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The Em-Powter-ing of America: Using Info-mercials to Teach Persuasion and Popular Discourse in the Basic Communication Course

Daniel W. Heaton

“. . . the usual defense consumers have in our over-communicated society is to develop. . . a mind that largely ignores most of the information to which it is exposed.”

Charles Larson, *Persuasion*

“You guys ready to stop the insanity? In a big way!”

Susan Powter, *Stop the Insanity*

Consumers devour television to such an extent that several scholars have examined a variety of effects and uses of television by consumers (Best & Kellner, 1987; Fiske, 1995, 1989a, 1989b, 1987; Heaton, 1990; Larson, 1995; Schudson, 1984; Vestergaard & Schroeder, 1985; Zeuschner, 1993). Today's college students — as consumers of material goods, visual images, verbal and nonverbal texts, and intellectual property — spend approximately 85 percent of their free time watching television (Zeuschner, 1993). Yet despite their almost addictive pursuit of this “product,” many students ignore the impact and importance their conspicuous consumption of television has on their daily lives. As a result, they are in danger of developing “a mind that largely ignores most of the information to which it is exposed” (Larson, 1995, p. 392). Therefore, communication educators need to develop teaching

methods and assignments that not only take into account the persuasive messages to which our students are exposed everyday, but that also help our students become more critical consumers of messages.

This article describes my attempt to help students become more critical consumers of the popular discourses to which they are exposed everyday. The assignment I use to teach persuasion and popular discourse focuses on one particular instance of popular discourse, Susan Powter's *Stop the Insanity!* info-mercial. I will first discuss why I chose this particular text as the object of student critique. Next, I will describe the assignment and then discuss its goals. Finally, I will relate my observations of student responses to the assignment formulated from qualitative student responses, personal conversations, and interviews about this assignment. Since this is not a quantitative study, my interpretations of student responses are necessarily subjective and impressionistic.

WHY "STOP THE INSANITY"

When I first began teaching the basic communication course, I was anxious to get to the section about persuasion. I realized how important a knowledge of persuasive tactics and strategies could be to anyone, no matter what their line of work, major in college, or relational goals. But when I asked my students what they thought about the persuasion chapter, many replied that they thought it was boring. Boring? Boring!

At first I thought there was something wrong with me as a teacher, but then I made an amazing discovery. I re-read the chapter about persuasion. It *was* boring. I will not mention which text we used, but the way the book's author explained persuasion made an exciting, life-changing topic sound like the recipe for burnt toast. I realized that I had been so excited about teaching persuasion that I gathered

quite a bit of supplementary material and ignored the textbook.

At that moment I was determined to salvage what I could of my favorite topic — I mustered all my persuasive energies to try to convince my students that, in spite of our textbook, the world of persuasion really was interesting and worthy of our attention. I decided that I would try to devise a way of teaching persuasion that my students understood and would accept. I knew they spent a great deal of time watching television, so I wanted to find an instance of persuasive discourse that was closely related to that activity. That is when I saw Susan Powter's 30-minute long paid advertisement "Stop the Insanity!"

Powter, "a woman whose own disappointing experience with the diet and fitness industry led her to discover the truth about taking back her life and becoming lean, strong, and healthy" (Powter, 1992) developed the "Stop the Insanity!" weight loss system for herself and decided to mass market the idea. The video is a combination of a lecture/sales presentation Powter gave to a large audience in the Mall of the Americas in Dallas, Texas, testimonial vignettes from people who have successfully used the product, "one-on-one" segments with Susan supposedly "at home" directly addressing the camera (and thus the home viewer), and opportunities for the home viewer to call a toll-free number to order the system. When her info-mercial first aired, it was usually broadcast around 1:00 a.m. or 2:00 a.m. As she gained popularity, her info-mercial began to air during prime-time hours on cable channels and on the weekends during the day, thus increasing her exposure to millions of viewers.

I was intrigued by the info-mercial because the organizational pattern of the entire advertisement was a very obvious example of Monroe's Motivated Sequence — Attention, Need, Satisfaction, Visualization, Action (Gronbeck, McKerrow, Ehninger, & Monroe, 1994). As Beebe and Beebe (1994) state, the motivated sequence uses a cognitive dissonance approach

designed to "first disturb your listeners and then point them toward the specific change you want them to adopt" (p. 385). I thought that such an explicit example of a persuasive strategy already discussed in class might prove more stimulating to my students than a video tape of a sample persuasive speech. Also, by using an example of persuasion from popular discourse, I thought my students would make the connection between what we discussed in class and the messages they encounter everyday.

THE ASSIGNMENT

Students watch the video of "Stop the Insanity!" in class. The assignment involves both solo and group critiques of the video. Students analyze the video to discover what persuasive strategies are used to get the home viewer to call the toll-free number and buy the product. After watching the video in class, they write a description of the content of the text and answer a set of directed questions (see Appendix) to guide their critique of Powter as a speaker. Students answer questions in six categories: choice of topic, organization, content, language/style, delivery, and effectiveness. They then provide examples from the video supporting their critiques. They also identify their criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of the video as a persuasive piece of popular discourse.

Students bring their written critiques to class and we discuss them as a large group. Students are then assigned to small discussion groups. Each group is given a specific area of importance to persuasion to apply to the video. For example, one group will examine how Powter's delivery positively and/or negatively affects the video's persuasive ability. Another group will explore the ethical issues raised by Powter's persuasive tactics. Yet another group will articulate how the different segments of the video, such as the public lecture, the

“Susan at home” segments, and the testimonials, affect its overall effectiveness.

Once each group assesses the video and forms its critique, each group presents their findings to the class. Often, this part of the assignment is more like a debate than a discussion. Sometimes groups form very different opinions of the ethics and effectiveness of Powter as a speaker. For example, several groups over the years have questioned Powter's credibility to speak on this subject because they do not believe she actually once weighed 260 pounds. Their reasons for doubting her credibility have varied from “her 'before' picture doesn't look anything like her — it could be anyone,” to “I read somewhere that her family denies she was ever that large.” Other students viewed her as extremely credible because “she comes across as someone who has been large before — she seems to care about getting people to make a change in their lives.” But whatever the particular disagreement in a class might be, I then encourage them to discuss their disagreements further so the group discussions themselves become exercises in formulating persuasive arguments.

After the group debates/discussions we begin follow-up discussions about what the students have learned about persuasion by completing this assignment. For me, this is one of the most crucial parts of the assignment because this is where I, as the instructor, receive direct feedback about an assignment's effectiveness. If I discover during the follow-up discussion that some concept pertaining to persuasion is generally misunderstood or warrants further discussion because of its impact on the students, I will adjust my schedule for the following class periods to clarify or expand an issue.

THE GOALS

The goals of this assignment are varied and extend beyond the critique of this particular instance of popular dis-

course. Cultural theorist and media critic Douglas Kellner (1995, 1989) proposes that viewers of television need to become more critical consumers of the images and ideologies to which they are exposed. Kellner (1995) contends that "critical literacy in a postmodern image culture requires learning how to read images critically and to unpack the relations between images, texts, social trends, and products in commercial culture" (p. 252). He suggests that viewers perform "ideology critiques" of the popular discourses encountered in their daily lives. Kellner, (1995) further stresses the importance of critiquing advertisements when he states, "many ads are multi-dimensional, polysemic, ideologically coded, open to a variety of readings, and expressive of the commodification of culture and attempts of capital to colonize the totality of life" (p. 257). By critiquing the "Stop the Insanity!" info-mercial, students put into practice "critical literacy" skills that effect their performance in not only the basic communication course but also across the curriculum and in a broader cultural context.

Many goals of this assignment are directly applicable to the basic communication course. By using Monroe's Motivated Sequence in their critique of "Stop the Insanity!" and by answering the directed questions students learn to apply the terminology used in the course and develop the ability to effectively articulate the principles of effective communication. By assessing and discussing Powter's use of high energy delivery and the amount and quality of sources she does and does not cite for her information, students explore the relationship between content and delivery in persuasive speaking. By debating Powter's credibility, naming the type of ethical standard she uses in her arguments, and establishing criteria for evaluating her use of ethics, they recognize which tactics used by speakers are ethical and which tactics are not. Furthermore, they not only gain experience evaluating the persuasion that occurs in a variety of settings (public speaking, mass mediated, verbal, and nonverbal) but they also gain experience formulating persuasive messages in a variety of

setting — intrapersonal (the solo critique), small group (the group critique), public (the in-class discussion), and mass media (watching the video).

Many goals of this assignment also apply across the curriculum. First, students employ critical thinking skills, which are useful no matter what courses they take. Additionally, since students discuss their views of the video individually and in groups, and since they must support their views with specific examples from the video, students get practice verbalizing their opinions and interpretations of a text in a very specific, concrete, well-supported form. Of course, as with assignments in any course, the crosscurricular value of this assignment manifests itself when (and if) students apply skills and knowledge gained in this course to their other courses. Although I have not conducted a quantitative study to assess the extent to which students apply their knowledge gained from this assignment cross-curricularly, I have spoken with many students over the years who have told me that the skills and knowledge they acquired in the basic communication course did have a direct impact in their other courses. Several mentioned this assignment specifically.

In addition to specific course goals and cross-curricular goals, this assignment fosters skills and awareness that have broad societal/cultural impact.

After completing the assignment, students should be able to identify the strategies used to persuade audiences of popular discourse. Also, by gaining experience as cultural critics, they become more critical consumers of popular discourse. Since “advertising sells its products and view of the world through images, rhetoric, slogans, and their juxtaposition in ads to which tremendous artistic resources, psychological research, and marketing strategies are devoted” (Kellner, 1995, p. 251), students in basic communication courses need to develop the ability to critique the often overlooked, but ever-present media messages that impact their lives in some form everyday.

STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE ASSIGNMENT

Over the period I have used this assignment in class, I solicited qualitative student responses concerning the effectiveness of the assignment, how useful they felt it was in class and how much they felt they used the skills fostered by this assignment in other courses. Some responses were gathered through personal conversations with students after class, others were gathered during class discussions, and the rest were gathered from their written critiques of the video.

One positive outcome of using this assignment noted by several students was a decrease in the amount of overall communication apprehension felt when students presented their own persuasive speeches in class. As one student told me, "I think I was less scared to talk in front of the class after the group work; I kind of knew people a little better, could judge how they think a little better than I could just from talking to them." Students said they felt more comfortable speaking in front of each other after this assignment because they knew each other's opinions more than they did before and the group work helped bring them closer together. Also, because they understood the art of persuasion more than they did before the assignment, they felt more confident in their ability to be effective persuasive speakers. As one student stated, "Once we did the critique [of Powter's video] I could see what you meant by the different types of appeals and about how to structure your arguments to be more persuasive. I think that helped my persuasive speech — I guess it did; I got an A!"

Some students also expressed how valuable the assignment had been to them beyond the basic course. When asked about this particular assignment, several students cited the "Stop the Insanity!" written critique as their first instance of

actually taking time to analyze a message received via television. One student's response was typical:

I grew up with TV, so I guess I didn't really think about it affecting me one way or the other. But seeing the video and talking about it really made me focus on something that I do everyday, but I just don't think about, you know. Until you take the time to sit down and really figure out, "this show is trying to influence me this way," and "this show is trying to influence me to do this other thing." I started [critiquing television shows] at home now, too. It's fun. Interesting to see how persuasion really works outside of speech class.

I know several students from different classes who became speech majors after taking the basic course. Five of them mentioned the "Stop the Insanity!" assignment as one of the inciting incidents that sparked their interest in learning more about rhetorical criticism and mass communication. Still other students have told me how they now take more time to formulate their opinions and support their arguments more fully in all their courses than they did before they understood how to be an effective persuader. According to one student who is currently in law school:

I've noticed myself consciously making an effort to think before I speak now. I used to just say what I thought regardless of what people might think. But I realize now that every time you speak you have some sort of persuasive effect on other people, and that's sort of a scary realization.

Another student, who became a speech major after taking the basic course, told me, "When we watched the Powter tape in class and critiqued it, I got a chance to practice debating my views with other people. I learned very quickly how to support my arguments because someone always calls me on them."

The assignment has been so successful in my classes that I have even had former students request copies of the video

for use in a variety of other classes as a way of encouraging in-class discussions about such topics as: fad dieting in a Health class; use of persuasive language in an English Composition class; truth in advertising in a Business class; use of gender stereotypes in a Women's Studies class; and the culture of weight loss in a Sociology course. Many disciplines are concerned with how popular discourses affect viewers, and students who major in those disciplines are using their skills to offer critiques of those discourses.

From my perspective as the instructor of the course, I have noticed several positive outcomes. I did not use the assignment in every section of the basic communication course that I taught so I could compare outcomes between classes that did use the assignment and classes that did not use it. In classes where the assignment was not used, students watched tapes of persuasive speeches from speech contests and by students from previous semesters. In classes where the assignment was used, student awareness of the persuasive structure of popular discourse increased as compared to classes where the assignment was not used. Those students also demonstrated the ability to distinguish between types of persuasive appeals used by a speaker more quickly than students who did not watch the video. On tests and in class discussions of their own persuasive speeches, students who completed the assignment could better articulate the relationship between content and delivery than students who did not complete the assignment. Those students also demonstrated the ability to apply knowledge gained from this assignment to other popular discourses, such as thirty-second commercials, popular magazines, song lyrics, and films, thus demonstrating their skills as critical consumers of popular discourse.

CONCLUSION

Variations of the assignment have also been successful in class. I began providing students with a written transcript of Powter's info-mercial so they could focus more closely on her use of language. Also, I recently began using thirty-second and one-minute long commercials in class as precursors to this particular assignment. In one class, I switched to a different info-mercial, Don LaPre's "Making Money," and discovered that it works almost as well with this assignment as "Stop the Insanity!" does. I even ordered the "Making Money" package that I bring to class for us to critique. Still, I prefer to use "Stop the Insanity!" because of Powter's dynamic delivery, her clear organization, and, as noted in several student discussions, her questionable credibility and ethics.

The critique of Susan Powter's "Stop the Insanity!" info-mercial provides educators with an effective, class-tested, and fun assignment to be included in the persuasion section of a basic communication course. Not only does this assignment provide students with an excellent example of a message from popular discourse that follows Monroe's Motivated Sequence, but it also facilitates discussion of several key issues related to persuasion. Among these key issues are: the persuasive effect of a high-energy delivery; speaker ethics and credibility; the relationship between content and delivery; how to detect logical fallacies; and the importance of supporting materials. Additionally, because this activity uses popular discourse, students enhance their critical thinking skills and become more critical consumers of messages they receive.

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APPENDIX

Directed Questions

The following is a list of the major categories I wanted student critiques to address and the directed questions I asked them to consider within each category:

Choice of Topic —

Describe the speaking occasion.

Where was the speaker?

Who was her target audience?

Did her topic seem appropriate for her target audience?

Did her topic seem appropriate for her?

Evaluate her choice of topic based on what you perceive her goal to be.

Organization —

Identify each part of her speech and tell how it follows Monroe' Motivated Sequence.

Introduction —

How did she arouse interest and gain your attention?

Did she use a preview?

Did she establish her credibility?

Did she make her topic clear?

Body —

Did she use transitions between her main points?

What were her main points?

Conclusion —

Did she summarize what she wanted her audience to receive from her speech?

Did she conclude on a strong note?

Was her organization easy to follow and to remember?

Content —

What types of evidence did she use?

What types of proof did she use?

What types of arguments did she use?

Did she cite her sources?

Were they credible?

Did she use any persuasive techniques you were told to avoid?

Language/Style —

Did she use vivid language?

What are some examples?

Did she ever use abstract language?

Did she use concrete language?

Was her style formal or informal?

How did this affect her credibility?

Delivery —

Bodily —

Describe what she did with her body that was effective.

Describe what she did with her body that was distracting.

Vocally —

Describe what she did vocally that worked.

Describe what she did vocally that did not work.

What types of visual aids did she use?

Did she use them effectively?

How was her delivery different for the “home” audience?

Effectiveness —

Did she accomplish her goal of persuading her target audience?

Was she ethical?

If so, in what ways?

If not, what did you perceive as unethical?

Was she interesting?

Was she honest?

What could she have done differently to improve her speech?