Pedagogies of Paradox in Media Studies and Media Labour

Vicki Mayer

My work on media production hinges on contradictions that swing wide open in the classroom. Contained within my own safehouse, the social theories of humans as inherently productive have been the inspiration for much of my academic research and writing career. Yet, my inspiration creates consternation in an academy that builds more walls than windows to the outside. We live in a world in which not everyone's labour is seen as contributing value—public or private—in which the university participates through pedagogic regimes of sorting and competition. Media Studies 2.0, as Toby Miller (2012) variously tells the history, moved from a training ground of Cold War propagandists to a full-body hug of global Hollywood and High Tech. While I have no illusion of remaking media studies outside of the contemporary politics of media representation, ownership, and distribution, I have found some doors that, if we crack them open a bit, might generate a collective ethics for media production.

Language and other representational forms are media for creativity and action. Passed along through social processes, they enable us to speak in our own voices and express the material conditions that have shaped us. Theories of voice and social action have underlined numerous strands of media activism, from the pre-Stalinist Labor Press in the early Soviet Union to the NAACP's *The Crisis* magazine to Pacifica Radio and Bread and Puppet Theater. My own experience with media activists came in graduate school, at the urgings of DeeDee Halleck, who herself emulated a professor-activist for a theory of media production and social change. I spent a summer, then two, following the work of TV Maxambomba, a community media collective forged from the resistance to the continuity of authoritarianism in post-dictatorial Brazil. I cut my teeth on "vídeo popular" as a process of freeing working-class people by allowing them to self-produce videos that countered the images of themselves as either thieves or servants. Embedded in neighborhoods throughout the metropolitan sprawl of Rio de Janeiro were teams of mostly teen producers. They were planning stories about community concerns and developing fictional allegories for future political debates. For a number of years in the 1990s, they showed their work in public squares, projected on the wall of the church or the daycare center, and then opened the camera up to anyone who wanted to speak to what they had just seen. I was struck by how, with very little capital but a lot of gifted labour, an ethos of radical pluralism in media production empowered a community of citizens. Plus, it was a lot of fun. The spiriting uplift I still feel reading

about radical newspapers, guerilla video, community radio, and all sorts of production by the people, for the people can be quite deflating in a practical setting. Very few scholars have written about the micro-politics of the labour of media production—who gets to control the camera or the mike, the editing decisions or the audience discussion afterwards. All collective creative processes are messy. Richard Sennett (2012) theorizes improvisation as a kind of routinized communication between people who trust each other enough to let them express their unique contribution for a moment. Fostering trust, from inception to distribution of a media product, is one of the big reasons industrial media production tends to concentrate in a handful of global metropoles and creative production teams tend towards the same un-diverse set of workers. Geographic clustering allows people to build trust networks to efficiently get the routine aspects of the project done, while allowing individuals to add their own touch on the finished product. It's that security that motivates labourers to say they love what they do, despite every other crappy and precarious part of being a member of the vaunted creative class.

A university shares some of the same geographic advantages as a creative cluster. The media studies students know each other. They have to, if they are to finish their team projects and group assignments. In addition, institutions of higher learning draw together communities that share routines for the production of knowledge. There are the ritualized individual genres for self-expression—the essay, the exam, and th e class presentation—but these are learned in a community of other students and in dialogue with the instructors. Bonds of trust, when built over time, allow individuals in the collective to show more of their own unique selves, to take that risk outside the rubric.

Paradoxically, the advantage of clustering is not in itself of value in the academy. Simply being present and interacting with others over a sustained time is not going to get anyone through their program of study, though it is the foundation for all subsequent production. Grade hierarchies do not reflect the value of negotiating social differences in the physical spaces of campus, much less the surrounding locales where part of the process of just being integrated into society is actually referred to as "adulting." As a result, we don't tend to evaluate the quality of the clusters formed in that special community. Media industries are rife with creative teams who've worked with each other since the old college days. John Caldwell (2014) even calls them a shadow academy, for the ways media studies students import the critical theories from our classes into new contractual relationships. And there is yet another rub. With so many people working together even for a matter of weeks, the classroom tends to reproduce voices that represent the shared qualities of the whole, or lack thereof. If student media production reflects the quality of the clustered community, and we do not pay attention to or assess the social condition represented therein, then we should not be surprised at the narrow scope for media creativity and action, the lack of pluralism, and the abundance of highly skilled media pieces that all say very little.

Like in other creative industries I have studied, I am wary that the individualized goals of media studies' students overtake their attention to the politics of their own production community, and the means by which knowledge is produced and circulated. I am constantly searching for pedagogies that challenge the inevitable emptiness of media produced by individuals in search of reputation and affirmation within a small network.

Most of my class projects now find themselves in online spaces where they live among the contributions of others from many different communities of producers and users. The latest experiments have found their way into ViaNolaVie, a collaboration between university instructors and citizen journalists to promote voices about life and culture in New Orleans.[1] The projects set up challenges that demand that everyone participate in the alternative politics of community media. Namely, that project members forge:
- An alternative ethics for media representation that considers the perspectives of others beyond the classroom through deep listening and cultural study;
- An alternative ethics of ownership that reconsiders the property rules that protect their creations

but disrespect those of others beyond the classroom;

• An alternative ethics of distribution that experiments with interactivity, algorithms, and connected networks of partners

Not every project addresses every one of these alternative politics, but they are emulated across the ViaNolaVie archive as a messy, unsorted, and pluralistic whole. I guess that's what blows in when you open the doors.

When does the pedagogy of an alternative media studies move students from an academic model based on creative labour and into a creative activism based on plural voices and an alternative politics for media? Maybe these are not so opposed. Like creative labour, creative insurgencies are largely deliberate, social processes that take the familiar and make it new, strange, and symbolic. Theorizing the creative insurgency behind the Arab uprisings, Marwan Kraidy writes that productions were rarely spontaneous: "Mural street art is a laborious endeavor" (2015, 15). It involves many people working in a dialectic with other artists, activists, intellectuals, and ordinary people who inspire something not wholly new, but a fusion with the universe of what has been. The routine creative labour of the university classroom can contribute to creative insurgency, but it takes a long view with larger, connected producers and publics.

Of course, my theory of pedagogy would be incomplete if it did not assume the added labours that my co-teachers and I face in laying that groundwork for others. Even the etymology of the word depends on the pedagogue, from the ancient Greek *paidagogos*, or a "slave who escorts boys to school and generally supervises them" (Harper, n.d.). Beyond the slavishly routine duties of escorting and supervising, however, lies the excitement of building something together that lasts beyond the semester, the student cohort, the faculty, and the staff. For these projects are the products of those social theories ambling around my own mind, which only working together, can find a site to call home.

Notes

1. This project has many predecessors and inspirations for collaborative production and archiving, including: MediaNola, New Orleans Historical, Technotrash, and Data Walking. I dedicate this essay to those who have invited me and those whom I have invited to work on these efforts.

References

Caldwell, John T. 2014. "Para-industry, shadow academy. " *Cultural Studies* 28 (4): 720-740.

Halleck, DeeDee. 2002. *Hand-held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Harper, Douglas. n.d. "Pedagogue." *Online Dictionary of Etymology*. Accessed May 20, 2019. https://www.etymonline.com/word/pedagogue?ref=etymonline_crossreference.

Kraidy, Marwan M. 2016. *The Naked Blogger of Cairo*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Mayer, Vicki. 1998. "For the people and by the people: TV Maxambomba's regeneration of popular cinema." *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 17 (January): 223-232.

Mayer, Vicki A., and Cicilia M. Krohling Peruzzo. 2015. "TRANSLATION: Civic Media, Meet Community Media; Community Communication and Education for Citizenship." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 32, no. 3 (August): 143-157.

Miller, Toby. 2012. *Blow up the Humanities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Sennett, Richard. 2012. *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.