Latinos(as) in the eye of the media storm

CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY FOR LATINO PARENTS

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RESUMEN

El propósito principal de este trabajo es hacer más patente la urgencia de abordar la alfabetización crítica de los medios con los padres latinos cuyos hijos, y la comunidad latina en general, son cada vez más el foco de atención de la publicidad comercial y los políticos, y no precisamente con la intención de ayudarlos. En "círculos culturales", se ha explorado, junto a los padres, los mensajes que se transmiten por los medios de comunicación y que les afectan a ellos y a sus hijos. A medida que son más conscientes de esto, muestran interés en conocer más acerca de las prácticas que emplean los medios, para su beneficio y el de sus allegados. Este es un proyecto en curso en el que convergen la investigación, la educación en cuanto a la alfabetización mediática crítica y el trabajo comunitario.

Palabras clave: círculos culturales, crianza, latinos, literacia mediática

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this paper is to broaden consciousness concerning the urgency of addressing critical media literacy with Latino parents whose children and the Latino community in general, are increasingly targeted by marketers and politicians, and certainly not for the purpose of helping them. In "culture circles," I have explored with parents the media messages that impact them and their children. As Latino parents become more aware of this, they show interest in knowing more about media practices for themselves, their families, and other relatives and acquaintances. This is an ongo-

ing project in which converge research, critical media literacy education, and communitarian work.

Keywords: culture circles, Latinos, media literacy, parenting

Introduction

There is an increasing focus on Latinos as scapegoats for all the social maladies, including national security, which resonates in the mainstream media and especially in the right-wing pundit shows. Literacy in general, and media literacy in particular, has become indispensable in globalized market-driven societies. In this paper, literacy means much more than decoding and encoding words, which is the mechanistic approach promoted by the latest federal educational policies. It means "reading the word and the world", as defined by Freire and Macedo (1987). Under the same understanding, Lankshear and Knobel (2003) refer to this new view in two ways: as new and broader ways to look at literacy, and as the newly emergent literacies that are urgent to embrace. Media literacy is one of these. These authors note that, decades ago, the subject matter of literacy was only considered part of non-formal adult education; outside this area, it hardly appeared in the educational discourse and school curricula. Now it is central to both.

Family literacy has become popular as a path toward engaging parents in their children's education. An important component of this is media literacy, which has become more urgent every day due to the current merging of media corporations into oligopolies and the subsequent disappearance of diversity of viewpoints, and hence the deterioration of democracy. McChesney (1999) wisely synthesizes this trend as "Rich Media, Poor Democracy", which make us more vulnerable to manipulation and control not only by the elites, but by our own government with the support of corporate media. The less we are aware of how media work and of the existence of independent public-interest media, the more we are an easy prey to persuasive maneuvers that lead us to buy, perceive, behave and think in ways that support their vested interests. Unfortunately, Latinos, especially youth and children, have become the targets of marketers and politicians, both to make money and to influence their voting. One way to counteract

this trend is by engaging Latino parents in critical media literacy through workshops as 'culture circles'.

The purpose of this paper is to raise consciousness among Latinos, educators, and citizens concerning the urgency of paying attention to the increasingly harmful impact of media on people, especially the more vulnerable individuals such as Latino children and their immigrant working-class parents, who are disadvantaged in terms of immigration status, poverty, and lack of formal education.

Critical media literacy at the center of family literacy

Robert McChesney (2009), a leader, scholar and pro-democracy activist in media, maintains that "The media are central to all our lives…Yet the media are the most frequently misunderstood parts of our lives. We want to help people understand the role of media in society." Given the tremendous impact of mass media on people, critical media literacy must be part of any program of family literacy. Critical media literacy is defined as: a) Understanding how media work — driving interests, persuasion techniques—; b) Identifying and supporting independent non-profit public interest media, and c) Becoming active as educators and community organizers to promote media reform.

Unfortunately, the practice of family literacy in schools that serve poor and minority language students is often a colonizing activity (Reyes & Torres, 2007). This practice emphasizes parenting skills (e.g., reading to the child) to meet the school expectations from a European middle-class perspective (Panofsky, 2000). In addition, they ignore, devalue or suppress first or home language/literacy —their stories, cultures, and values— by adopting a deficit thinking model of Latino parents (Ada, 1988; Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001; Barton, Drake, Perez, Louis & Georgia, 2004; Carvalho, 2001; Lankshear, 1993). Lankshear points to the functionalist perspective of this type of family literacy, since it focuses on what the elite class thinks that less educated people should learn. He claims that this mentality is promoted by world institutions such as the United Nations, whose programs have embedded patronizing functionalist ideas of adult and family literacy. They "incorporate adults into established economic and social values

and practices. It is a means to an end. Hence, this functionalist vision minimizes human beings" (p. 91).

Macedo (1994) calls the literacy imposed at schools–discrete language skills—"instrumental literacy for the poor" and "literacy for stupidification", which has been consolidated and legitimized by the No Child Left Behind policies on literacy. This a perfect example of "banking education" as characterized by Freire (1992), which centers on decoding the word, but not on reading the world, nor for writing as a powerful tool for changing it. Literacy in this way renders children and parents unaware of most things that happen in the world and prevents them from acquiring genuine critical literacy. In family literacy school programs, often the extent and quality of participation of Latino parents is limited, but these same trlatives are blamed for lack of their involvement (Andrade, Denmat & Moll, 2000). In addition, as Zentella (2005) argues, Latino parents are treated as a monolithic group with common literacy practices. She concedes that some Latino families may fit the middle class European American model of literacy, while others rely heavily on oral tradition, which is not part of the mainstream view of literacy.

Corporate media manipulation and misrepresentation of Latinos

"Marketers go after Latinos, big time" is an article in the Business section of the *Naples Daily News* (Deibel, 2003). Its source is the University of Georgia's Selig Center on Economic Growth, whose prediction about Latino buying power amounted to one trillion dollars by 2008. Ironically, marketers as well as politicians (Subervi-Velez, 2008) are targeting Latinos using the slogan "Latino power". We need to question: Whose power? Unfortunately, this so-called Latino power is only a slogan framed in increasingly sophisticated propaganda strategies for taking power away from Latinos, increasing sales, or winning elections. In return, Latinos get what Chomsky (1989) calls "Necessary Illusions", which is the core element of propaganda, whether political or commercial. Román (2000-2001) questions the media's spinning of the Latino boom and asks: "Explosion or exploitation"?

Tobacco and alcohol industries are heavily targeting Latinos in the US and Latin America, both adults and youth (Wides-Muñoz, 2005). The editorial of *La Voz de Aztlán* (2001, October 20) traces the propaganda motto "Drinko for Cinco", which is intended to commemorate the "Cinco de Mayo" holidays for Mexicans and Mexican Americans, to a close "alliance" between the Mexican American Legal Defense Education Fund (MALDEF) and the beer giant Anheuser-Busch Corporation. The affinity bears on the fact that a Hispanic woman, who is part of MALDEF, is on the Board of Directors of the Anheuser-Busch Corporation. As a consequence, "MALDEF now pushes Budweiser beer and other alcoholic products in the Mexican/Chicano community at every opportunity, and lobbies politicians to abstain from passing any laws detrimental to the alcohol industry" (La Voz de Aztlán, 2001). Unfortunately as Chen, Cruz, Schuster, Under and Johnson (2002) document, youth minorities, Latinos included, have high receptivity to pro-tobacco media.

Politicians and their advertising advisors (euphemistically called public relations personnel) have become very knowledgeable (manipulative) about the things that persuade Latinos. Mr. Bendixon, president of a Hispanic marketing firm, points out: "In Hispanic culture, 'it's love me first and I'll vote for you'" (Alvarez, 2002, p. 2). Of course the major media networks are having a "big time" since they are the ones that diffuse those ads. Meanwhile, many of these same politicians endorse measures to go after Latinos, to "lock them up", to deport them, to deny them social services, and to push them out of schools with endlessly stupidifying curricula and testing. Who is being hurt most with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind federal educational policy and its testing mania? Latinos and poor children, whose only fault is to have experiences in life and in school that do not match those of the test makers. Political campaigns rely heavily on propaganda that exploits Latino pride and emotions in their favor. As Alvarez (2002) notes: "Rather than simply translate scripts from English to Spanish, candidates in Florida, New York, California and Texas have tailored their messages by injecting cultural touchstones such as music, celebrities and messages that resonate with Hispanics" (p.1).

While marketers, politicians, and corporate media that diffuse their messages are having a "big time" using "Latino power" and cultural pride as hooking strategies, Latinos and Latino community issues are unfairly under-represented in the major networks' news programs. The latest National Association of Hispanic Journalists' 2006 *Network Brownout Report* (Montalvo & Torres, 2006) sampled the stories aired in the main networks CBS, ABC, NBC news programs during two non-consecutive weeks in the year (in May and in December). The main result of this study was the dismal coverage of Latino issues of the year. Of the 12,600 stories aired during this time frame, only 105 or 0.83% have to do with Latinos and Latino related issues. The five top topics about Latinos were: domestic government, crime, human interest, immigration and sports. The topic of crime increased, while that of immigration decreased. Key political stories lack Hispanic perspectives. Since the first "Brownout" Report appeared in 2001, the numbers have not varied significantly. On news matters, Bill Moyers' (2005) closing speech in the 2005 Media Reform Conference maintained that in today's mainstream media, including the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, whose news program is highly funded by oil companies, "news is what people want to keep hidden, and everything else is publicity". As we know, truthful information is a *sine qua non* condition to real democracy.

This lack of representation and misrepresentation of the Latino/Hispanic population in the mainstream media has a tremendous impact on the cultural identity of Latinos, especially children and youth (Suro, 2004). Larson (2005) studied media misrepresentation of minorities, including Latinos, and found that in American media, no matter which minority group is represented, there is a pattern: exclusion, then stereotyping, followed by stories that justify racial inequality and discrimination. This pattern was recently denounced by the Hispanic and Asian Americans interviewed by the editor of the *Temple Journalism Review* (2009, May 26). Pehl (2004) works with her literature class in gathering first-hand information about the role of media in creating and perpetuating stereotypes of Latinos. She concludes: "The representations of Latinos in the U.S. media are degrading, insensitive, racist, and very, very inaccurate. This Latino imagery is responsible

for the social standard by which many in this country judge the entire Latino community". She identifies two major consequences of these "normalized" misrepresentations of Latinos: First, the corporate media resonance of these messages feed stereotypes and prejudices against Latinos. This is reflected in their interactions with other cultural groups at schools, job places, the justice system, and the like. The second consequence lies in the minds and souls of Latinos, causing great damage to their own self-perception and cultural identity, especially for the younger and more vulnerable members, given their internalizing these media messages without questioning them.

While Latino parents have a responsibility in mediating media messages, schools should also intervene and advocate on behalf of children against the deceiving, invasive, and every-day-more-sophisticated propaganda strategies found in commercial media programming, including news. Teachers need to be prepared to counteract such an impact of the corporate media on children (Torres & Mercado, 2007). For the most part, critical media literacy is non-existent in schools. On the contrary, school administrators are "selling" students as a captive audience, for example, to Channel One. The 12 minutes of "educational" news delivered on a daily basis in secondary schools represents no more than a billboard for commercials and indoctrination in "free" market fundamentalism (Laidley, 2000; Molnar, 2005) and the reinforcing of stereotypes about teachers and public schools (Reyes & Rios, 2003).

Another area of great media impact is health, especially that of Latino children. Many of us have witnessed how children and young people prefer junk food promoted on TV everywhere, including in schools, rather than fresh healthful food prepared at home. Unfortunately, the former is often cheaper than the latter. In addition, soft drink companies bribe schools with money in exchange for exclusive vending of their brands. No wonder we are witnessing an increment of obesity and diabetes in children. For instance, in Santa Cruz, CA, where the adult population ranks among the skinniest, the children are ranked among the fattest. Furthermore, "Television is enlisted as an affordable babysitter", says Martha Quintana, a health educator in the Pájaro

Valley Community Health Center (Alexander, 2003), with "couch potato" inactivity aggravating the effect of excessive junk food consumption.

Media impact Latinos in many other ways. Talk shows and other "reality" shows plague the public airways of TV and radio. These invasive types of programming, called appropriately by Quail, Razzano and Skalli (2005) the "Vulture Culture", have displaced more family-oriented and socially responsive programs, as well as professional actors and journalists. With the hook of reality, they in fact use and exploit the family problems of the most vulnerable, poor, and uneducated people, and make them a spectacle of entertainment. This vulture culture has spread as a plague on the TV screen and radio because its production is extraordinarily cheap, affirm these authors. In Spanish we can mention: Laura de America, Cristina, Caso Cerrado, etc. Under the guise of self-denominated informative, educational or even advocacy type of programs, these melodramas are presented as a fusion of common sense and "expert" knowledge, driven by the logic of capitalism. People's conflicts are used to make money, for the benefit of the owners of the network and the advertisers, not the persons whose dramas fuel the show. The exploitation gets worse, when these people are patronized and blamed for their own misery and misbehavior, with no allusion to the social institutions that contribute to generating them. Meanwhile, the spectator gets a huge dose of an often grotesque spectacle of insults, verbal and physical aggression. This is accompanied by unquestioned lures of patriarchal, individualistic, and even racist overtones of experts, the show's anchor, and even the public attending the show. Whereas these talk shows could address issues that really matter to people's lives and future, and give voice to the marginalized and voiceless, the commercial interest becomes the driving force, while people are assaulted in their humanness and dignity. For instance, Latino women are used to display their "curvitas" (curves) or "colitas" (derrieres) before the leering looks of men (Puente, 2009; Medible, 2007).

My critique targets the use of physical features or family conflicts of real and vulnerable human beings to make them a spectacle of entertainment. In the same light, the problem of media

does not refer to the media per se, but the ways media are used and abused to make money and provide no real public service.

Critical media literacy is still a neglected area of study in schools, universities or other educational institutions, despite the fact that their impact is obvious to most people. The media literacy programs, often outside the educational system, are not addressing all the dimensions this task implies (Schwarz & Brown, 2005), except for notable exceptions of media activism and education such as the New Mexico Media Literacy Project, Free Press, and Media Reform. Observing the influence of children's TV programs on his own granddaughters, Cortés (2000) found that media "education" happens "even when we don't expect it, even where we don't want it, or even if we don't realize it" (p.17). Propaganda does not refer merely to ads, which have been the main focus of media literacy educational programs, but to any flow of information subject to strategic maneuvering in order to persuade the targeted people to do, think, look, and perceive in ways that favor the interests of those who hold the power to control such information.

Propaganda is not a new practice. World War I was a test laboratory for the power of controlling information, as Bernays (1928) celebrates in his book *Propaganda*. He describes it as "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses". He further asserts that "engineering of consent" is the very "essence of the democratic process." Against this type of manufacturing consent, Herman and Chomsky (1988), and Chomsky (1989) argue that the critical study of how media work is an act of "intellectual self-defense".

To add to this problem of media misrepresentation and anti-Latino sentiment in this, the political right-wingers have been constructing an empire in the US media for decades. Parry (2004) calls attention to the often unrecognized role of media in their success:

> For the past quarter century, the Right has spent billions of dollars to build a vertically integrated media apparatus reaching from the powerhouse Fox News cable network, through hard-line conservative newspapers and magazines, to talk radio networks, to book publishing, to well-funded Internet operations and right-wing bloggers (p. 1).

Parry goes on to blame Democrats, Progressives and the Left for not understanding or accepting fully the role of right-wing media in their defeats. Furthermore, the "liberal" media is moving to the right (Alterman, 2003). Actually, the problem with the major media is not only their going right-wing, but their merging into conglomerates. Bagdikian (2004), in *The New Media Monopoly*, points out that, in the first edition of his book (early 1980s), there were about 50 major news media owners in the US; this contrasts with five in the latest edition. This shows the horizontal and the vertical growth of media in the neoliberal globalized media market (McChesney, 2004; Herman & McChesney, 1997). The problem with this consolidation is that the market has become the "Medium, Message, Everything" (D'Souza, 2004), and implies the narrowing of viewpoints and boundaries of the thinkable as well as the enrichment of those corporations, which McChesney (1999) succinctly names "Rich media, poor democracy". Meanwhile, smaller mass media, precisely those most progressive and responsive to their communities, start disappearing in times of crises.

We could say, let's turn to the Spanish language networks, or to the Internet. It is true that the Spanish channels address Latino communities here in the US, Latin America and the world; however, most stories are about disasters, scandals, and crimes, more as spectacle rather than about the real concerns and achievements of the common people and their communities. In addition, the phenomenon of media consolidation is also happening in those networks. Furthermore, even though the Internet allows anyone more open participation, access on one hand and increasing commercialization on the other are not improving much the situation. Betina Fabos (2004) documents the "wrong turn of information superhighway". Unfortunately, computers and videogames add to the problems of Latino children and youth as vulnerable targets of the "Plug-in Drug" as Marie Winn's (2002) landmark book urges all us to pay attention to.

What do these trends in corporate media have to do with Latinos and specifically with Latino parents? A great deal. Summarizing so far: Latinos, especially the most vulnerable (children, poor, uneducated) are the targets of aggressive advertising.

Many of them do not have easy access to alternative media due to the "digital divide", among other things. The major networks "brown-out" Latinos in the news, misrepresent their concerns, or even blame them for the economic and social problems of the times. The consolidation of the right-wing media represents a threat to Latino people's interests by constant misinformation fueled with fear of the "browning" of America (meaning the USA) and the invasion of "criminal" illegal immigrants and their advocates.

Critical media literacy in culture circles for Latino parents

Why parents, and not teachers? Given the constant reaching out to Latinos by marketers and politicians, critical media literacy is an important step in counteracting the pervasive control by corporate mass media of every dimension of social life. One logical idea would be start media literacy in schools. However, as we know schools have been taken over by the NCLB business community , making them difficult to access for anything other than "teaching the script" and/or the subjects that are in the standardized achievement tests, in order to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress. Turning to parents seems a viable option for starting a program in critical media literacy, from the bottom-up.

Freire (1992) developed the notion of *culture circle* when he was in charge of an adult literacy campaign in his native country, Brazil, in the early 1960s. For him, the setup of a culture circle helps both students and teachers dissipate the hierarchical structure of what he called the "banking education" system, in which instructors simply need to fill up students' empty minds. He also used the concept as a device to fight against the fatalism of some participants. By using the notion of *culture* as part of the curriculum thematic identified by participants, Freire was able to assist them in understanding that culture is created by people, and therefore can be changed by them when a cultural practice is oppressive for members of that cultural group. For Freire, becoming literate is much more than reading and writing. It means the ability to participate consciously in critical understanding and in the shaping of their own societies, including changes of cultural practices that degrade all or some of the members. For him, a culture circle

is a setting where people, especially those most marginalized by the economic, social and political systems have the opportunity to meet and engage in dialogue toward deeper understanding of their worlds and building common ground for collective action for their betterment. Freire and Macedo (1987) define literacy as learning to read and write by learning to read and write their own worlds. For them, literacy in particular and education in general should be grounded in participatory democracy, the valuing and upgrading of popular knowledge for the empowerment of people and the transformation of their life conditions.

Freire's (1992) notion of a culture circle goes beyond method or strategy for conducting workshops, to include dialogism as the philosophical underpinning. Both Freire and Bakhtin (1981, 1986) are important pioneers of this philosophy. Their understanding of dialogue includes the recognition of human dignity and the socio-political dimension of seeking transformation and liberation. Dialogical encounters are central to participatory action research (PAR), which involves an ongoing interplay among research, service and teaching. Freire (1992) was one of the firsts to foster this movement starting in the area of popular education. Other developers of PAR have also worked in that field (Hall, Gillete & Tandon, 1982; Gaventa, 1991; Horton & Freire, 1990) or are social scientists from the so-called "third-world" (Fals-Borda, 1970, 1976, 1985; Rahman, 1994; Vio-Grossi, Gianotten & Witt, 1978; Tandon, 1998; de Shutter, 1990).[1] Many names for the movement also have emerged besides PAR. I will use "Research as Praxis" or RAP, which can be considered more descriptively relevant to the experience referred to in this paper, and somewhat more difficult to strip from its democratic and transformative tenets, except for the inappropriate translation of 'praxis' as 'practice'. Briefly, RAP principles are: a) radical participatory democracy; b) collective action for transformation toward a better world; c) commitment to work for social justice in solidarity with the popular classes; d) interplay of research, education and social action.

The first tenet of RAP —radical participatory democracy— means breaking with the conventional subject-object relationship even though it is common practice to call the research participants "human subjects." This epistemological break is clearly

described by Rodríguez-Brandão (2005) as moving from "object of my research" to "subjects of our research". That is, research participants are protagonists and the researchers become supporting actors. Researchers in RAP-type of work forge the conditions for radical democratic participation of the people in the study and their collective action for the transformation of their realities. The second tenet —collective action for transformation toward a better world— refers to political action toward building countervailing popular power for transforming the conditions of participants and the marginalized sectors of society. In other words, it is a liberating movement. Critical understanding of the people's situation by the people themselves includes the forging of consciousness of the need for solidarity, hope and commitment to sustained collective work for their own betterment. Based on historical analysis, de Souza (1990) argues that any top-down reform or social change, without real people's participation, will result in actions against the people themselves. The third tenet of RAP is: Commitment to ethically and socially responsive type of work. It implies that researchers must commit to ethical and socially responsive work on the side of the poorest and most vulnerable people (Fals-Borda, 1995). Freire (2005) urges us to ask ourselves: How can we struggle to make the world better? For whose interests do we fight? He suggests that we must follow the ethics that respect the dignity of human beings, not the ethics of the market. However, it is not possible to change the world without a vision, dream and utopia (Freire, 2005) as well as commitment and solidarity. Hence, the role of the external researcher is that of shared decision maker, being socially and culturally responsive to the group or community's issues, interests, and needs as defined by most of the members of the community. The fourth and last tenet—interplay of research, education and communitarian work— is self-explanatory, given that RAP is a holistic experience in which research, action, and social action are intertwined and in continual dynamic interdependence and interaction.

Participants and setting

This project is an ongoing service and research intertwined activity with school children's parents living in 'colonias'. Attendant

parents (for the most part mothers), are a transient population, yet there is a core group of five to seven mothers who regularly show up. Except for one who is in her 40s, the rest are in the late 20s and early 30s.

So far, I have facilitated 18 culture circles type of workshops on these matters, with an average of 15 participants per each meeting taking place in two different community centers. I use the insights from this continuing experience to illustrate, document, and contextualize the urgency for Latinos(as), especially parents, to engage in critical media literacy.

By and large, Latino parents are invited to participate in dialogues about the issues that preoccupy them, concerning their children's schools, school duties at home, excessive violence, sex, and commercialism in TV and other means of communication. I often use current Latino related stories and the ways they are portrayed in the media they use most. Actually, Latino parents readily embrace the issue at hand and go on to share stories they have experienced or are familiar with. In general, parents (especially mothers) feel that their lives and traditions have been invaded by new media programs and entertainment that are not good for them, their families or their communities. At the same time, they value being informed through the media, and cannot imagine life without access to them. The topics they bring up the most are: children watching TV or video games rather than doing homework or participating in sport activities outdoors; violence and stereotypes in cartoons and other children's programming; feeling that their experiences are misrepresented; the bombardment of advertisements and their impact on eating, dressing, and behavior; and the advertising of alcohol and tobacco. Following the study of each issue selected by the specific group of parents, they are invited to engage in exploring ways to take action, including the search for alternative media that benefit rather than harm their children and themselves.

For the most part, Latino parents show awareness of media problems in terms of the direct influence on their lives, but they lack awareness in key impacting areas, such as the uncritical consumption of news. I always perceive their increasing potential for becoming more conscious consumers and users of media

and active participants in searching for, supporting, and/or creating alternative, independent means of communication that will serve their communities better. Specifically, for Latino parent participants in these culture circles, media affect their family affairs by: a) Taking time and opportunities away from more interaction among family members and giving special attention to each other; b) Promoting things bad for health, such as junk food, alcohol, tobacco, drugs, violence, and stress; c) Pre-empting practice of sports and engaging in activities other than being a "couch potato"; d) Pre-empting time for engaging in community and cultural activities; e) Increasing the electricity bill; and above all; f) Stimulating children's nagging their parents to buy things advertised on TV or other media. They also admit that, without media, they will be missing some information about what happens around the world.

I have found important logistic and institutional problems in doing critical media literacy with Latino parents from these neighboring communities. Those complications impede advancing with a group of parents up to the point of preparing them to become media literacy educators for their own families and communities. This type of project requires continuity of the respective culture circle meetings to achieve enough preparation and/or the initiation of an alternative media endeavor (e. g. a newsletter). The impediments have to do with the institutions that are in a position to reach out to Latino parents, such as schools and governmental or non-governmental social agencies. These organizations operate with a top-down, transmissionist model of information and education rather than a type of literacy for reading the world, as Freire and Macedo define it. Institutional practices and the Latino communities themselves are used to having information about any issue simply passed down from above. Follow-up concerning what people do with it is for the most part not included in the plan. Batliwala and Patel (1997) point out the problems of working with time-bounded initiatives for a real community transformation. For these authors as well as for Rahman (1994), communitarian work should look at supporting people's self-development and self-reliance, which more often than not far

exceeds the time limits of a funded project. I have found myself many times in this situation.

At this point, the reader may be thinking "why don't I get a grant to implement these types of long term critical media literacy projects with Latino parents?" I have written several proposals, but unfortunately this area is not a priority, and worse, it seems very unpopular among foundations and even with governmental institutions. This is the reason why I have collaborated with other projects that target these same communities of Latino parents that I am also interested in working with.

Exceptional experience

A group of mothers (15-20) who had attended several educational workshops in a community center in a nearby small town continued meeting although the supporting agency had finished the project and its economic support. This group of women often expressed concern about their children's problems related to school. One of the difficulties they talked about in the first meeting was their lack of strategies to engage the youngsters in reading books, as the school expected them to do. We started exploring why the students did not engage easily in reading the books provided by their teachers for reading at home. In the following meetings of the culture circle, called "Tertulia literaria", we analyzed a couple of those publications, other children's books of the same nature, classic fairy tales, as well as multicultural and bilingual children literature. The collective analysis allowed many fruitful conversations concerning their perceptions, struggling relationships with school personnel, and their deep care about getting the best education for their sons and daughters. As mothers closely examined these texts, they realized that the books their sons and daughters took home were not new to them; hence it was difficult to get children interested in reading them again. One participant, a woman from an indigenous community from Central America, pointed out she hasn't seen a single book, of those brought home by her boy, which had stories relevant to her own culture. She offered to write some herself. This was the spark that ignited these women's desire for authoring their own stories, with the perspective of having their children read them and perhaps follow their

example. Nonetheless, some of them were not confident of their writing ability or of the interest that their accounts could have for others, even for their own progenies. I tried to motivate them by showing some books that my student teachers have written about their families, and their own lives, full of poems and stories. The mothers started to compose prose and poetry based on life experiences each time we met. I scaffolded and facilitated their writing by reading and giving examples of already finished works.

Certainly, at the beginning, some of the women had a hard time to start writing and/or sharing. I can say now that meaning, purpose, and connections with their life experiences were key for their engagement. The focus on writing and problems of scheduling provoked about a 50% drop out of the women initially interested in continuing to meet as a group. However, those who became involved grew in confidence and motivation by the possibility of having their own books published. They wanted to show the school personnel that they were able to do things never expected from them. These women wanted their children to be proud of their moms as writers. Five of them wrote enough pieces (about 10, with illustrations and pictures) to make up their own individual books. We found a company that gives the first copy and the materials free, so that they could have their books published at no cost.

Other media literacy areas examined in the culture circles

In examining the mass media impact on Latino families, we need to focus not only on what media do, but what they do not do. This has to do with their lack of social responsibility to serve the public targeted with their commercials and programming. Corporate mass media regularly omit presenting information that is relevant and necessary to Latino communities. This includes issues concerning bilingual education, parents' rights, and in general the school system and its expectations, which has tremendous implications for future generations of Latinos in the USA. Lack of all these facts makes Latino parents feel incompetent about meeting the school expectations and participating in the decision-making process about alternatives for their children's instruction.

This is a generalized problem for immigrant Latino parents. Corporate mass media are not providing public service —as they should— by informing parents about the programs and issues of the schools in the area, and allowing people to ask questions and debate these important topics. Instead, commercial media are using the airwaves —a public good— to flood Latino homes with advertising, irrelevant and even harmful programs targeting youth and children, solely for their own economic and political benefit. Furthermore, these same corporate media are prompt to echo anything that puts immigrants, especially Latinos, in a bad light, and either imply or directly state that immigrants as well as the people who care for them are criminals. To some extent, schools that serve Latino populations should take some blame for not making public significant information about educational programs that may enable their participation in a more effective way in the education of their children. These same schools often blame parents because of their lack of involvement in their children's education.

Based on the culture circles held so far with Latino parents, I have identified some types of actions that are urgent to implement in order to have direct impact on their habits in using media:

1. Deepen and spread the process of conscientization about the impact of mass corporate media on families and communities.
2. Raise awareness of the vulnerability of some subgroups such as toddlers, children, youth and elderly, targeted by marketers.
3. Question the interests that are served by what is given as news.
4. Propose supplementary activities in addition to parents' own initiatives about engaging and mediating their own families' media literacy:
    a. Sit with children and watch TV programs in order to identify the concerns and issues important to their children. This could be an opportunity to know what their children like and why.
    b. Help their children to appreciate the impact of media on their own lives and preferences by negotiating with

them the meaning of the messages while helping them identify the hidden agendas and stereotypes.

c. Negotiate with children alternative activities to watching TV or playing electronic games, and reward them with activities more highly favored by the child.
d. Role-play a family scenario of media literacy in order to identify strategies and problems when mediating media programs for children.
e. Present an actual TV show to a group of parents and model for them how to make a critical analysis by asking questions such as: Who benefits from the show conducted in the way it is? Who suffers, is hurt or humiliated? Is it fair? Whose values are legitimate? Who is stereotyped? What is the purpose? What are the benefits from viewing it? How could they be better? What could you do to make it better? How could you impact the revision of that specific program? (For example, write a letter to the producer and director of the program).

A comprehensive critical media literacy project should include, as early as possible, the engagement of parents in searching for, identifying, supporting or creating alternative, independent, nonprofit public service media at the local, regional and national levels. As defined by their mission statement, these types of media are concerned about the public interest by informing with real news, presenting voices which will not be heard otherwise, and providing space for democratic public debates about real problems of real people and their communities. Even though Latino parents from immigrant working classes have some basic awareness of the negative influence of the most popular media such as TV and video games, there is still a long road to travel.

Concluding remark

Even though the invisibility and misrepresentation of Latinos(as) in major news networks has not changed significantly since the 2001 *Network Brownout Report* was issued, marketers and politicians are having a "big time" going after Latinos while hiding their agendas under the banner of "Latino power". Latinos are in the eye of the media storm. Knowing how the media work and their

driving interests, critical media literacy is a necessary and urgent "intellectual self-defense" as Chomsky (1989) defines it.

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NOTE

1 See a history of this movement in Rodriguez-Brandão (2005).