The message behind the medium:
an appraisal of a computer software for schools catalogue

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The most obvious and most natural view to take about computer software for schools is that it provides an interesting new technology for teaching the familiar school subjects. This may well be the case. However the question which I wish to explore in this paper is whether or not there are additional messages which this medium is communicating, intentionally or otherwise. Clearly a full investigation of this would require study of the software in use. As a preliminary step however in such a project the present paper studies a computer software for schools catalogue. The messages which I am on the look out for are those relating to social inequalities, or misleading representations of society.

Social Inequalities
Gender

Uden (1988) refers to the "enormous prejudices" which "exist in the male-dominated world of computers". To what extent therefore does the catalogue reflect - and hence possibly reinforce - this power structure? Three aspects seemed to reflect this. Firstly, in quoting teachers' approval of particular packages, twice as many male teachers (8) were quoted, compared to female teachers (4). (Note all schools were at the primary level). Also, the cover showed ten children only three of which were girls. Finally on the three occasions where the computer is personalised, it is referred to as male.

Race

There is little evidence to go on here. Two of the ten children on the front cover appeared as if they might have come from ethnic minorities. All the teachers quoted had British surnames.

Misleading representations of society

Many of the software programmes refer to situations in society. The point I wish to make about that is that there are different perspectives on social situations. Yet all the programmes appear to provide just one perspective. This is educationally damaging in that it gives the pupil the impression that there is only one perspective.

A further point is that there would appear to be a systematic bias in the perspective which is selected. Not surprisingly it is the dominant perspective which is chosen. Although this may seem the natural choice,

nevertheless the consequence is that the dominant perspective is reinforced - at the expense of the less dominant. It is in this sense that we can say that the teaching is biased.

Finally I should point out that any one instance of this bias scarcely seems to matter. What does matter is that <u>this bias pervades education</u>, and <u>the accumulation of many little unimportant biases constitute the socialisation of the child into the dominant perspective</u>.

Colonialism

Perhaps the most blatant misrepresentation is the programme entitled "18th centuray exploration". This gives the child an active role in setting up a colony ... they make decisions like choosing a site, planting crops, building shelters. There appears to be no reference to the original inhabitants - the children are given no experience of what it meant to be colonised.

Profit and safety

Less obvious is the case of "Time Trucker". Here the object is to deliver as many objects as possible in a specified time and to earn money. The perspective here would seem to be the maximisation of profit by the employer and the maximisation of wages by the employee. Yet our knowledge of real life tells us that this system can be a threat to road safety in that employers pressurise their drivers to take risks, and in that drivers, as a result of this pressure or voluntarily in order to maximise wages, do indeed take risks - and illegally falsify driving records. These aspects would appear to be ignored.

"Discover your environment"

In this programme, you are a caterpillar learning how to survive in Whispy Wood. You then "take the 'Test of Fellowship' to see if you are fit to survive". In the shift from the first to the second sentence is it possible to detect the introduction of the notion of Social Darwinism? Whether in biology proper or in social theory "survival" is a concept which needs to be carefully handled.

Space

"Climb into your space ship and follow Big Norman [as distinct from Little Norma, presumably] to the planets". As a devotee of Dan Dare I can well imagine the fun of this programme. But real space is not so funny. Not only is it a demonstration of technological development (which some call progress), but it is also driven by the superpower military competition. The child needs to be introduced to both perspectives on space.

Droom

"Rescue a princess and defeat her enemies". OK it's a fairy-tale, but ... A gender perspective might suggest that boys are too busy rescuing computer princesses to allow real girls a chance to use the computer.

And how do we know we're on the princess's side? Here again the assumption is that it is right to be on the side of the ruling authority, perhaps even that a monarchy is better than a republic?

Conclusion

I expect that with the last few examples you began to feel (as I did!) that my argument was wearing a bit thin - that really it's all very harmless. In reply I would point you back to my earlier argument that what is important is not any single instance but the unremitting tide of ideas which consistently point the pupil towards the dominant perspectives in society. This is not what education should be.

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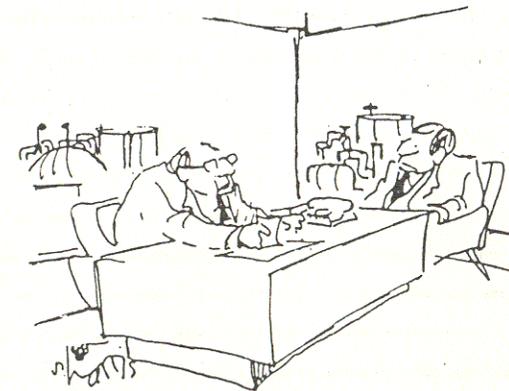
'True, the fluorocarbon industry's threat to the ozone layer may very well be serious, but the ozone layer's threat to the fluorocarbon industry is equally serious'