

OVERVIEW OF THE KIT

Media Construction of the Environment Kit Series

The kits in this three-part series explore a wide variety of media in the United States with a broad chronological and topical sweep. Indigenous media forms prior to European contact with Native American peoples included petroglyphs, pottery and basketry. These media provided means for indigenous artisans to transmit ancestral knowledge and ritual forms concerning human interaction with their natural world relations – animals, plants and minerals.

In the early 19th century, media forms included etchings and paintings created by painters and illustrators. These artists were often hired by wealthy patrons, often kings or presidents, to represent their interests in distant corners of their dominion. In the late 19th century, with the expansion of the market economy, the first public relations experts began to create posters and fliers to sell the wares of their sponsors. Advertisements for a new McCormick's reaper and Black Death insecticide and fertilizer were created in this way. In this same period social critics began to publish their own individual challenges to prevailing views regarding people and the environment. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and the *Harper's Weekly* cover, "Slaughtered for the Hide" are examples of such early environmental advocacy.

By the mid-20th century, public relations firms were hired by multinational corporate clients to manage public perception and to help create new markets for their products. Magazine ads for DuPont, for example, heralded "Better Things For Better Living Through Chemistry" and encouraged consumers to

buy new products such as nylons and antifreeze that were not previously available and thus not necessities just a decade before. In a similar way, large governmental projects such as Hoover Dam were advertised on government report covers as "modern engineering triumphs." By the end of the 20th century, as global corporations became even larger, the capacity to spread their message grew accordingly. In-house corporate marketing departments in coordination with industry councils created multi-year advertising campaigns to increase market share, to self-define as "green" and to defend themselves against critics.

With the advent of the modern environmental movement in the 1970s, new questions came from an awakened public as to the impact of scientific and technological progress. These questions were initially posed in writings by individuals such as Rachel Cason and Jacques Yves Cousteau and then brought to the wider public in such visual forms as posters, editorial cartoons and satirical spins on corporate advertising. By the 1980s, environmentalism had such public approval that major corporations now use this popular environmental interest to sell their own products. Thus *Time* magazine's editors could prepare a cover story on the toxic poisoning of the nation while relying on advertising revenue from some of the very corporations that were polluting.

Media Construction of the Environment Kit Series continued

In the 21st century, new media had advanced to the point where individuals and small groups advanced their own point of view to attack or support corporate or government positions. The Internet and digital technologies allowed advocacy journalism to thrive in the blogosphere. Environmental activist groups like Students for Bhopal and Greenpeace created their own media forms as did their critics, groups like the American Chemistry Council and the Committee For a Constructive Tomorrow.

The proliferation of media forms and sources raises concurrent issues of concern: Can an advocate for a particular point of view also be objective? Is knowledge of the financial sponsorship of a group or individual essential in determining credibility of their media message? When corporations, the government and activist groups all use appeals to “planet stewardship” to further their disparate goals does the phrase itself lose its currency?

“As we peer into society's future, we -- you and I, and our government -- must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage. We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent phantom of tomorrow.”

– President Dwight Eisenhower
Farewell Address

OVERVIEW OF THE KIT

Media Literacy and Democratic Citizenship

The founders of the United States articulated the need for a literate citizenship as core to the development of a deep and enduring democracy. We live in an age when the most influential messages about pressing social issues and events are delivered through mass media, such as television, magazines and the Internet. Most students use the Internet as their primary source of information, yet few have any formal training in assessing the credibility of information in Web sites. It is essential to the success of our democracy that young people consciously and consistently analyze and evaluate media messages. They need to be taught to seek out current, accurate, and credible sources of information; they need to understand the influence of media messages on their understanding of the world; and they need training in identifying and using various techniques for communicating messages in different media forms. Without these critical skills, we risk losing the diversity and freedom of thought that underpins a culture of true democracy.

Collective Reading of Media Messages

This curriculum is based on the classroom practice of collective reading, in which the teacher leads the class through the process of decoding images, sounds and text as a way of developing a range of critical thinking skills while teaching core knowledge. This constructivist approach encourages the development of moral reasoning as students clarify their own interpretations, listen to the analysis of their peers, and discuss ethical issues. Decoding of the documents in this curriculum will help train students to distinguish fact from opinion, analyze point of view and identify bias, interpret historical

documents, and use evidence to back up a thesis. The classroom decoding process is particularly effective in involving students who rarely share their opinions about print-based material, including students with reading disabilities, visual learners, and students for whom English is a second language. The teacher should consider calling on students or going around the room to ensure participation by all students in the collective reading process.

Encouraging Multiple Readings

Although the Teacher Guides for each lesson include possible answers to the probe questions, the teacher should encourage multiple readings and a diversity of responses for most of the questions posed in the teacher guide. It is important that students give evidence in the document to explain their conclusions. Occasionally a question has only one right answer (e.g. "Who created this video?"), and students should learn to distinguish between objective and subjective questions. The suggested answers given in the scripts are intended to reflect typical responses that address key historical and media literacy concepts and information. However, it is important that students recognize that all people do not interpret media messages the same way. Depending upon each reader's background, including life experience, age, gender, race, culture, or political views, he or she may have very different interpretations of a particular text. The collective reading experience provides the opportunity to explore these differences and discuss the important concept that readers interpret messages through their own lenses.

Reading Bias

A major theme of these materials is the recognition that all media messages come from a particular point of view and have a bias that reflects the intent and perspective of the producer and sponsor. With these materials, teachers can train students to recognize bias and point of view. The teacher should encourage students to ask critical questions about any media messages encountered inside or outside the classroom using the *Key Questions To Ask When Analyzing Media Messages* found at www.projectlooksharp.org.

Bias in this Curriculum and in the Classroom

This series of lessons, like all media, also has a point of view and a bias. As teachers use the lessons, they may identify opinionated language, selective facts, missing information, and many other subjective decisions that went into constructing this view of history. The same questions the curriculum applies to other documents can be applied to this media construction: Who produced this curriculum for what purpose and what is its bias? Teachers and students could and should be asking critical questions about the editorial choices that went into constructing these lessons. For instance, why did we choose to focus on certain topics (e.g., environmental justice, green marketing and GMOs), but not others (e.g., risk/benefit analysis, the precautionary principle and chemical body burden)? And, what is your evidence for these conclusions? When using these materials teachers will make their own decisions of what to include and to edit, what questions to use and what issues to avoid. All of these decisions, both by the creators and users of the curriculum, will influence the view of history that students receive. Teachers should encourage students to thoughtfully analyze and discuss the stories, the perspectives, and the biases celebrated and criticized within our own classrooms. Those skills and practices are core to an educated democratic citizenship.

Additional Resources

For more information about media decoding download these documents from the project Look Sharp website:

- Key Questions to ask when analyzing media messages
- Tips for Media Decoding
- Core Principles for media literacy education

Fair Use of Media Documents

The classroom critique of political and cultural documents (e.g., paintings, TV news clips, excerpts from films, web pages) is essential to the development of core literacy skills in our media saturated democracy. To enable educators to fulfill the mission of teaching these core civic objectives, Project Look Sharp has created media literacy integration kits using a variety of different media documents for critical analysis in the classroom. The documents in this curriculum are presented for the purpose of direct critique and solely to be used in an educational setting.

For more information about fair use in Media Literacy Education, go to the Media Education Lab at Temple University at www.mediaeducationlab.com.