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Mass Media as Grass Roots



5:00 - 7:00 pm Haines Hall 352

Wednesday, October 14, 2009

In this talk, I will illustrate that mass media is not necessarily a homogenizing, deadening force. Instead, the mass media can cultivate distinctive grass roots movements. This is because the very same mass-media infrastructures that are characterized by cultural critics as “mind-numbing” also require creative recontextualizations in order to spread. I’ll illustrate this point by looking at a phenomenon arguably categorized as a “hip hop artist” named Soulja Boy and the meteoric rise of his hit, “Crank Dat.” By looking at how this song has been recontextualized in a fantastic diversity of forms, it becomes clear that no matter how massively produced and ubiquitously distributed a product or message is, any text contains layers of semiotic value that are **selected for** differently by different groups. Moreover, *the more widely circulated and mass-produced a semiotic form is, the more highly diverse the interactions with it will be.* Suburban Elementary School Boys, Harry Potter Fans, even MIT Professors and their students know this song. But they all know it very differently. And, rather than being mindlessly numbed by it, each group, to different degrees, creatively recontextualizes it in a new semiotic array. I will conclude with a brief illustration of other movements — presidential campaigns and anti-campaigns, for example — which take this same form, and discuss how this new-fangled, mass-mediated but highly localized grass roots process may also be a critical force in education and politics today.