

The Golden Age of Education that Never Was

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Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Rolin Moe's blog](#) on June 1, 2015.



The history of edutainment, a mid-20th Century portmanteau used to describe the mix of broadcast contents with an educational context, is a fascinating field, and Audrey Watters' [Story of The Learning Channel](#) is an important addition to a critical reader on the relationship of broadcast media, ownership rights and the education superstructure. Noting how the current state of ~~The Learning Channel~~ TLC evokes responses of, "[Remember when it was called The Learning Channel](#)," Audrey presents the history of the infrastructure which created what was a public-public partnership between government agencies to provide satellite-based educational television (conceptualized in the 1960s, partnered with more public agencies and enacted in the early 1970s), and how *public-public* became *public-private* became *private* became *a host of barrel-scraping reality TV fare*. It is an excellent read.

The article ends with questions to consider when engaging broadcast television, education, edutainment and the other terms and subfields that inhabit this realm:

- *Who owns the “pipes”? Who owns the means by which content is transmitted? Who owns the satellites? Who owns the spectrum? Who owns the cables? Who owns the network?*
- *What do we mean by “educational content”? In particular, how has our definition of “documentary” changed over the last few decades? How does this shape what media – in form and in content – enters the classroom?*
- *How have regional educational agencies and distance education providers – particularly those offering for-credit classes – been affected by the commercialization of content and delivery?*
- *How has education become increasingly commercialized? How might education on the Internet and via various computer technologies be following down that very path taken by education on cable TV?*

This topic intersects with my emerging research; I am thankful to Audrey for this discussion and the energy behind it. I would like to join the conversation as part of an emergent discussion.

In 2014, [Coursera announced a partnership with Curiosity.com](#), a start-up launched from within Discovery Communications, whom Coursera heralded as the parent company of Discovery and Animal Planet. (Note: [in November Curiosity.com spun off and away](#) from the Discovery Communications paternity) At the time, [I blogged about the partnership](#), briefly touching on the histories of Discovery and The Learning Channel, as well as the media conglomerate that would form from their 1990s merger/acquisition and growth. I framed this in the context of edutainment, which took me down a whirlwind of Disney history, resulting in [scholarship on the relationship between](#) the learning objects/resources of the OER movement, edutainment, and the ‘free-as-in-beer’ resources one finds in Coursera/edX/curiosity.com. The expansion of this research continues; at the present I am [adopting a postmodern lens](#) to look at the history of broadcast contents within education, in their utilitarian existence as well as their social/political/cultural/philosophical/power contexts too.

Why postmodernism? There are a number of reasons, but in the context of this debate I have more and more seen a complex historical relationship between public and private interests in education, and power struggles that may seem new are in fact deep-rooted, perhaps to the point that they are foundational to the infrastructure of compulsory education. For example, Walt Disney is credited with the term *edutainment* [as far back as 1946](#). Often this is related [to the development of the True Life series of nature videos](#), which played as bumpers in cinema houses prior to featured shows. However, Disney was in the classroom in 1946.

[Watch the video](#)

[The story of The Story of Menstruation](#) is fascinating; at its briefest, it is a 1946 partnership between Disney and Kotex, one which 1.5 million students likely watched. [From one perspective](#), it was an attempt to bring modern and accurate science into sexual education courses, for the benefit of schoolchildren. From another, it was an opportunity [to use an existing film mechanism \(Disney’s WWII propaganda section\)](#) to roll out contents for school children. And from a third, it was an early introduction of commercial partnerships in the world of education (Kotex, a co-sponsor of the film, was the #2 feminine hygiene product at the time to Proctor & Gamble’s Tampax). There are also existing critiques [along lines of gender, class and power](#), and we are potentially building a pedagogical critique here.

If we agree with John Modell and Madeline Goodman, two sociologists of adolescence who argue in ‘[Historical Perspectives](#)’ (At the Threshold: The Developing Adolescent; 1990) that high school as compulsory becomes part of the American ethos in the early 1930s (in part due to the Great Depression and the lack of work options for children of lower classes), there is scant time between the establishment of high school as a space of equity and the private sector’s involvement in contents and curriculum. This throws into question [ideas of a Golden Age of education with heavy public backing](#); while the increases made via the GI Bill, the Higher Education Act, and the Civil Rights Act all are designed to be legislations to promote equity, the equity is not in a sacrosanct public good as much in a negotiated space of public good and private enterprise (and, when 1958 rolls around, [a space of crisis and in need of more management](#)).

This harkens back to a longstanding debate in distance (and ergo online) education. Is the development draped in equity; after all, distance ed enabled a greater number of citizens to engage educational attainment than previously in

history? Or is it draped in pragmatism, indicative of an industrial age allowing low cost of production and a penny post to pass materials back and forth? This is problematic because we cannot easily abstract one from the other – the equity argument is in lockstep with the pragmatic argument, meaning equity for upward mobility is wedded somewhat to career growth and industrialization.

I look at early documentaries – not just titles like the seminal documentary *Nanook of the North* ([questioned as to its historical accuracy versus a creation of reality](#)), but even to the very earliest film work from Thomas Edison and *Sandow the Strongman* – and I wonder how much of documentary has ever been, well, document as objective. Documentary is a contradiction in terms, because every filmmaker has the power of camera and the power of edit. Even Frederick Wiseman, arguably the most important cinema verite documentarian (whose two films on schooling, *High School* and *At Berkeley*, are some of the best works of film ever IMO), gets to choose what to film and what to cut even if his style is to not ‘interject himself’ into the subject matter. The educational contents of the original Learning Channel, those 1970s course contents, are markedly different from the Histori-docs produced on the Discovery Communications networks (and there’s a space to critique the History Channel/University of Oklahoma relationship here too). But before we bemoan the change, we need to identify what it is we are really looking for. Documentary film is largely ideology – at its most base that ideology looks like *Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo*, but I would argue there is a lot more similarity than difference when comparing TLC shows to the documentary work of Davis Guggenheim, Morgan Spurlock or even Michael Moore. The technicalities of documentary have certainly changed and allowed for greater production elements to hold attention; I would question the idea that those elements have led to less robust documentaries or if perhaps it just illuminates a deficiency of the form.

How does this relate to the world of broadcast educational contents? I think about [the history of Encyclopedia Britannica with educational filmstrips in the 1940s and 1950s](#), and the lack of favor such artifacts held in the 1970s and 1980s (to the point many of the originals were thrown in dumpsters rather than preserved or archived), the renaissance of television in the classroom in the 1990s with Channel One and Cable in the Classroom, [the politics behind their commercialization or their ties to industry](#), their eventual recession from classrooms, Khan Academy or MOOC du jour today – and when I hold all of this in my head, I am left with the feeling not only that we are reinventing a flat tire in education, but that the *education ideal* as public good and upward mobility is faulty too, that education may in some cases have been able to lift people up but this was never the design and never the intention of this superstructure.

This is a loaded statement which deserves unpacking, much can be found throughout blogs here and elsewhere, and will continue. The question I propose: as we critique education and question the models/instruments/statements/proclamations made today, should we also question some of the most core assumptions we have made about the function and purpose of education?



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