

In Conversation with John Culkin

by Maria P. Robbins

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[EDITOR'S NOTES: From Television & Children Journal, summer 1981. Much of this article describes Dr. Culkin's interests outside of Unifon. The entire article is reprinted here to help us understand his philosophical perspective, his wide range of interests, and how he merged Unifon into the "big picture" of media study.]

Television & Children: You have long been recognized as a leading media specialist and a strong advocate of visual literacy. What excited your interest in the field?

JOHN M. CULKIN: My early training and interests were in English literature and education. While I was teaching high school English on the late fifties, I had an honors class of high school seniors and I was allowed to teach anything I wanted for six months. I decided that we were going to do nothing but Shakespeare. I don't quite remember why I decided this, but, in fact, I announced that in six months we were going to read *all* the plays. The normal procedure would have been to

take three months just to read Macbeth, and I didn't want that. So I said to the kids, "Let's get the *flavor* of this stuff. Let's plow right through. After all, this was popular entertainment in its day, and people did not know all the words, and they didn't get all the jokes, but the thing swept them along."

So we went ahead and did two plays a week. On weekdays we read the serious plays—doing an act a day—and on weekends we read the historical plays and comedies—quickly—just running through them, checking off sentences that seemed particularly nice, things like that. Well, it turned out to be the single most exciting teaching experience I'd ever had.

At the same time that we were reading the plays, I looked around to find where they were being produced...in the theater, on film and TV. It turned out to be a very interesting period, because there was a *Hamlet* on TV, and we saw a couple of plays and the Olivier films. I remember particularly that after we had been to a screening of *Henry V*, one of my brightest students came up to me and said, "Now I understand what it's all about." The film had come closer to the core of the experience. After all, Shakespeare did not write books to be read, but rather dramas to be performed. This student had started me on the path to becoming a media teacher rather than just an English teacher. Shakespeare was experienced differently in the non-print media. Content was not all. The medium

Dr. John Culkin, Director of the Center for Understanding Media at the New School for Social Research, is a writer and scholar in the field of media studies. Dr. Culkin recently shared his views on children and media with Maria P. Robbins, Contributing Editor, Television & Children.

was a difference...an enjoyable, compelling difference.

Later on that year, I took a group of kids to Boston to look at colleges. We had a few hours of free time and we went to see a film called *La Strada*. I had heard that it was pretty good—so we just went. Well, very quickly that became a second benchmark, because we ended up talking about that film for hours...for days. And for the rest of the year, in addition to doing Shakespeare and looking at Shakespeare films, we also started to regularly look at what I called “real movies,” like *La Strada*.

Anyway, I became very interested in the teaching possibilities of including films as part of a liberal education, as an extension of the way you treat narrative fiction. I started to write about it; I went to Harvard and did my doctorate there. For my doctoral thesis I developed a curriculum on high school film criticism, and for three months taught it at Newton South High School. Naturally it was a brilliant success! I went on to Fordham University to set up a program to train teachers to deal with film—later on television was added—but at the time it was only film. Then came another important benchmark. Somebody gave me an article to read by a writer named H. Marshall McLuhan. When I read it, I knew that there was a different kind of mind looking at the data. It was very refreshing after all the statisticians and pious preachers about the media. I became very involved in McLuhan’s work, met him and we became collaborators. And so I moved from being an English teacher who had an interest in film to perceiving the whole field of communication as an organized field for study that included everything from gesture and dance to the more

traditional arts, including film and television.

At Fordham I started the Center for Communications, where we did a lot of teacher training, publishing, and we ran a lot of conferences. Of course, there had been people working in the area of what we called “film study” all along, but they tended to be very negative and moralistic. And while there was a fair amount of film teaching going on in the colleges, the approach was very academic: the art of..., and the history of..., and also the purely practical aspects of filmmaking. Well, I didn’t want film study in high schools to go in that direction. Film is an exciting and interesting medium—you go because you want to go. So why give the teachers a chance to spoil it by putting the wrong sort of pedagogy on it? We had too often done that to Shakespeare. Perhaps with film we could do it right.

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I perceived the study of film and television not only as a new area in the curriculum but also as an opportunity for a new kind of teaching—a teaching that would not be didactic, that would not be proscriptive and prescriptive. It would be based not on film, but on *film as experience*, on what the emotional response of the kids to the film was. So while most of my work was aimed at

getting films and television on the high school agenda as legitimate topics for study, I felt it was not important to get them on in a different way. It was important to find a way to teach these things without losing the excitement.

When I left Fordham in 1969 I incorporated my own not-for-profit organization, The Center for Understanding Media, named after McLuhan's book. We were affiliated with Antioch College and started a master's program in media studies there, and when the three-year charter in New York State ran out, we moved the program into the New School where it is now. And there I was until two years ago when I left to do my own research and writing.

T&C: Tell us about the Center for Understanding Media.

JMC: The Center was engaged in an organized approach to things we are talking about—communication, arts, education and young people. Increasingly my interest was directed toward younger and younger children, because it's more important what happens to kids at younger ages. Anyway, besides the graduate program I already mentioned, we also started the "Artists in the Schools" program in film and television with the National Endowment for the Arts and trained filmmakers and teachers in elementary and secondary schools in 44 states around the country. That was a successful program and the idea of kids making films in the company of professional film artists was good for a lot of copy in the press. This, of course, helped to get the subject legitimized in the school systems. We did that for five years, brought it to a level of self-sufficiency and then the Endowment

took it over, which was part of the original plan.

We originated the design and produced the first five films for the American Short Story series. Then that became a separate activity.

We had a National Young People's Film Festival and a National Young People's Radio Festival where kids around the country made films and radio programs and submitted them to public TV and radio stations around the country. The local stations made selections and broadcast the best films and radio programs. Finally we made a couple of national TV specials that consisted of the best of the films from around the country.

Along with all this we reviewed most of the then existing short films for children and produced a book called "Films Kids Like" published by the American Library Association. Then we handed all the film activity over to Maureen Gaffney who started the Media Center for Children, which is going beautifully to this day. So the Center has really been a catalytic agent and most of the activities of the Center are now parceled out. I decided that the time had come for me to leave to do my own research and writing.

T&C: What direction is your work taking now?

JMC: It is focused on reading! So of course, people say, "Oh, you're not in the media anymore, you're in reading?"

But as McLuhan and I have been saying for 20 years now, print is a medium; and film is a medium; TV is a medium. They're all media.

But it's interesting. I started out being a literature teacher trying to get people interested in the new media; now I'm perceived as a new media person trying

to get people interested in literature. So in a sense, I've come full circle.

"The medium is the message," said brother McLuhan. And if I approach reading from the experience I have gained as a media analyst there are certain questions that I have to ask that I would ask about any medium. What is print supposed to do? Is it doing it? And I look at the audience and analyze that. Who is the client and what do they have going for them as they come to the study of this medium? Let's look at the reading client. The student who comes to reading in first grade in American schools has watched five or six thousand hours of television. This is a different child from the child in the year 1900.

T&C: How different are children today?

JMC: Well, they've got expanded interests, they've got some psychological habits from TV—they want to be fed stuff, they want to process it quickly, they can get passive on you, their attention span is hard to maintain. These things are all there. But the other thing that's there is that their vocabularies are enormously expanded. Their ability to recognize words when used in context is almost ten times what the vocabulary capacity was of the child in the year 1900. Just from sheer exposure.

So what we have is a kid with expanded interests, expanded vocabulary and a contracted attention span coming into the school to learn how to read. What does the school do for the expanded interest? Very little. The books that they are still using are pretty tame stuff. For the expanded vocabulary? Well if you work very hard, at the end of first grade you will know how to read and write 400 words. But the kid *knows* 8,000 words. So here you have a fast learning kid with a short attention span

going into the slowest moving institution in our culture.

But let's continue with the media analysis.

What is reading?

Reading is the process by which we derive meaning from the abstract letters on a page.

What are letters?

Letters are abstract symbols which stand for spoken sounds.

Good, How many spoken sounds are there in the English language?

There are 40 spoken sounds in the English language. That's in your mid-American dialect, spoken by Walter Cronkite at normal speed. Bell Telephone can show you all the green wiggling marks on the oscilloscope. There are 40 distinct sounds.

Since an alphabet is a series of abstract symbols that stand for spoken sounds, and there are 40 sounds that make up all our words, there should be 40 letters. Right?

But we only have 26 letters. Right?

Sort of. We really have 200 letters. We spell our 40 sounds 200 ways. If you say "o" into a computer, you can get "ow", "oh", "oe", "eau", etc.

T&C: Are you saying that we have a defective alphabet?

JMC: That's exactly right. A rice language, the richest language in the world; syntactically, a fairly uncomplicated language compared to the inflected languages of the European family; the richest vocabulary by far of any language in the world; a language which is the *de facto lingua franca*, the second language of most people in the world *and* we have a defective alphabet.

T&C: How inadequate is our alphabet?

JMC: Let me tell you how bad our alphabet is. If you have 40 sounds and you spell them 200 ways and you divide

40 into 200 you get five. It is one-fifth efficient. So we have a 20 percent efficient alphabet. So if we look back at our analysis of the client and our analysis of the medium, we have the following situation: A fast learning, large-vocabulary kid with a short attention span is coming into a slow moving situation to spend one year to learn 5 percent of the words he or she already knows using a 20 percent efficient alphabet. Why do we have a reading problem? My question is, why does anybody learn to read?

T&C: What can be done?

JMC: Let me tell you about one way reading is being taught very effectively at the beginning level. UNIFON is both an alphabet and a reading system. There are 40 characters to match the 40 basic sounds (phonemes) of standard spoken English. There are 24 consonants and 16 vowels. There is one and only *one* letter for each sound.

Here is how it has been taught in experimental school systems: when the child comes into the first grade, the first four weeks of class he is taught to recognize, pronounce and write the forty characters. Then the kids are in business. *Anything* they can say, they can write. The rules are simple: a) words are written as pronounced; b) there are no silent letters; c) there are no double letters. Students pay great attention to the pronunciation of words. They use their own extensive and lively vocabularies to write stories. By the end of the term, and at their own pace, they make the shift to the standard alphabet. The transition works smoothly because their first experience with reading has been successful and they have confidence in their abilities. Most students read as many as 20 books during the second semester and they

continue to do a great deal of writing. By beginning with UNIFON the child is allowed to discover that reading in itself is not a great problem, but that reading English in the traditional form does have its problems. UNIFON allows the child to enjoy the simplicity of the act before being overwhelmed by its complexity.

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T&C: Let's talk about television.

JMC: Okay. But let's talk about *reasonable expectations for television*. My feeling is that television is judged against a completely unreal set of expectations. The fact is that there are many things that it cannot and should not be expected to do. For example, television cannot make up for bad parents. So, if you don't have good parents, television isn't going to make much of a difference. Television cannot make up for bad schools. Television cannot make up for lack of caring in communities and churches. Television is primarily an entertainment medium.

T&C: But there are those who say that we have bad parents, bad schools and ineffective churches in part because of television.

JMC: There are connections. For example, I don't agree with the position of the networks that the public gets what it wants. The public takes what it gets. And if you take a lot of garbage for a long time, then you end up wanting garbage and rejecting the stuff that's of higher quality.

Essentially, TV is a picture box that's there to entertain and to make money for the advertisers. That is 98% of its role. I'm talking about TV in its present mode—commercial network television.

That's why it has always been my advice to the NCCT, from the time that it was getting started, to forget network television, forget television as it has existed. We lost that game by such an overwhelming score that a lot of effort to make little bitty changes is a waste of time. That energy should be expended at heading them off at the pass—to planning what television will be like the second time around. Our efforts should be directed towards influencing what cable will be like; what satellites will have to communicate; concern about the international aspects, not to mention cassettes, discs, fiber optics and computers. In my view, broadcast television reform is not going to accomplish very much and the very medium it is seeking to change is being changed much more drastically by other forces that we should be paying more attention to.

Television as new know it now could have been much different if, when we gave out licenses 30 years ago, we had given a different mandate. But we did not and that's the reality we have to live with. Right now, the rule is that you cannot make money doing quality television programming for children. The program that is just a little bit better is not going to make as much money for

the sponsor and so it has to be underwritten on public television. It can't happen in a medium that's dedicated to making money. Now that's too bad, and I don't approve of it at all, but it is a fact. A fact that seems to have eluded a lot of people. And if we want quality television programming for children then we either have to change that fact or go someplace else.

My feeling is that we *should* spend a lot of money providing quality television for kids. They're going to be watching television anyway, so what do you want them to watch? And if television is such a big powerful medium then we should treat it like a big powerful medium and put big powerful dollars in it to do big powerful things for little powerless kids.

But alas, we are not anywhere near that level of seriousness about taking care of our kids. We leave them to the commercial interests where they are exploited by people whose main goal is to make money from the products they sell to them.

T&C: Will cable be different?

JMC: Ten years ago I gave one of the keynote speeches at the National Cable Television Association. I remember asking the head of the Association to tell me who my audience was. And he said, "It's a husband and wife who probably used to be in the electronics business in Kansas and then they heard that you could put an antenna up and run some wire off it and charge people and make money." This was what cable was ten years ago. It grew up in the farmlands and suddenly those people were being told that they were the wave of the future.

So I gave a talk called "The Kids Cable Channel" in which I said to them, "Look, you guys are going to make a lot of money, and that's great, but why

don't you do something that's different from what the other guys in TV do. They all make their money out of television and then at the end of the day, because they don't feel quite clean about the whole thing, they look for a university or a hospital or something like that to give the money to. Why don't you decide to do that? Why don't you decide that when you make money and you're going to give it away—to give it to yourselves. And you put the money into television, because television is more important than Harvard. And why don't you decide that you will be the people who *will not* screw kids. You take your profits and you put them back into good programming. And you don't sell products to babies and you don't do any of the nasty stuff that other guys do."

Well, I'll tell you, I've given a lot of talks and I have never gotten such a positive response. They were looking for stuff like that, and it's interesting to see that some of it has happened.

Any cable company that wants to do good business these days should take on children as a loss leader—that's their investment in the future. And they can feel good at the end of the day.

And it seems to me that that's where anybody who is really interested in television these days should be—in developing and getting established the structures that will govern these new technologies. It's like coming to a spot in the middle of the country and saying, 'Let there be a Chicago.' It's all a prairie

land and so what we should be doing is buying real estate downtown.

T&C: What kind of real estate?

JMC: Getting designated channels that will only serve the best interests of kids—and a lot of that is being done. But also building in the thinking mechanisms and the funding mechanisms, so that if there is a tax on cable television, let it be allocated to children. In other words, whatever is necessary to making children the priority. But none of that will happen unless there is leadership. It's a nice, clean wholesome idea, but somebody has to do it. And it can't be the people who are hanging around hollering about what the networks and broadcast television are doing. The networks are doing what they're going to keep on doing. *You can't change them.* They couldn't change themselves in a lot of ways even if they wanted to. But the cable people are looking for friends—and here's where the Council could play a real leadership role.

It makes sense, doesn't it? That any cable company that wants to do good business these days should take on children as a loss leader—that's their investment in the future. And they can feel good at the end of the day.

T&C: I know that you'll agree that television is only one small part of a child's media environment. What about music, radio, movies?

JMC: I think it was Morris Ernst who said, "No culture can be much better than its mass media." I agree with him entirely. The mass media go right by the gate keepers. They're in the wind, in the water, and become a part of people without their choosing. It is just as stupid to be unreflective about the emotional and intellectual air that you breathe as to not think about the physical air that you breathe.

So it seems to me that anybody who is dealing with young people today has to deal with the world in which they live, and has to respond to that. Tony Schwartz wrote a book called *The Responsive Chord* in which he says that when you communicate with a person, you are not going into some kind of vacuum, but there are things in there already, off which your message bounces, and which influence the way in which the message is accepted. Therefore, to be unaware of those things should disqualify a person from getting involved with communicating at all. He also talks about the need for “presearch” rather than research. That is, to find out what people know already, what their fears are, what their hopes are, all that kind of business. Now that’s the kind of thing that goes on frequently in advertising and broadcasting and only occasionally in education. I would much rather have it be the other way around. As it is, if we fail in the schools we flunk the kid not the teacher; if advertising fails, they flunk the person who made the commercial.

I don’t really think you need any special courses for critical viewing and skills or television appreciation. All you need to do is just to pay attention to the kids and activate their responses.

You don’t really have to teach kids how to use the media, all you have to do is be aware and to know that it exists. The teacher who knows what the kids are watching and what they are listening

to is going to be 50 steps ahead of all the other teachers.

I don’t really think you need any special courses for critical viewing skills or television appreciation. All you need to do is just to pay attention to the kids and activate their responses. Get the kids talking. Don’t tell them whether they’re right or wrong, correct or incorrect, just get the stuff in motion. There are enough corrective devices in most groups of kids, if they are in a situation where they are not intimidated. My rules are very simple—active is better than passive and smart is better than stupid. So anything that will make them smart and active is fine. And just to acknowledge the existence of these media in their lives without putting a moral judgment on them changes the game immediately.

One of the primary roles of the school is to develop the sensory life of the child. That means that the active arts—dance, music, drama, painting, sculpture—should be at the heart of early childhood education.

T&C: Do you have other thoughts for teachers and schools?

JMC: It seems to me that one of the implications of the influence of television on children is that the schools have to realize that a child coming to them for the first time has already had a great deal of television experience. For instance, in the UNIFON reading program in Indianapolis, which [*is an?*] experimental site, the kids in first and second year do a lot of writing. Given

their druthers, they will usually write about something that they have seen on television. We're very pleased about that, partly because it gives them something to write about that brings their world into the school and, at the same time, it helps them *unpack* all this vicarious experience they've had through television. And since television does tend to produce a certain passivity combined with a short attention span in younger children, it seems to me that their school education has to take some very active steps to insure that there is a balance to the child's development. It is very important, in the television age especially, although it has always been true, that one of the primary roles of the school is to develop the sensory life of the child. That means that the active arts—dance, music, drama, painting, sculpture—should be at the heart of early childhood education. I'm not saying anything new—Piaget affirms this, all of Montessori's work affirms this, along with Suzuki, Kodaly, Orff, etc. We know a lot about how kids learn, but very little of it gets into the schools. The arts are always considered peripheral, and are always the first to be eliminated.

Energy should be applied to helping children develop their own capacities for judgment, taste and sensitivity.

My philosophy in schooling is not “back to basics”, but “forward to basics.” I would have the arts, reading, writing and some mathematics, and forget all the other stuff until the kids are really at home with these “basics.” But

this demands a different kind of a teacher. The arts, properly taught, demand flexible, outgoing people who are not afraid of their own bodies, not afraid of their own feelings. A lot of teachers are not that way. A lot of people are not that way. But if we see it as a value, we can work toward it. If we do not see it as a value then we will just keep on moaning and whining about what's wrong with the schools and pretending that a little more money or a little less something will fix it. But it has to be solved from the inside out. I think that is the problem with education today and I think that television has a lot to do with it. We can no longer protect and help the child as much from the outside as we used to. Today's child is exposed and will be exposed to every kind of idea and value system and vicarious emotion just because of the nature of the electronic environment. So trying to keep certain things off television or out of books is futile. That same energy should be applied to helping children develop their own capacities for judgment, taste and sensitivity, so that they know how to make decisions that are based, we hope, on positive values.