in the morning, and secured my tickets. There was no way I was going to miss out on the possibility of seeing/experiencing this spectacular event – or so the promoters say.

I know because of past experience, websites, and other "fan" acknowledgement, this festival is worth the money and time I will spend. Each year I attend, I learn about new bands I've never heard before who quickly become new "favorites." I feel that I am privileged enough the spend three days sharing an experience with 80,000 people with whom I share common interests. Ultimately, this event is used, not only to promote new up-and-coming bands, but also for companies such as Intel, AMD, Xbox, Livestrong and others to cater to a captive audience. Knowing full well how involved media is in this production, I choose to ignore the negatives because the "fan" in me wants the experience.

The Content Critic: As Gitlin points out, "Content critics commonly take the media to task for defining how things are or ought to be in ways that they believe unduly influence, if not their independent-minded selves then all those credulous others" (138). Being an English teacher, and one focused mainly on rhetoric, I feel it my obligation to my students to make them aware of the bias and "tricks" of media. Instead of blindly following trends, I want my students to question the stereotypes and generalizations played out in all media forms. I want them to figure out exactly how shows, advertisements, and news can influence their beliefs, especially of social and cultural issues.

I have also come to realize that the content critic in me seeks the truth from media. When I watch shows like "Mad Men," "The Wire," or "The Sopranos," I often spend time researching the information presented by the producers. In turn, I am able to learn about cultures and time periods in a more realistic fashion than the shows' interpretations. I also often expect that the news I hear from "credible"

sources (CNN, BBC, *The New York Times*, etc.) is truthful and accurate, though I am well aware of its bias. Therefore, I find myself seeking multiple perspectives of current issues to ensure that I am well informed and knowledgeable – even though I know that I have to sift through and try to critique each perspective I come across in order to gain my own understanding of events.

The Ironist: While "the fan" and "content critic" in me are small portions of my overall styles of media navigation, I am truly an "ironist." However, one could make the argument that a mix of a fan and a content critic is the make-up of an ironist. I have come to realize that I enjoy certain aspects of media, while at the same time, I am aware of how different aspects of media work. As Gitlin wrote of ironists, "She reads *People* or *Vanity Fair*, follows gossip columns, wants to know what Julia Roberts, George W. Bush, or Dan Rather is *really* like, but makes a point of knowing that their images are fabricated…" (151). It is no secret that those in the spotlight play "roles," and some play these roles because they can make money. Though, if these forms of media are taken as entertainment, or if the bias is recognized, then there is no harm in participating in the entertainment or riding the wave.

I am also able to see the humorous side of media. Shows like *The Daily Show* and *Family Guy*, which satirize American life and show the sometimes absurd nature of media, allow a different look at the stereotypes and generalizations of daily happenings. There is also irony in the fact that I may tend to believe more of what Jon Stewart says about politics over a career politician. Along with the television and media I devour, as a teacher, I also have a desire to want to connect with my students on a level other than that of an authority figure. I try to stay on top of new trends, famous figures, teen obsessions with new books, television shows, and musicians – some of which I tend to like, or I can at least understand the draw for high school students. By learning about these various forms of media, I can help my students connect, say, Shakespeare to Eminem.

In exploring different navigational styles, Todd Gitlin is able to point out that learning about and through the media can come in a variety of ways, as long as people are not closed off to and unaware of the impact that media can have on society.

2. How can the implications for the learning society of *Media Unlimited* and other Unit 8 resources be addressed by individuals, educational (and perhaps other) institutions, and government?

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As Todd Gitlin writes in *Media Unlimited*, "There is no repealing the technologies that spray images on our walls, graft stories onto our screens, sing songs into our headphones. There is no diversion from the seduction and clamor, the convenience and irritation of media" (206). Knowing that technology is moving forward and not ceasing to try and encapsulate a global audience, individuals, educational institutions, and governments need to embrace the "progress" of media and technology and figure out a way to harness its powers for the learning society. Since all evidence points to the strengthening of media and technology, all individuals and institutions need to take it upon themselves to figure out a way to create a system for sifting through the torrent of information, create a way for technology and media to enhance human connection and interaction, and create access for all.

Because of the speed of technology and the ever-increasing vaults of readily available information, Christine Rosen points out that people today are being asked more and more to become better at multitasking – something which tends to create inattention and less depth of understanding. As she writes in "The Myth of Multitasking," "Today, our collective will to pay attention seems fairly weak." As individuals, we have to be aware of the dangers of multitasking. In an effort to stave off the desire to move from phone messages to emails to the Internet, there needs to be an incentive to stay focused. Currently, there is great satisfaction for individuals to move from task to task and starting something new before the old is done. However, as Rosen also points out, "given what neuroscience and anecdotal evidence have shown us, this state of constant intentional self-distraction could well be of profound detriment to individual and cultural well-being." If that satisfaction is somehow erased or quelled, either by employers, teachers, or individuals themselves, and others are praised and rewarded for their focus and attention to detail, then maybe it is possible that the adverse effects of multitasking can be reversed.

In addition to individuals monitoring their own focus, educational institutions need to allow students the opportunity to learn in a variety of capacities – specifically through formal and informal education. In order to allow the positive aspects of multitasking to shine, a focused purpose needs to be present. Nicholas Burbules explains in "Self-Educating Communities" that students need a purpose for acquiring knowledge and information outside of the context of a traditional classroom. He writes, "The ongoing dynamic of participation in the group, through processes of discussion, debate, and information sharing, is where education happens" (282). Students need to learn how to sift through the information they encounter in a more focused and intentional way. Even through formal or informal online education, a purpose must be present for gathering relevant information.

Gitlin, in turn, spends a fair amount of his book focused on the speed at which we are moving and given information. While the majority of the chapter, "Speed and Sensibility" seems to criticize the rate at which media is moving, he also points out that, "a speed-up is not an automatic defeat for good prose or vivid rhetoric," and he sites the relatively few words of the Gettysburg Address (97). In terms of communication, condensed information, whether it is fewer words on a page, bullet points, or summaries of longer works, allows individuals to plow through the incredible amounts of information at

a much quicker pace. In a way, the learning society is becoming more efficient in terms of seeking out relevant information for any inquiries.

Another implication for the learning society is the lack of human connection and interaction, or maybe a false sense of human connection. Robert Putnam explains that, "There is reason to believe that deep-seated technological trends are radically "privatizing" or "individualizing" our use of leisure time and thus disrupting many opportunities for social-capital formation." While Putnam's statement may be accurate, it does not mean that the learning society cannot form social-capital online. Technology can and has been used to spread information and create involvement more rapidly and to a broader range of individuals.

In another aspect of human connection, Lowell Monke writes in "The Human Touch," "There is a huge qualitative difference between learning about something, which requires only information, and learning from something, which requires that the learner enter into a rich and complex relationship with the subject at hand." Using online resources can richly support a more concrete experience. Monke uses the example of learning about a tree by touch and seeing a tree up close, and while nothing can replace authentic experiences, using the Internet to learn even more about trees can be beneficial to individuals and students alike.

Access for all is another implication surrounding the learning society. Nicholas Burbules points this out in "Self-Educating Communities" by saying in his closing paragraph that, "unfortunately, I think we must remind ourselves of people around the world who have no access to these sorts of online educational interactions and opportunities." It is imperative that citizens around the world have equal opportunities to learn and seek information. Whether or not someone comes from a developed nation should not determine their ability to learn. In the speech that Tim Berners-Lee gave, he says, "The role of mobile technology in the poorest regions of the world merits particular attention." He goes on to tell of a man who was able to provide opportunities for his village by learning English over the Internet. If the World Wide Web Foundation believes that part of its mission is to, "extend the Web's benefits to all people on the planet," then governments should step up to address the infrastructure problems.

In conclusion, it is a fair assumption that the majority of the developed world is moving at a faster and faster pace. That pace does not, however, automatically undermine the goals of a learning society, whatever they may be for various individuals. While technology and a plethora of information create certain implications for learners, a balance can be achieved through purposeful and directed learning.