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Political and Social Agendas: Analyzing Commercials & Public Service Announcements Attempting to Sway Public Opinion

Jennifer Sharkey

Circumstances of the Instruction

According to Nielsen Ratings in March 2010 the top ten video streaming portals provided access to over 6,570,000 streaming videos, with YouTube continuing to dominate the arena. Amid all of the "look at me" types of videos is a small subset of videos that have the potential to significantly sway public opinion. The organizations that produce these commercials, public service announcements, and ad campaigns vary as much as the message conveyed. This group of videos is ripe for integrating into any type of information literacy instruction or curriculum.

This type of analysis activity incorporates the third ACRL Information Literacy Standard, *evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system*, and the fifth standard, *understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information*. Various performance indicators and objectives can be achieved depending on how much time is spent on the analysis of the commercials or public service announcements.

For the purpose of this lesson plan, the activity is geared towards a one-time guest lecture for a 50 or 75 minute class. The activity can easily be extended for a class session(s) in an information literacy credit-bearing course or embedded into a discipline specific course where multiple visits may occur. This type of evaluation activity is most beneficial for courses that are either studying media and social influences in some way, where the students are allowed to use alternative, non-print sources, or if students are actually creating some type of commercial or public service announcement.

Objectives of the Instruction

At the end of this activity, students will be able to

- Examine how values and points of view are included or excluded in a commercial or public service announcement
- Discuss how language, audio, and visuals of a public service announcement or commercial can influence beliefs and behaviors
- Determine relevance and appropriateness of a public service announcement or commercial for incorporation into a project

Components of the Instruction

Preparation

One of the best ways to find social and political driven commercials or public service announcements is to do a Google, Bing, or Yahoo video search using the search terms "ad campaign," "public service announcement," psa, or commercial. With these search terms, focus your search with terms about a certain issue (e.g. hpv, high fructose corn syrup, coal mining,

etc.) or the organization (e.g. GE, Corn Refiners Association, National Cattlemen's Beef Association, NBC, AdCouncil, etc.) creating the commercials and public service announcements. Doing a search on the Google, Bing, or Yahoo video search engines gives results from YouTube (www.youtube.com), vodpod (www.vodpod.com), Metacafe (www.metacafe.com), and Daily Motion (www.dailymotion.com), along with many smaller sites. Any of these sites can be searched individually. Allow 1-3 hours of time to find commercials and public service announcements as each one will need to be viewed and analyzed them in addition to finding them. Also decide if the class will be evaluating the same commercial or public service announcement or if several will be used in the class.

The types of supporting materials used will be influenced on how this activity is incorporated into the learning environment. For the purpose of this lesson plan, the activity is geared towards a one-time guest lecture for a 50 or 75 minute class. The activity can easily be extended for multiple visits or as part of a credit-bearing information literacy class. The most important supporting material will be the question guide. Many students find this type of analysis challenging so a more structured question guide ensures students stay on task and gain more from the overall activity. It can be helpful to have students do homework, such as learning persuasion techniques, to prepare for the session.

The types of classroom equipment needed are fairly straight forward. Since most of the commercials and public service announcements are on the web as streaming videos, a stable Internet connection is needed. Determine if a specific media player or browser plugin is needed for any of the computers that will be used to view the commercial or public service announcement. If the commercial or public service announcement is saved or recorded to a CD, DVD, video tape, or flash drive, make sure the viewing computer has the appropriate drives, USB ports, or connected players to access and view the multimedia. Depending on how the students will view the commercial(s) or public service announcements, either have a projection device such as an LCD projector and external speakers connected to the computer for viewing as a large group or have computers and ear buds or headphones for each student to view individually.

Presentation

Facilitation of the activity is fairly straightforward. For the purpose of this lesson plan, the activity is geared towards a one-time guest lecture for a 50 or 75 minute class and all of the students are evaluating the same commercial or public service announcement. If students have not done any preparation work for the session, introduce them to the key aspects of media evaluation. Specifically, have a discussion on the methods of persuasion that are typically found in this type of multimedia. Another helpful discussion to have is about how and why one would use this type of information source in a project. Next, handout out or direct students to the question guide they will be filling out. At this point, explain what the activity is and what is expected of the students. It isn't necessary to introduce the actual clip(s). Have the students view the commercial or public service announcement. Typically, the students will need to watch the clip more than once so allow time to do this. The best set up is to initially watch the clip as a large group and then have the students watch it on individual computers as often as needed while they are doing the analysis.

The activity can easily be extended for multiple visits or for a credit-bearing information literacy class. If it is used over multiple visits or as part of a credit-bearing course, alter the facilitation to meet the needs of that environment. This could include discussions and readings about media's broader influence on public opinion, tactics of persuasions, and the positive and negative elements of commercials and public service announcements attempting to sway social and political opinions.

Similar to evaluating any other source of information, key concepts to highlight include who created the commercial or public service announcement, the point of view of that entity, who the target audience is, and the obvious and hidden messages from the visuals and audio. One concept that is more relevant to multimedia than perhaps other forms of information is persuasion techniques. Because the point of the commercial or public service announcement is to persuade the audience, it is important to discuss specific techniques that are used.

Evaluation

There are multiple ways an evaluation and assessment can be done to determine how students internalize the concepts and apply critical thinking. A good summative evaluation method is to have a large group discussion about the key elements of the commercial and how students answered the questions on the worksheet. Most important is to talk about why or why not students would include the selected commercial or public service announcement into a project. This particular discussion goes beyond the typical this is a good or bad message to having student think how this type of information could be synthesized into their project. Other evaluation and assessment methods include gathering the worksheets and grading them, doing an assignment analysis to determine how commercials or public service announcements were incorporated, or having the student write a reflective essay on the analysis process and how they perspective of commercials or public service announcements had changed or remains unchanged.

Supplementary Materials

- Activity worksheet

Suggested Resources

New Media Consortium. (2005). *A Global Imperative: The Report of the 21st Century Literacy*.

Austin, TX: New Media Consortium. Retrieved from

http://www.nmc.org/pdf/Global_Imperative.pdf

Marcum, James W. (2002). Rethinking Information Literacy! *The Library Quarterly*, 72(1): 1-26.

New Mexico Media Literacy Project -- www.nmmlp.org

National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) -- www.name.net

Activity Worksheet

Analyzing Commercials & Public Service Announcements

Commercial Title: _____

When analyzing a commercial or public service announcement (PSA), there are many factors that contribute to its message as well as its usefulness, reliability, and appropriateness for your research. After watching the commercial or public service announcement, answer the questions below. Use one sheet per commercial.

A

- What is the message being conveyed in the commercial or public service announcement (PSA)?
- What kind of language, imagery, and/or sound is being used (give specific examples)? Does it evoke any type of emotional response? Does it project a specific tone, attitude, or mind set?
- Who is the producer or what organization is responsible for the commercial or PSA? How might this affect the slant or bias of the commercial or PSA?

B

- If statistical information is included, is it clear where the data came from or how it was generated?
- How does the use of research and statistics affect the overall impact or credibility of the commercial or PSA?
- What do you think is an alternative point of view or message? How and where could you find more information to support an alternative point of view or message?

C

- When was the commercial or PSA created or made available? (e.g. air date)
- Does the date correlate with major events which are/were happening in the US or world?
- Why are or why aren't these dates important for the message or content of the commercial or PSA?

D

- If you would use this commercial or PSA for your project, list 3 reasons why?
OR
- If you would *not* use this commercial or PSA for your project, list 3 reasons why?