

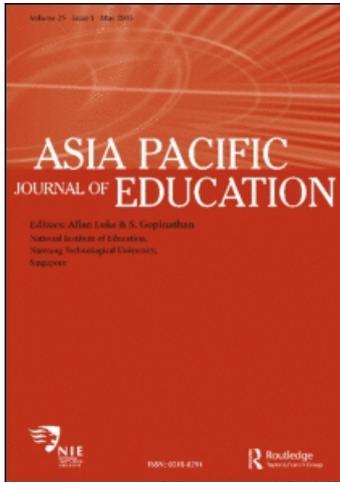
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Making claims for school media: a study of teachers' beliefs about media in Hong Kong

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Despite growing calls for media education in different parts of the world, little consensus has been reached over what to teach and how to teach. The implementation of related initiatives varies across different contexts as well as cultures. The outcomes depend largely on the beliefs, attitudes and efforts of individual teachers. This study aims to identify and discuss teachers' beliefs about media through an analysis of documents related to school media. It examines how 13 secondary schools in Hong Kong justified their applications for funding to set up a school television station. Using methods in documentary research, the study analyses the claims made for school media. The hidden assumptions held by schools towards school media, new media, mass media, media education and media literacy are discussed.

Keywords: school media; new media; school TV; media literacy; media education; teachers' beliefs

Introduction: the idea of school media

In the past decade, more and more schools in Hong Kong have set up their own school media (Chu, 2003). The notable increase in their numbers is closely related to advances in communication technologies. Desktop publishing improves editing work for school newspapers. Electronic media, which were once seen as expensive ventures, are becoming more affordable. Technologies have become more user-friendly, with easy-to-follow interfaces. Today, even primary school students are able to master the production of a video on their own (Gauntlett, 1996). School media, in print, electronic and digital forms, have now become commonplace in Hong Kong.

In this study, school media refers to schools' attempts at modelling after mainstream media institutions by producing their own media works. The idea of school media has close associations with two other terms, namely "educational media" and "media education". In the former case, schools have been looking for opportunities to make use of new media in education. In a review of the history on teaching with technology in American K-12 schools, for example, Cassidy (1998) found that generations of educators had been working to integrate new media into classrooms in the past century. On the other hand, the increasing prominence of media in the everyday lives of students has prompted calls to introduce media education into the formal curriculum, in the hope of equipping students with the skills and abilities to live in the media age.

What do school media, educational media and media education have in common? In all three instances, various "media" are brought into schools. As a result, educators are

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presented with the task of understanding and managing the media so that they can use it to achieve various objectives. The task often involves substantial planning and resources. In a discussion on student television in the United States, Silvia and Kaplan (1998) warned that students have to be prepared for budgetary, staffing as well as administrative problems, as any media organization would. Unlike small-scale and infrequent productions undertaken by individual teachers, school media requires school-wide planning and participation.

Although more researchers have begun to examine the details and dynamics of media production by youths (see Buckingham, Grahame, & Sefton-Green, 1995; Burn & Durran, 2007; Gauntlett, 1996), little is known about institutionalized school media (Chu, 2003). While recognizing that many important issues regarding school media need further research and discussion, this paper sets out to tackle the issue of teachers' beliefs about the media. By analysing the claims made in the application for funding of school television projects, this study identifies and discusses the deep-seated, often taken-for-granted, beliefs about mass media held by frontline educators. This will in turn benefit the discussion on the implications of teachers' beliefs for both new media and media education.

Teachers' beliefs, new media and media education

A review of how teachers' beliefs have made an impact on both new media and media education puts the present study in a wider social and historical context. Past research has suggested that schools tend to respond slowly to opportunities offered by new technologies. Horn (1987), for example, questioned why schools did not actively seize the rich educational potential offered by the then-latest laser technology. However, when schools did introduce new media, they were rarely for the purpose of experimenting with innovative ideas. Lawson and Comber (2000) found that computers were used in American schools to fit in with, rather than to challenge, traditional ways of teaching. Inglis, Ling, and Joosten (1999) noted that technologies like the compact cassette, VHS cartridge and overhead projector were often first established in the entertainment and business sectors. The education sector would only make use of them for educational functions at a much later stage, after the cost had come down and when there was clear evidence that such technologies were indeed reliable and useful.

Teachers' beliefs about media education are also crucial in its introduction and implementation in the school curriculum. Media education is a relatively new social curriculum in schools (Lee, 1997). The reasons for introducing media education range from it being an essential life skill (Kubey & Baker, 1999; Lee, 1997) to arguments that media literacy is about empowerment (Thoman, 1995). Tyner (1992) believed media literacy to be a vital component in democracy education. Considine (1994) argued that media literacy was related to higher order critical thinking skills. Some others see media education as inevitable. The saying often begins with the phrase, "Like it or not, we cannot live without the media . . ." (Lusted, 1994; McBrien, 1999). The conclusion often is that schools cannot afford to neglect this rising trend in the media society. Many writers agree that media education has become a worldwide movement in the past 30 years or so (Brown, 1998; Hart, 1998b; Kubey, 1998; Kubey & Baker, 1999; Lee, 1997).

Such gains in worldwide recognition of the importance media education have been hard-won. As Alvarado, Gutch, and Wollen (1987) commented, the emergence of media in the school curriculum has been a long and continuous cultural struggle. Winning legitimacy for such a "trivial" subject in schools has been a challenge. In England, where media education was introduced in schools decades ago, media studies is still denounced by some politicians as a soft option, amounting to a "Mickey Mouse subject"

(Bazalgette, 1996). Teaching media in schools inevitably brought in popular culture. It aroused parental anxiety on the one hand while, on the other hand, the students might not welcome this kind of “intervention” into their own media experiences (Aufderheide, 1998).

Even when media education eventually finds a foothold in schools, proponents need to design the curriculum as well as develop relevant pedagogies. These give rise to other problems. As Hart (1998a) noted, there has been “much rhetoric but little research” on media teaching. Little is known about what actually goes on in classroom settings. However, the available research suggests that media education, when put into practice, differs rather markedly from what has been advocated. This is where teachers’ beliefs make the difference.

Hart and Benson (1996), in their research on English classrooms in the United Kingdom, found that few teachers had received formal training in the field. It should be noted that media education was taught within the English curriculum. This resulted in a wide variation in terms of theoretical understanding and classroom practice. The classroom-based research findings surprised the researchers as the teaching practices were “almost entirely uncritical”. Hart’s later international research amongst English-speaking countries yielded similar findings (Hart, 1998b). Most experienced teachers were more inclined to adopt an inoculatory approach in their teaching, which was often seen as the earliest paradigm used in media education in England. As theories of popular culture developed, the discriminatory and critical approaches were advocated (see Buckingham, 1998; Hall & Whannel, 1964; Masterman, 1995). However, actual classroom research suggested that the conservative approach was still the norm, rather than the exception.

Hart also found that most teachers seemed to be remarkably conservative in their choice of media for study. Instead of elaborating on relevant theoretical frameworks, the use of media texts was often a means of pursuing other goals. There was also the absence of interaction and dialogue about media between teachers and students, or between students themselves. There was little space for young people’s own media experiences and knowledge, and few opportunities for active involvement in the production of texts. Also, engagement with political issues and learning about media institutions was rarely found (Hart, 1998b, pp. 184–191).

A noticeable gap between theory and practice was observed. Frontline teachers had to deal with the practical problem of deciding what could be talked about and what should be censored, either in media classes or student media productions. The “pragmatic teacher instincts” discouraged teachers from working against the norms in schools (Stevens, 2001, p. 551).

The above discussion of new media and media education concurs that it is never easy to bring media into schools. In both cases, the beliefs and attitudes of teachers were highly relevant and significant. Yet, given the diverse backgrounds of teachers and sporadic nature of media education practices, it has not been easy to identify the specific teacher beliefs or survey those “pragmatic teacher instincts”. The beliefs and attitudes of teachers towards issues like the nature of media, their place in schools, and their relationship with schools has to be researched in a more systematic manner (Chu, 2001). School media offered a unique site for exploring these significant issues in this particular case study.

Making claims: funding exercise for school television in Hong Kong

This study aimed to address this lack of understanding of teachers’ beliefs through a detailed analysis of funding proposals prepared by 13 Hong Kong secondary schools.

All of these schools had set up their own television stations between the years 1999 and 2006. In order to secure additional funding for these endeavours, they had to convince potential funding sources that it was meaningful and worthwhile to introduce such projects in schools. In Hong Kong, the Quality Education Fund (QEF) has been the major funding source for these student television proposals.

The QEF first came into operation in 1999. Mr C.H. Tung, then Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR government, announced the set-up of a special fund in his first policy address in 1997. The government allocated \$5 billion to establish the QEF, which aimed to encourage innovation, competition and self-motivated reform in primary and secondary schools. It states that it will be a more flexible and efficient alternative funding source than the normal government mechanism (Hong Kong SAR Government, 1997).

To apply for funding, schools need to submit proposals to convince the authorities that the projects are “innovative, competitive and will encourage self-motivated reforms” (Hong Kong SAR Government, 1997). There is a standard form for applicants to fill in details such as the objectives, implementation plans, timeline, deliverables and outcomes of the project. Successful applicants are also required to submit an evaluation report upon the completion of their projects. Both the proposals and evaluation reports can be accessed by the general public on the QEF website (see <http://qcrc.qef.org.hk>).

A glance at the titles of the funded projects gives us a good idea about the sort of projects that have been popular in the past decade. Amongst the great variety of projects, it is hard not to notice a considerable number of projects on school TV. Through a keyword search of “school TV” on the official QEF website, it found that 40 schools successfully applied for funds to start their own television station between 1999 and 2006 (see Table 1).

In the present study, only secondary schools that completed the funded projects, and hence already submitted evaluation reports, were included in the analysis. Read together, these proposals and evaluation reports provide a rich set of data for uncovering the otherwise rarely articulated beliefs of teachers and schools towards the nature of media and school media. For this paper, however, only the claims made in the proposals are analysed.

Since all these proposals were written with the purpose of convincing the funding body that they deserved funding, schools inevitably had to justify: (1) why the school needed to have school TV in the first place; (2) what the school planned to do with it; and (3) how the school could realize their plans. It is not the concern of this study to confirm whether their justifications were substantiated or not. Rather, the focus is on the claims that the schools make in their applications.

A related concept here is “rhetoric”. As elaborated by Banaji and Burn (2006), rhetoric has three major characteristics:

- (1) They are highly elaborated structures, drawing on distinctive traditions of philosophical, educational, political and psychological thought.
- (2) They are organized to persuade, as a form of “communicative action” (Habermas, 1984, as cited in Banaji & Burn, 2006), seeking to bring about consensus, leading in some cases to intervention in specific contexts of practice.
- (3) They produce discursive frameworks such as key terms and taxonomies, which can be learnt by practitioners who either need them or are obliged to use them (p. 5).

Although this study was not intended to be a discourse analysis, the concept of “rhetoric” was found to be useful in this context because in order to secure funding, schools have to make claims that could persuade. Such claims are inevitably rhetorical in essence. It was found that they utilized key terms that were likely to bring about consensus

Table 1. Overview of QEF Projects with keyword 'school TV'.

Case no.	School name	Project duration	Budget (HKD)
1	St. Stephen's College	Sept 99–Sept 01	982,600
2	Clementi Secondary School	Sept 99–July 00	449,900
3	Pui Kiu Middle School	June 00–June 02	833,800
4	Chiu Yeung Primary School	June 00–Dec 01	150,000
5	Cheng Chek Chee Secondary School of Sai Kung	June 00–Sept 01	144,000
6	Ming Kei College	June 01–Aug 03	777,200
7	De La Salle Secondary School, N.T.	June 01–Aug 02	813,600
8	Buddhist Wong Wan Tin College	June 01–Aug 03	751,000
9	Shatin Tsun Tsin Secondary School	June 01–Aug 03	800,000
10	Kwun Tong Kung Lok Government Secondary School	June 01–Aug 03	800,000
11	St. Antonius Girl's College	June 01–June 02	803,600
12	Yaumatei Catholic Primary School	Sept 02–Aug 02	619,680
13	HKCWC Fung Yiu King Memorial Secondary School	Aug 02–Nov03	600,100
14	Ching Chung Hau Po Won Primary School	Aug 03–Aug 04	376,200
15	Assembly of God Morrison College	Sept 04–Aug 05	400,000
16	Ma Tau Chung Government Primary School	Sept 04–Aug 05	257,000
17	St. Joseph's College	Aug 04–Aug 06	288,000
18	CUHKFAA Thomas Cheung Secondary School	Sept 04–Aug 06	362,000
19	CCC Heep Woh Primary School	Aug 04–July 05	270,000
20	PLK Luk Hing Too Primary School	Sept 04–July 05	362,000
21	CCC Kei Wei Primary School (Ma Wan)	Sept 04–Aug 05	274,000
22	Alliance Primary School, Whampao	Sept 04–Aug 05	313,400
23	Baptist (Sha Tin Wai) Lui Ming Choi Primary School	Sept 04–July 05	326,000
24	Five Districts Business Welfare Association School	Aug 04–July 05	323,100
25	Christian Alliance Cheng Wing Chee College	Aug 04–July 05	290,400
26	PLK Horizon East Primary School	Aug 05–Aug 06	239,800
27	Caritas Chong Yuet Ming Secondary School	Sept 05–June 07	308,700
28	Yaumatei Catholic Primary School (Hoi Wan Road)	Sept 05–Aug 07	306,800
29	SKH Yan Laap Primary School	Aug 05–Aug 06	299,500
30	Hong Kong Taoist Association Yuen Yuen Primary School	July 05–Aug 06	226,000
31	Tin Sui Wai Methodist College	Aug 05–July 06	270,000
32	SKH Kei Fook Primary School	Sept 05–Aug 06	241,600
33	Chun Tok School	Sept 05–Aug 06	255,000
34	PLK Laws Foundation College	Aug 05–July 06	260,000
35	The Hong Kong and Macau Lutheran Church Queen Maud Secondary School	Sept 04–July 06	306,700
36	St. Andrew's Catholic Primary School	Aug 06–July 07	228,000
37	Aberdeen St. Peter's Catholic Primary School	Aug 06–July 07	301,500
38	SKH Tang Shiu Kin College	July 06–June 08	320,200
39	Shatin Methodist College	Aug 06–July 07	226,500
40	The True Light Middle School (Primary section)	Dec 06–June 07	223,000

Note: Retrieved from QEF website in January 2007.

between the funding authority and themselves. When read together, a study of these claims enables us to take a step back and examine the institutional values at work.

The present analysis identifies the claims made in four main areas, namely, project objectives, project timeline, the types of programmes schools claimed they would produce,

and the required budget. The findings are then interpreted within relevant theoretical frameworks in media education and new media, followed by a discussion of their implications.

Major findings

Project objectives

All applicants were required to state detailed project objectives in their proposals. Applicants could list as many objectives as they liked. One school in this sample listed a total of 16 objectives (Case 10). Table 2 summarizes the number of objectives stated by each school.

A closer look at the objectives suggests that there were overlaps in many instances. For further analysis, all objectives were classified into five broad categories:

- (1) To enhance and promote media literacy
- (2) To serve schools with regard to specific functions including:
 - (a) promoting school activities to the student population
 - (b) promoting a sense of belonging to schools
 - (c) helping with the teaching and curriculum development
 - (d) better communication with parents and community members
- (3) To achieve different forms of education:
 - (a) whole-person development
 - (b) moral education, civic and social education
 - (c) IT education
 - (d) values and attitudes
- (4) To develop generic skills in different areas:
 - (a) creativity
 - (b) critical thinking
 - (c) independent thinking
 - (d) ability to communicate
 - (e) teamwork
 - (f) problem-solving skills
 - (g) other essential life skills
- (5) Others

Table 2. Number of objectives stated in each proposal.

Case number	Number of stated objectives
1	6
2	4
3	4
5	8
6	7
7	5
8	5
9	6
10	16
11	7
13	8
15	7
25	11

Table 3. Number of mentions of project objectives.

Project objectives	Number of mentions in all proposals
1	10
2	36
3	22
4	18
5	7
Total number of listed objectives	93

All objectives listed were coded into each of these categories; Table 3 highlights the categories that were deemed to be most important. The order of appearance of the first five objectives in each case was tallied, as shown in Table 4. It shows that in terms of the order of appearance, the second and fourth of the categories above were more frequently listed as the first objective in the project proposals. Considering that it is mentioned 36 times out of 93 instances, serving schools became the most mentioned project objective, followed by the development of generic skills in different areas.

Keywords for persuasion

A few keywords were repeatedly found in these applications, showing that they were considered to be useful in the process of persuasion: “student-centred”, “sense of belonging” and “creativity”. Despite the natural affinity with media education, the rare occurrence of the term “media literacy” is also significant and warrants further discussion. Below are some noteworthy examples.

“*Student-centred*”. Except for Case 8, none of the applicants explained what they understood as “student-centred” in the “background” section of the proposal:

4. Student-centred to give students more space and flexibility to organise and master their learning as students are the owners of learning. The ultimate aim of education is to help each student to achieve whole-person development. Teaching methods and learning approaches must be based on the needs and interests of students... (Case 8)

“*Sense of belonging*”. Another keyword frequently mentioned was “sense of belonging”. Applicants claimed that school TV could promote a sense of belonging in the school community. Again, it appeared to be a taken-for-granted concept without any elaboration.

“*Creativity and many more other skills*”. Creativity was a keyword that appeared in all proposals and, as in the above case, it was taken to be self-explanatory. It was simply mentioned, often along with other desirable qualities and skills. A typical example:

Table 4. Priority of objectives.

Priority/Project objectives	1	2	3	4	5	Total number of mentions by schools
1	2	2	2	2	0	8
2	5	3	3	8	7	26
3	1	3	6	0	3	13
4	5	4	1	1	1	12
5	0	1	1	2	0	4

Through the setting up of a school TV, students will have to take part in the planning, production and appreciation of the programmes. During this process, students can strengthen their cooperation skills, communication skills, creativity, critical thinking skills, I.T. skills, problem-solving skills, self-management skills and project learning skills. (Case 9)

At a time when creativity has become a buzzword in the waves of education reforms across the world, a great deal of research with different disciplinary emphases has looked at the traits, capacities, influences and products related to creativity (Runco, 2004), which aptly highlights its complexities. However vaguely it was defined, its ubiquitous presence showed that educators believed that this rhetoric of creativity would work.

“*Media literacy*”. Given the close relationships between media production and media literacy, the mentions of “media literacy” were, however, less frequent. Only two case schools highlighted and explained media literacy in their proposals (Case 8 and Case 11).

Objective 4: To promote media education and critical thinking skills

In recent years, there is an increasing recognition for the effectiveness of media education. In view of information explosion, schools should cultivate critical thinking skills and proper values in students through media education. Media education can help schools to counteract the bad influences of media. Setting up a school TV can sensitise students to these issues. (Case 11)

That schools should counteract the bad influences of media has been a familiar saying in the history of media education (Buckingham, 1998; Kubey, 1998). The protectionist stance adopted by this case school reflected mistrust towards the mainstream media.

It would be a hasty conclusion, however, if this view was taken to be a representative one. Another case school approached media education in a different light.

There is no media education in the existing curriculum in Hong Kong. In view of the advances in information technology, we are obliged to encourage students to learn decoding media messages and cultivate their critical thinking skills, which belong to the higher order thinking skills. By producing our own television programmes, we hope we can introduce students to the world of media . . . Students should also be able to appreciate good works and understand ideologies at work. The aim is thus to encourage students to walk out of passivity and become an active audience. (Case 8)

Despite the fact that both schools were claiming to cultivate critical thinking skills through school TV, there was a substantial difference in their undertones. And compared to the other claims like creativity, critical thinking and language competences, the relative absence of media literacy in this context suggests that applicants did not think that this element would help to persuade the funding body to finance their projects.

Project timeline

Schools were required to provide a clear timeline specifying the duration of the projects. The funding body needed to ensure that money was spent in an acceptable and appropriate manner over a reasonable period of time. In the present study, seven schools noted that they would need one year to complete the projects while six schools needed two years.

These schools shared one remarkable similarity in the way they organized the different stages in their timelines. The cycle went like this: In the first stage, money would be spent on the purchase of equipment. Training came in the second stage. The common practice was to bring in “professionals”, who were mostly media practitioners, as trainers. Training ranged from writing a script, shooting a story, editing a programme to general talks on “media”.

The actual production work came in afterwards. In this stage, teams would be set up with different roles. In the final stage, evaluation and/or production of deliverables like DVDs would mark the official completion of the project.

Types of programmes

What types of programmes did schools claim to make? This study classified the programme types into four broad categories, which were further broken down into 13 smaller units.

- I. Information about schools
 - (1) School news (e.g., results in inter-school competitions)
 - (2) Interviews (e.g., with teachers, principals, and other student leaders)
 - (3) News about student clubs (e.g., introduction about goals and activities)
 - (4) Publicity materials for student activities (e.g., upcoming activities)
- IV. Educational programmes
 - (5) Educational programmes
 - (6) Language programmes
- IV. Broadcast dubbed TV programmes
 - (7) Broadcast daily TV news
 - (8) Broadcast civic, social education programmes
 - (9) Broadcast cultural programmes
- IV. Others
 - (10) Performance, arts and culture
 - (11) Song dedication
 - (12) School forums
 - (13) Programmes for parents, alumni and community members

Tables 5a and 5b summarize the types of programmes schools preferred to produce. Most of them were either informational programmes about the school or programmes that were considered to be of educational value. Apart from their own productions, they also showed dubbed programmes, which were news programmes or those with an educational emphasis.

Table 5a. The first five types of programmes mentioned by schools.

Types of programmes	1	2	3	4	5	Total no. of schools
School news	6	1		2		9
Interviews			1	1		2
News about student clubs				1		1
Publicity materials for student activities			1		1	2
Educational programmes	2		1		3	6
Language programmes		1	1	2	2	6
Broadcast news	3	3				6
Broadcast civic, social education programmes		1	1			2
Broadcast cultural programmes		2				2
Performance, arts and culture			3	1		4
Song dedication	1					1
School forums				1	1	2
Programmes for parents, alumni and community members	1				1	2

Table 5b. Total number of mentions of types of programmes.

Types of programmes	Total number of mentions
Information about schools	14
Educational programmes	12
Broadcast dubbed TV programmes	10
Others	9

There were four instances when schools claimed to document school art and cultural performances. The types of programmes on offer were predominantly “educational” in appearance. What this meant, however, was not spelled out clearly and thus subject to different interpretations and implementations.

Budget

The budget required by each school is listed in Table 6. Although all called by the same name, that is, school TV, some were far more costly than others. Let us take Case 2 and Case 5 as examples. Both projects lasted for one school year, yet the former required HK\$305,900 (around US\$3910) more than the latter. In fact, the most expensive project in this sample applied for a sum approximating a million dollars (around US\$128,000).

The more costly projects often opted for more state-of-the-art technology, with a preference for models used by media professionals. The less costly projects, however, settled for less advanced models. In some cases, where construction of a studio was deemed necessary, the work ranged from removing walls to rewiring the whole school.

Little justification was given as to whether such actions were essential in the setting up of a school television station. It appeared to be merely a matter of subjective choice. Some schools were determined to make this a “real” campus TV network and thus they needed the money to make this possible. For others, it was good enough to acquire basic equipment and show their works in venues on campus, hence making a substantial difference in terms of money.

Table 6. Budget for school TV.

Case no.	Project duration	Budget (HKD)
1	Sept 99–Sept 01	982,600
2	Sept 99–July 00	449,900
3	June 00–June 02	833,800
5	June 00–Sept 01	144,000
6	June 01–Aug 03	777,200
7	June 01–Aug 02	813,600
8	June 01–Aug 03	751,000
9	June 01–Aug 03	800,000
10	June 01–Aug 03	800,000
11	June 01–June 02	803,600
13	Aug 02–Nov 03	600,100
15	Sept 04–Aug 05	400,000
25	Aug 04–July 05	290,400

Discussion

Paradoxical teachers' beliefs

As conscious attempts to lobby for funds, the QEF proposals revealed a few dominant themes that the applicants believed would work best. A careful and critical reading further unveiled two paradoxes that characterized the beliefs of the teachers who were responsible for writing up the proposals. This section discusses (1) how the “changing society, changing schools” discourse clashed with the rather static nature of schooling, which in turn highlighted the problem of introducing new media in schools; and (2) how the mixed interpretations of the term “media” reflected the very limited understanding of the media by educators.

“Changing society, changing schools”

“Society has changed.” It has almost become a cliché in discourses related to education reform. In Hong Kong, education reforms were launched with this acute awareness of a changing society, and hence a demand for schools to change.

In the tide of changes, everyone has to meet new challenges. Adaptability, creativity and abilities for communication, self-learning and cooperation are now the prerequisites for anyone to succeed, while a person’s character, emotional qualities, horizons and learning are important factors in achieving excellence. Lifelong learning and all-round development is our expectation of everyone in this era. Education is infinitely important for everyone. (Education Commission, 1999, p. 3)

It is clear that all the proposals in this study echo the above key messages. A sense of urgency was present in these proposals, pointing to the need for schools “to do something” to meet new challenges.

Amongst the many TV projects that were proposed, applicants particularly stressed keywords like “student-centred”, “creativity”, “critical thinking skills” and “language competences”. It was clearly no coincidence. They fit neatly into the dominant discourses of education reform. By speaking the same language, the applicants had a better chance of forging a consensus, winning identification, and thus securing funding for their schools. How schools understood and worked with these keywords in reality was of little relevance. Thus these keywords, so readily and conveniently used, were never defined in the proposals. Their major function was to confirm that the applicants understood, and agreed with, the popular discourse that “society has changed so our schools have to change”.

By introducing new media into schools, it implied that schools were living up to the changing demands of society. To determine if this was really the case, we could further consider two points covered in the proposals. Let us first consider the ways schools organized their media production. As noted in the section on Project Timeline, schools organized the whole process into a few stages. Without exception, all schools stated that training would be given by professionals at the outset. Participants who had gone through the whole process would be required to train the next batch of participants. These findings suggest that schools tend to understand learning as being hierarchical, which resembles the traditional transmission model more than it does the new learning theories. The former model is noted for its teacher-centredness and emphasis on direct instruction. It contradicts the claims of student-centredness and the notion of “learning by doing” in media production discourses.

In fact, developments in learning theories in recent years remind us that there are many approaches to learning (Bransford, 2000). With a deeper understanding of how learning occurs, there have been more critical reflections on more traditional ways of teaching. Research on the value of media production in media education has found that students are

able to understand “the constructed reality” of media through practice (Luchs & Emery, 2004). This knowledge is not taught by experts but acquired on location. The assumption of a linear, hierarchical view of learning suggests that the frontline educators held rather static conceptions about education. This did not quite fit the claims they made about a “changing society”, in which “adaptability, creativity and abilities for communication, self-learning and cooperation are now the prerequisites for anyone to succeed” (Education Commission, 1999, p. 3).

With regard to the types of programmes schools planned to make, it was clear that they were heavily biased towards informational and educational content. The former refers to productions that feature various facets of school life, mainly meaningful activities. The latter refers to productions that focus on the transmission of knowledge. Again, the emphasis was on the transmission of knowledge, which was seen as a most relevant educational activity in schools. As a taken-for-granted concept, what it entailed to be educational was subject to interpretation by different individuals. Based on a reading of the proposals, educational programmes referred mainly to those that imparted information and knowledge. There was no mention of forms and genres; the mere mention of “educational” sufficed to communicate an image of the school media as valuing education and downplaying entertainment.

More than two decades ago, Postman (1985) lamented that the mass media was ruled by a “supra-ideology” of entertainment. Everything in the mass media has to be entertaining in nature. Quite contrary to the popular media, school media appears to subscribe to a supra-ideology of being educational. Everything that is communicated via the school media has to be educational in nature, meaning that they have to contain useful and legitimate knowledge. The paradox is that while frontline educators may no longer be slow in responding to opportunities offered by new media (Horn, 1987), their conceptions towards learning and education show few signs of big changes.

Mixed and limited understanding of media

It should be noted, however, that the types of programmes planned by the schools fit well with their proposed objectives. If school media was meant to foster a sense of belonging to the school and to cultivate generic skills, it made sense that informational and educational programmes prevailed. School media were at best instruments to help schools advance different goals, from meeting the new demands placed by the changing society to providing more education to students.

In this regard, school media was conceived as an instrument or tool to serve higher ends in this changing society. In the proposals, it was presented as a “solution”, or even a quick fix, to a great many problems faced by educators today. The long list of objectives waiting to be realized by this newcomer in school suggests that its abilities were highly valued.

Paradoxically, when the mass media was mentioned, the same applicants were far less approving. The mass media was blamed for its bad influence on students. The inconsistency here speaks much about the assumptions held by schools. Whilst the mass media was seen as creating problems, it was believed that the school media would bring solutions. The key difference lay in the fact that the latter was under the control the schools, and it was considered to be in “good hands”. It was also assumed that schools knew better than others how to make this “solution” work, which in a way resembled the protectionist stance in earlier media education practices in some Western countries (Buckingham, 2001; Buckingham & Domaille, 2003).

Apart from the protectionist or paternalistic undertone, the views of schools also reflected a limited understanding of the nature of the media. Any media studies textbook would readily dispute a simplistic understanding of media; it does not matter whose hands they are in. Media scholars and media educators have written extensively about the complexities of modern media (e.g., Carey, 1989; Brown, 1998; Butts, 1992; Potter, 1998). The multiple media literacies framework proposed by Meyrowitz (1998), for example, reminds media educators of the three important dimensions of media, namely media content, media grammar and medium literacy. In our case, however, it seems that most educators are overtly concerned with the media content while overlooking other issues such as media languages/grammars and the characteristics of the medium.

Their limited understanding of the media could also be inferred from the ways schools prepared the budget. In the brief review of the budget required by the 13 schools, substantial discrepancies in the amounts were found. Proposing very similar projects, the funding requested by each school ranged from HK\$200,000 to HK\$980,000. A detailed study of the breakdown of the items in each case showed that the more costly projects were modelled closely after the “professional” setting of a “real” television station. They planned to install control rooms, video editing rooms, AV theatres, and television sets in all classrooms. For the less costly projects, the equipment could be as simple as having basic items such as video cameras, accessories and video editing computer workstations.

These efforts to resemble professional media environments could be an indicator of a simplistic understanding of new media. It was yet another paradox. Teachers were claiming that new media would bring manifold benefits but it seemed that they hardly grasped its fast-changing, dynamic and flexible nature.

Implications for media education

Making grand claims, all schools in this study painted a rosy picture of school media in justifying its introduction into their schools. These claims revealed otherwise hidden assumptions that have implications for media literacy projects.

First, the rather uncritical understanding of the nature of media was intriguing. The message was a contradictory one. On one hand, schools claimed that they were embracing the opportunities offered by new communication technologies. On the other hand, they assumed that once the ownership was in good hands, they could make anything happen. This all-powerful framework did not align with the nature of the new technologies, which often celebrated freedom, diversity and possibilities. It also overlooked the dynamics and relationships between different components in any media environment.

The same lessons could be applied to other media literacy projects. Without an informed understanding of the media, the design and implementation of media literacy projects would easily favour dominant discourses. Heinle (1999) believed that schools had appropriated the concept of media literacy to serve their own cause. In the process, the more critical dimension of the original concept had given way to easier and less controversial subject matters. Chu (2003) argued that such appropriation risked the danger of reinforcing existing assumptions at the expense of critical thinking. The claims of cultivating all sorts of generic skills were likely to end up as empty promises.

Conclusion

This study adopted a qualitative approach to examine the claims schools made in the process of persuading the relevant body for funding. The focus has been predominantly on

the texts provided by the applicants and the sample concerned here was a limited one. Funding proposals are, after all, rhetorical exercises aimed at convincing funding bodies to give money. The present analysis focused mainly on the presentation, which was set out to impress, and was inevitably dealing only with the content at “face value”. To understand the full picture of school media, further research has to be done on their actual implementation, in addition to a critical evaluation by its practitioners.

Despite these apparent limitations, the merit of this study lies in the identification of the assumptions schools make, which often defy ready articulation. While compelling one to reconsider the meanings and significance of the booming school TV phenomenon in Hong Kong in a new light, the study also invites educators in different social and cultural contexts to contemplate the paradoxical relationships between schools and new media, and hence the practices in media education.

The advent of more state-of-the-art and affordable technologies will continually bring exciting opportunities to the education sector. This study concludes that the real challenge is not so much about bringing them in but about how educators come to a more realistic understanding of their “new friends”. It is thus a lesson for both media education practitioners as well as teacher educators.

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