

THE JESSICA LYNCH RESCUE - NEWS, PROPAGANDA OR ENTERTAINMENT?

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn to ask key media literacy questions including:
Who produced this message?
For what purpose?
With what target audience in mind?
How accurate, current and credible is it?
- Students will examine the credibility of different sources and different media constructions about history and current events.
- Students will distinguish between different types of TV programming including news, news criticism, and drama.

VOCABULARY & CONCEPTS

combat camera	docudrama	media literacy	video news release
credibility	documentary critique	target audience	

MEDIUM

Video clips from an AFRT television news report, the ABC news magazine Primetime, the BBC documentary War Spin, and the NBC docudrama Saving Jessica Lynch (Total running time: 12 min, 54 sec)



MATERIALS NEEDED

- Unit 3, Lesson 7 video clips from DVD or Web site

TIME

50 minutes

LESSON STEPS

1. Present *Introduction to the Lesson* (pg. 2) to the class.
2. Play the four video clips about the rescue of Jessica Lynch. Give *Background Information* (pg. 5, 7, 9, 11) for each clip. Follow each clip with *Questions, Suggested Answers, and Evidence* (pg. 5-11) to help focus the discussion.
3. Lead a discussion about issues of credibility, truth and how we learn about history, politics and current events using *Further Questions* (pg. 3).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Televised news coverage during wartime is shaped both by the perspective of the producer of the piece and by the owner or manager of the broadcast channel. The news we see is based upon the ideas of individuals who make their own judgments about what is important to show and tell and what is not. For example, in February 1991 during the first Gulf War, U.S. TV news tended to report on the quick victory of Coalition forces over Saddam Hussein while international reports tended to focus more on Iraqi civilian casualties. In April 2004, U.S. coverage of the conflict in Fallujah tended to focus on the executions of U.S. security workers, while international coverage focused on Iraqi demonstrators who were killed by U.S. troops (see Unit 3, Lesson 5).

When television journalists use information provided by the government, there is always the danger of the truth becoming secondary to the government line. In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, for instance, all TV news was created by members of Saddam's ruling Baath Party. In the United States, there are many sources of televised news, from the major network news shows to cable and satellite alternatives. During the Iraq War, some media critics cautioned that major news media were becoming too reliant on Pentagon news releases for their information on what was happening. They suggested that the distribution of video news releases by the Pentagon film crew, "Combat Camera," made it less likely for the public to get to see perspectives on the war beyond those created by the military.

Media literacy is the ability to ask important critical questions about whatever source of information you are exposed to. To practice critical media viewing you must be able to ask important questions, such as: Who produced this message and for what purpose? Who is the target audience - who are the producers trying to reach? Is the information up-to-date and reliable? In this lesson, you will see four different accounts of the same event. One is a television news report from the Armed Forces Radio and Television network, the second is a report from a news magazine, the third is a documentary critique of news coverage and the fourth is a made-for-TV docudrama, or dramatic reenactment. This lesson will help you to understand how and why different media sources interpret, slant and even manipulate their constructions to give different impressions of the same event.

On March 23, 2003, the second day of war, Iraqi forces in Nasiriya captured Private Jessica Lynch after her convoy made a wrong turn. Her Humvee was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade and crashed into a truck. The Army's report on the incident later suggested that Lynch suffered extensive injuries in the crash, including multiple fractures. Eleven U.S. soldiers died during the attack on the convoy, some in the crash and some in combat (Purdum136). Nine days later, on April 1, a joint team of U.S. Special Forces rescued Private Lynch from the Iraqi hospital where she was being treated and took her by helicopter to safety.

This event became headline news when the Washington Post ran a story titled "She Was Fighting to the Death" which falsely claimed that Private Lynch was shot and stabbed by Iraqi forces as she "fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers" (Seib 74). The Post story itself became a focus of news reports when it was disclosed that Lynch in fact had not sustained injuries from fighting, but solely from the vehicle crash. Washington Post spokesman Michael Getler later admitted that the article had been inadequately researched in an effort to get the scoop on an irresistible story. Getler later commented, "This was the single most memorable story of the war, and it had huge propaganda value" (qtd. in Goodman 272).

→ **Show** each of these clips in turn, providing *Background Information* (pg. 5-11) before you show each one. Use the *Questions, Suggested Answers, and Evidence* for each, encouraging dialogue about how one can discover the “truth” when there are many sides to the story. *Additional Information* is provided for each document.

→ **Use Further Questions** to explore issues of credibility, truth and how we learn about history, politics and current events.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Which of the four clips was the most interesting to you? Why?

Which of the four clips has the most credibility? Which is the most believable? Why?

Which of the four sources is the most accurate (or least biased)? Why? Which is least accurate (most biased)?

Where do you get the bulk of your information about history, political and current events? Are your sources credible? Are they truthful?

How many of you recognize the names Shoshana Johnson or Laurie Piestwa? Piestwa was a Native American soldier killed in the same attack that injured Jessica Lynch. Johnson is an African-American soldier captured along with Jessica Lynch. How many of you can name any of the male soldiers captured in Iraq? Why do you think the media chose to focus on Jessica Lynch, but not these other soldiers?

CONNECTIONS

Compare issues of credibility with these ads from Project Look Sharp’s Media Construction of Presidential Campaigns: President Bush and Bill Clinton ads on the state of Arkansas’ economy in the 1992 election campaign.

Compare media coverage of Jessica Lynch with Newsweek’s coverage of Lieutenant Calley during the Vietnam War with Project Look Sharp’s Media Construction of War.

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War Spin. Documentary. Reporter John Kampfner, Prod. Sandy Smith, Ed. Karen O'Connor. BBC, 2003.

Armed Forces Radio and Television (AFRT) Service Two-Minute Report
Broadcast first week of April 2003



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As its main information sources, this report uses a Pentagon press release and news conference. It includes video footage shot by the Pentagon film crew that accompanied the rescue mission. It aired shortly after the rescue was made public.

QUESTION | **What is the main message about U.S. forces?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | They are brave, principled and competent.

EVIDENCE | Brave: General Brooks says, “Brave souls put their lives on the line to make it happen.” Troops faced firefights going into and leaving the hospital. Principled: “Loyal to a creed – never leave a fallen comrade or embarrass their country.” Competent: In a “classic joint operation,” Lynch was rescued successfully.

QUESTION | **What is the main message about the Iraqis?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | They are dangerous and underhanded.

EVIDENCE | General Brooks suggests that the hospital was actually a military post with “mortars, maps and terrain models” and that rescue troops took fire when they were on the ground.

QUESTION | **Who is the target audience for this report?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | Armed forces members and their families

EVIDENCE | This aired on Armed Services Television and the content promotes a U.S. military perspective.

QUESTION | **What forms of persuasion do the producers use to suggest that the message is credible?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | The use of footage shot at the time of the operation suggests credibility. The uniforms of the anchor and the press conference spokesman suggest that the news is “official.” The shots of the quiet reporters at the military press conference suggest that this is accurate information and not up for question.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced in early 2002 his plans to set up an “Office of Strategic Influence” in order “to tell the world that this (the War in Afghanistan) was not an effort against the Afghan people.” The plan was strongly criticized in the media, and the Bush administration withdrew its public plans for such an office. Nonetheless, Secretary Rumsfeld continued to declare that his department would do whatever it could to portray the U.S. military aims in a positive light (Federation of American Scientists).

One of the ways in which the military delivers its own version of combat operations is through its program Combat Camera, or COMCAM (<http://www.doim.army.mil/VIWeb/combatacam.html>). The Jessica Lynch video was an example of how quickly COMCAM could turn around its footage. Within two hours of the rescue, an emergency press briefing was held for journalists at the media headquarters in Doha, Qatar to screen the five-minute video film of the rescue. Lieutenant Jane Laroque, the officer in charge of COMCAM’s soldiers in Iraq, commented on COMCAM’s purpose in an interview with the Baltimore Sun in April 2003: “We’ve got a lot of good humanitarian images, showing us helping the Iraqi people and the people in Baghdad celebrating. A lot of our imagery will have a big impact on world opinion” (qtd. in Rampton and Stauber 188).

Retired U.S. Air Force Colonel Sam Gardiner challenged the use of “psyops” or psychological operations in his investigative report titled, “Truth from These Podia: Summary of a Study of Strategic Influence, Perception Management, Strategic Information Warfare and Strategic Psychological Operations in Gulf II.” In the report, he points to 50 news stories about the Iraq war that he says were manufactured by government media experts in a secret project to sell the military invasion of Iraq (Smith “A Strategy of Lies”).

Gardiner pointed to the Jessica Lynch incident as an example of the military becoming too interested in managing public relations rather than attending to military operations. He noted the Newsweek report that stated that as soon as Lynch was rescued the Joint Operations Center phoned the top civilian communications aide, Jim Wilkinson, who went on to become the communication director for the 2004 Republican National Convention. He concluded: “Washington and London did not trust the peoples of their democracies to come to the right decisions... Truth became a casualty. When truth is a casualty, democracy receives collateral damage” (qtd. in Smith “A Strategy of Lies”).

Clip from ABC Primetime with Diane Sawyer
Broadcast Tuesday, November 11, 2003



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This exclusive interview with Jessica Lynch on the news magazine program Primetime was the first time that she had told a national television audience about her side of the story in an extended interview. CBS had previously tried, unsuccessfully, to get Lynch to do an interview by offering her a book deal, a movie and an MTV video show. These offerings were possible because Viacom, the giant media company that owns CBS, also owned MTV and Paramount movie studios (Seib 76).

This report uses as its main information source Diane Sawyer’s interview with Jessica Lynch. Like the previous clip, it includes video footage shot by the Pentagon film crew that accompanied the rescue mission.

QUESTION | **What is the main message about U.S. forces?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | They are courageous, competent and compassionate.

EVIDENCE | Courageous: Jessica Lynch is prepared to face her own death. The U.S. forces are armed and expect to receive fire as they attempt the rescue.
Competent: U.S. forces had a clear plan to get Lynch – cutting electrical power and staging a diversionary firefight.
Compassionate: They want to save Lynch. Rescuer gives her a flag and reassures her.

QUESTION | **What is the main message about the Iraqis?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | They are dangerous and deadly. They are afraid of U.S. power.

EVIDENCE | Dangerous: The tense music and explosions in the background give a sense of danger. Sawyer says, “She knows one word from Saddam Hussein, and she’ll be executed.”
Afraid: Iraqi nurse, Sahad, appears afraid and says: “They were like giants. We didn’t know what they would do with us.”

QUESTION | **What forms of persuasion do the producers use to suggest that their message is credible?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | The interview with Jessica Lynch suggests that the real story will come from the primary subject of the story. The additional interview with the Iraqi nurse adds confirmation to her version of events. The “real video” from the Combat Camera makes it seem as though this is the way it really happened. The soundtrack leads viewers to an emotional release. It encourages anxiety as the troops search for Lynch with synthesizers and explosions, and then reassurance and calm after the rescue, with snare drums and slower tones.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Does the report criticize or support the government position presented in the previous clip?

This Primetime segment uses music and editing to make emotional appeals. Do such appeals to emotion help to uncover truth? Why or why not? Are they appropriate in a news broadcast? In a news magazine?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In another part of the interview, Lynch commented on the false reports that she had sustained combat injuries while fighting for her life: "It hurt in a way, that people would make up stories that they had no truth about. Only I would have been able to know that, because the other four people on my vehicle aren't here to tell that story. So I would have been the only one able to say ... I went down shooting. But I didn't."

She also commented about the way the military used her story: "It does [bother me] that they used me as a way to symbolize all this stuff. It's wrong. I don't know why they filmed it, or why they say the things they [say], you know. ... All I know was that I was in that hospital hurting. ... I needed help. I wanted out of there. It didn't matter to me if they would have come in shirts and blank guns; it wouldn't have mattered to me. I wanted out of there." Jessica Lynch went on that same week to do interviews with Katie Couric, David Letterman and Larry King.

Clip from the documentary War Spin

Broadcast on the British channel, BBC Two, on May 18, 2003 and in the U.S. in July 2003



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

John Kampfner, political editor for London’s New Statesman magazine, made this film. This report uses as its main information source interviews with Iraqi doctors and eyewitnesses to the incident in Nasiriya, as well as an interview with the U.S. Assistant Defense Secretary. Like the previous clips, it also includes video footage shot by the Pentagon film crew that accompanied the rescue mission.

QUESTION | **What is the main message about U.S. forces?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | They create fake media events to justify the war. They are evasive, if not dishonest.

EVIDENCE | Create fake event - Interview with Iraqi man in restaurant suggests that U.S. knew that there were no Iraqi military at the hospital. Interview with Iraqi doctor in which he says, “Why do they do this? There is no Iraqi soldiers in the hospital,” and “They made a show of the American attack on the hospital like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan.” Reporter’s voiceover at end of clip says that Prime Minister Blair and President Bush “knew how vital it was to get the message right, to present the war and the case for war.”
Evasive – Assistant Defense Secretary Whitman refuses to answer questions about Lynch’s injuries and Iraqi resistance.

QUESTION | **What is the main message about the Iraqis?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | They are victims of U.S. and British violence. They are compassionate brave, and intelligent.

EVIDENCE | Victims – Opening clip of Iraqi patient hopping down hallway and clip of man in bed who was handcuffed by U.S. during the rescue, while doctor says, “I don’t know why they tie him. He cannot move.”
Compassionate and brave – Doctor’s story of risking his life to return Lynch to U.S. front lines.
Intelligent – Interviews with Iraqi professionals who have a clear analysis of U.S. and British actions and motives.

QUESTION | **Who is the target audience for this report?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | British and U.S. television viewers, especially those critical of British and U.S. actions in Iraq

QUESTION | **What forms of persuasion do the producers use to suggest that their message is credible?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | They film within the hospital where Lynch was treated. They speak with the doctor who treated Lynch as a demonstration of believable professional opinion. They interview the U.S. Assistant Defense Secretary to show they are being evenhanded.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Why do you think the reports by the Armed Forces Radio and Television Services station and the BBC are so different in their views of this incident?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

John Kampfner, the BBC reporter for this piece, referred to the army's handling of the Jessica Lynch rescue as "one of the most stunning pieces of news management ever conceived...The American strategy was to ensure the right television footage by using...images from their own cameras, editing the film themselves" (qtd. in Goodman 269).

He suggested that the Lynch story "provides a remarkable insight into the real influence of Hollywood producers on the Pentagon's media managers" (qtd. in Seib 75). He suggested that the Pentagon had been especially influenced by the Hollywood producer Jerry Bruckheimer, who had made the action film Black Hawk Down, about a U.S. crew trapped behind enemy lines in Somalia.

Bruckheimer had been given special access to U.S. troops in Afghanistan for the reality TV series Profiles from the Front Line, in an arrangement where the Pentagon could review and edit footage "for the safety of the troops" (Seib 31).

Kampfner had many critics himself. U.S. Assistant Defense Secretary Whitman said that the claim of a staged rescue "is ridiculous. I don't know how else to respond. The idea that we would put a number of forces in danger unnecessarily to recover one of our POWs is just ridiculous" (Hyland "BBC Documentary Exposes"). Time magazine added that the documentary "may be guilty of exaggeration itself, with its claim that the Pentagon manipulated information" (Seib 75). John Walcott, Washington bureau chief for Knight Ridder Newspapers, defended the military, saying: "We have not been able to find anywhere in the record any military official overselling this as a heroic mission or claiming that it was done under heavy fire or anything of the sort" (qtd. in Seib 76).

Clip from the NBC docudrama Saving Jessica Lynch

First broadcast November 9, 2003



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This TV movie is a dramatized account of the efforts of Iraqi lawyer Mohammed Odeh Al-Rehaief, who claims that he risked his life to tell the U.S. Marines about the location of Jessica Lynch. The title is similar to the popular film Saving Private Ryan, in which a U.S. Army captain in World War II leads a mission to return the last surviving son of the Ryan family from the frontline of combat to his mother. This report uses as its main information source Al-Rehaief's book, Because Each Life is Precious: Why an Iraqi Man Came to Risk Everything for Private Jessica Lynch.

QUESTION | **How is this clip different from the previous three clips?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | Although there are many possible answers here, help students to recognize the difference between news and entertainment. This clip is from a made-for-TV movie and uses actors, music, scripted scenes and fictional characters. It relies on dramatic cinematic techniques to hold our attention rather than interviews, narration and documentary footage.

QUESTION | **Is this clip more or less believable or credible than the previous three clips?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | Although the drama and intensity of this clip draws the viewer in, perhaps more successfully than the previous clips, movies like this are created as entertainment and have less credibility than news programs. The three previous clips—from a government news source, from a news magazine, and from a documentary film—all claim to be accurate and truthful in their reporting. It would undermine their credibility and hurt their reputation and their business if their reports were found to include false and misleading information. Although they each have a slant or bias, they each claim to be accurate. Non-documentary movies made for entertainment, such as Saving Jessica Lynch, do not claim to be accurate. They often distort or even create characters or events in order to make the story more entertaining or easy to follow. In general, entertainment sources are less credible than news sources.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

What information do you think is inaccurate in this clip from Saving Jessica Lynch? How could you find out?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

NBC tried to purchase the rights to Lynch's story but could not because she had already signed a million-dollar book deal with publisher Alfred A. Knopf. NBC did purchase the TV rights to Al-Rehaief's story. He had already signed his own book deal for \$300,000 with corporate media owner Rupert Murdoch's Harper-Collins Publishers (Goodman 272). In a story reported in the entertainment weekly Variety, NBC officials said that the Jessica Lynch rescue was "as good a story as you can get from this war. This story is Mission: Impossible, but it's real. It's uplifting, heroic, compelling and dramatic. You see this sort of thing in spy movies and wonder if it's really true. Now we know it is true" (BBC News).

There were questions about the accuracy of Al Rehaief's story. Jessica Lynch disagreed with his statements that he saw interrogators slap her and that he told her he was going to help her. Al-Rehaief told U.S. officials that he had seen Lynch while visiting his wife in the hospital, but hospital officials said that his wife didn't work there, and he probably had simply overheard marketplace rumors. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told a visiting U.S. Congressional delegation that in fact it was Israeli intelligence that had played the central role in locating Lynch.

Others pointed their criticism elsewhere. Betsy Hart wrote a column in the National Review titled, "Jessica Lynch Week: The Meaning Behind the Media Tour." In it, she blames feminists for using Lynch's story "to advance their cause of integrating women deeper into the frontlines of combat. In fact, the capture of American women by Iraqis was hailed by American feminists as a major advance for the gentler sex." Journalist Mark Bowen, the author of Black Hawk Down, placed the blame on the media rather than the Pentagon. "This is how the media works today, for better or worse. It happens without any prompting from the Pentagon; indeed it would not have been possible for the Pentagon to stop the unspooling of Saving Private Lynch" (Seibe 76).