

JACA
2(1997): 125-132

In Their Own Words: Using Media Artifacts to Teach Media Literacy

J. MICHEAL GOTCHER
MARGARET DUFFY

SOCIAL observers and critics of the media do not agree on much, especially in regard to effects that consumption of media's products may have on children and young adults. Even more disagreement bubbles up when the discussion turns to what steps should be taken to deal with the pervasive and possibly sinister influence of at least some media. Some argue that the media should censor themselves; certain feminists and some conservatives, in a rare incidence of agreement, contend that media products should be regulated; others insist parents, not media organizations or governments, should control what is viewed or available on television, film, or music videos; still others cling to the notion that the cure (usually some sort of censorship) for problematic media content is more dangerous than the disease.

But almost everybody agrees that the media are powerful forces in society, and critics and academics of every ideological persuasion have expressed serious concerns about media's role in society. Given the American tradition of free speech and a rightfully wary view of censorship, restriction of content appears to be impractical and unlikely to be implemented on a large scale. Moreover, it seems unlikely that any one strategy for dealing with media and their effects is going to be successful.

However, some colleges and universities are taking the approach of teaching "media literacy" as a strategy to raise students' awareness of our media-saturated world. Though the label is relatively new, the concept is, as Cohen and Kinsey (1994) point out, as old as the liberal arts tradition: that is, developing students' abilities to think critically about an issue, helping them become more intelligent and active participants in society, and encouraging them to live fuller, richer lives.

These are noble and perhaps even quixotic goals. But we believe that it is rightfully our responsibility as communication scholars to engage this challenge. Further, communication teachers and researchers need to develop and share concrete pedagogical strategies in pursuit of providing students with media literacy. In this essay, we briefly review the recent scholarship on media literacy and the theoretical foundation for teaching it. Second, we describe specific methods and associated readings that successfully create media literacy.

The prescribed methods allow the media and their decision-makers to implicate themselves using examples of their own products and their own words. These methods involve allowing media artifacts to testify to issues of stereotypes, manipulation of news, centralization of ownership, and so on. In our approach, media kits, video news releases, and advertisements are used to illuminate and criticize media structures, products, and economic imperatives. In this way, we believe, students are able to see communication theories actualized in concrete ways and they are able to apply the lessons learned to their own lives. Students are enabled to draw their own conclusions, based on theory and analysis, rather than simply listening skeptically to lectures from professors.

MEDIA LITERACY: A SPECIALIZED APPLICATION OF CRITICAL THINKING

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1995) concluded that as a society we absorb a vast amount of media messages, yet we lack the critical skills necessary to analyze and evaluate those messages. Advocates of media education refer to the development of critical media skills as "media literacy." The need for the creation of media literacy is vital because media have become such potent forces in constructing cultural, social, political, and economic realities (Lewis, 1991; Messaris, 1994). Consequently, it is increasingly important for the public to be able to understand and interpret the motives, forces, and strategies which shape the form and content of mass mediated messages. Despite the need for this new type of literacy, it is not being adequately developed or actively pursued. Roy Berko (1995) commenting on the latest International Literacy Day noted that "the majority of our researchers, writers, and experts do little to assist in achieving speaking, listening, and media literacy" (p. 8).

Media literacy may be defined as the learned ability to understand the rules, conventions, and persuasive elements of mass mediated products (Lewis, 1991; Messaris, 1994; Considine, 1994). In general, media literacy involves inviting individuals to see media products as part of the process of building realities, and of constructing cultures. Reality, as many scholars have observed, is created through human communication practices, and interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In contemporary mass society, much of what human beings understand and know of the world is the result of their exposure to various media. As Walker (1993) points out, "Reality, for many, is what media recognize as real; what media do not acknowledge seems of little importance" (p. 4). Salomon (1979) argues that the mass media have become our cultural apparatus for selecting, gathering, storing, and conveying knowledge. Similarly, Considine (1994) observes that "it is no longer possible to consider the political process in this country without first understanding television's impact on it" (p. 31). Additionally, media and technological advances, called by some the "electronic envelope" (McLuhan, 1964; Considine, 1987), exert a powerful impact on all aspects of American society, altering everything from familial activities, shopping behaviors, dietary habits, political choices, religious practices, role models, and entertainment. In general, one would find it almost impossible to identify any aspect of society that has not been affected in important ways by the electronic envelope.

Traditional, or what Kellner (1988) calls more conservative pedagogy, focuses on skills most educators hold dear: capabilities to read and interpret complex texts and to write clearly and analytically. Moreover, the traditional canon insists that students direct their attention to "serious" and culturally revered artifacts such as classic novels, poetry, and historical treatises. However, as Kellner observes, most people spend most of their time with the ubiquitous creations of popular culture (television, film, magazines, music videos, etc.), without the concomitant critical equipment to evaluate them. We believe the application of communication theories and research to popular media artifacts can create the necessary

and essential skills for media literacy. In the remainder of this essay, we suggest approaches that can be used in pursuit of this goal.

APPLICATION OF THEORY

Using the media artifacts of video news releases (VNRs), magazine media kits, and political advertisements, instructors may present relatively abstruse and difficult theoretical constructs to accomplish the objective of media literacy. Furthermore, this essay offers associated readings which are theoretically quite sophisticated, but which are generally accessible and interesting to undergraduates.

The application of theory to common media artifacts provides an effective way to overcome the problematic separation of theory and practice in academe and to make media literacy a realizable goal. Frequently, students view theory as an academic oddity to be discarded at the end of the semester after the last examination so that they can start their "real and practical" education out in the work world. In response to this problem, we have found that the application of theory to "real world" phenomena removes the abstract nature of the theoretical perspective and makes theory usable. A good theoretical concept is not just to be remembered for an examination, but is to gain valuable insight. Theory, then, fosters media literacy.

In the following pages, we suggest how the VNR can be used to present theories of the political-economic basis of news coverage and the notion of the information subsidy and Bagdikian's (1990) concerns about the institutional context of media messages. Second, we suggest how the magazine advertising department's sales tool of the "media kit" (a set of materials given by magazines to potential advertisers) can be used to acquaint students with the ways advertising needs shape editorial content and the notion of the delivery of audiences to advertisers. This focuses particularly on how the thirst for revenues becomes the most salient variable in media form and content. We also consider how feminist issues can be brought to the forefront through analyzing how advertisers and editors present idealized images of femininity. Third, in examining political advertisements produced for television, we suggest the application of semiotics to illustrate how advertisements may be rhetorically analyzed and deconstructed to reveal the implicit values embedded in them.

THE VIDEO NEWS RELEASE: INSTITUTIONALIZED DECEPTION EXPOSED

The video news release (VNR) is the publicity and marketing industry's most recent weapon in its battle to turn newscasts into advertisements. The VNR is usually composed of an "A-roll," or complete news-style broadcast story, and a "B-roll," which provides broadcast quality raw footage, ambient sound (such as traffic or factory noise) and an accompanying script which may be read by the anchor. The B-roll can be edited by the news room to meet its needs and to make it appear even more like a "real" news story. Most news organizations will not use the A-roll, but over 80% admit to using some VNR footage in their news casts. Satellite distribution of VNRs has made them even more enticing to media organizations under increasing pressure to boost revenues and control costs (Lieberman, 1992, p. 11).

In either case, the video features a product or service disguised as news independently produced by the news organization airing it. Many VNRs include an "interview" as part of its pitch. This usually involves a company spokesperson or third party "expert" on the product who is presented as a neutral interviewee. For example, a golf ball company produced a VNR featuring a distance challenge contest. The third party expert (hired by the organization) discusses the new technology in a pseudo-interview with the station anchor person. The VNR provides questions that the anchor reads as if they were his/her own; the tape

shows the interviewee "answering." (VNRs for classroom use can usually be obtained free of charge from cable or broadcast television stations. Similarly, audio news releases (ANR) can be obtained from most radio stations if the instructor wishes to extend the analysis.) In using VNRs in the class room, we usually begin by showing the tapes and actually getting class members to conduct the pseudo-interview by reading the questions scrolling across the television screen. This leads to a discussion of the ethics of VNR use and how certain powerful and wealthy institutions can afford to influence public policy and debate because of their expertise and resources. A useful reading to accompany this is Oscar Gandy's discussion of the "information subsidy." Gandy (1992) argues that powerful societal actors are able to provide persuasive information to media and to decision-makers because they reduce the cost of that information (Gandy, 1982, 1992). For instance, in providing a public relations news release, the policy actor provides material that is useful to the television station (such as a "news" story about a new product), which the station does not have to research and produce on its own. Therefore, the station's costs are substantially reduced and the opportunity for profitability is enhanced. Moreover, the information presented as news has substantially more credibility for the targets of persuasion than would explicitly persuasive materials such as advertisements.

The VNR reveals how skilled, powerful, and resource-rich policy actors can "subsidize" news and thus gain substantial influence over target publics. In addition, excerpts from Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) provide useful insights and are readily understandable by undergraduates. Herman and Chomsky suggest that "filters" and controls utilized by powerful institutions work to provide only the viewpoints and perspectives of powerful and elite segments of society. Their theoretical argument relates very well to VNR production and use. In addition, *TV Guide's* "Fake News" (Lieberman, 1992) is an accessible and interesting exposure of how politicians and the government produce VNRs, how even the major networks have used them, and how they can influence U.S. foreign policy.

This is a particularly good way to alienate students from a conception of news as a transparent reportage of world events to the conception of news as shaped by exigencies of time, space, power, and money. It leads to thoughtful discussions regarding the socially and media-constructed nature of reality and to speculation on the future of news and its increasing focus on providing profits for large media institutions.

THE MEDIA KIT: SELLING AUDIENCES TO ADVERTISERS

Similarly, the media kit can be a powerful teaching tool. As mentioned above, the media kit is a sales instrument used by the advertising departments of consumer magazines to sell potential advertisers on the magazine's capabilities to reach desirable audiences. Many university instructors may not be familiar with the kits. They usually can be obtained free of charge by calling the advertising department numbers listed in the front of a magazine. The kits are generally slick, sophisticated, persuasive packages. A four-color folder encloses demographic information presented in very creative ways to showcase the magazine's reach, growth, and power among desirable audiences. It will also include information about the publication's editorial material and how it enhances the impact of related advertising.

The media kit quite clearly identifies the role the magazine plays in linking the advertiser with the reader/consumer. For instance, Victoria Lasdon, publisher of *YM*, a magazine for female teenagers, writes in the *YM* media kit (1994): "My goal as publisher is to ignite a long term and dynamic bond between our advertisers and this desirable audience. By translating our impressive growth and vitality into increased visibility and awareness, *YM* advertisers will reap the rewards of this powerful association. *YM* puts an advertiser's message

before millions of young women who are on the road to self-discovery, independence and confidence . . . let their search end with you."

In presenting media kit material, we usually go through each component of several kits. The demographics material makes it clear how audiences are segmented for advertiser's needs; the advertising rate sheets show how different magazines command different prices for delivering an audience and clarify the concept of CPM or the cost-per-thousand for an advertiser to reach readers/viewers. Discussions of editorial content make it clear how supposedly neutral articles are created to enhance the salability of products offered for sale in the magazine. The problem of advertiser influence on editorial material is explained well in Gloria Steinem's "Sex, Lies, and Advertising" (1990), which details her efforts at *Ms.* to battle advertisers' insistence on an advertising-editorial linkage. This problem becomes especially clear in studying media kits for magazines aimed at young women such as *YM*.

In considering such materials in conjunction with feminist theory and media literacy, it is interesting to introduce students to the notion that, as Lana Rakow (1992) puts it, "the most important effect of advertising is . . . that it requires people to generate meanings preferred by advertisers" (p. 136). That is, ideals of feminine behavior, beauty, popularity, and happiness are linked to purchases. Diane Barthel provides an accessible reading for undergraduates regarding advertising and women in her 1988 book *Putting on Appearances*. Chapter Six, for instance, can give undergraduates insights into how advertising represents and reveals social relationships and gender oppression when analyzed from a feminist perspective.

Discussion of the *YM* media kit can lead to an examination of how and why women are represented as they are and the notion of gender as a socially constructed idea, differentiated from biological sex. For instance, the class can be asked to consider why certain products are advertised as feminine or masculine and why certain kinds of behaviors are considered to be "naturally" feminine or masculine. As suggested by Foss (1989), the class can be invited to expand on the versions of reality presented by magazine representations and the motivations of advertisers. Of course, media kits from magazines aimed at different consumers can also be used in the classroom to show how different advertisers and audiences shape the form and content of the publication.

Marketers' focus on audience research and advertising effectiveness has also had an important impact on the ways we select our leaders. The following section reviews the spot advertisement and how it may be examined using semiotic analysis.

POLITICS THE AMERICAN WAY: CANDIDATES FOR SALE

Television has become the channel of communication in contemporary politics, and the message format most frequently chosen by candidates is the spot advertisement (Kaid, Leland, & Whitney, 1992). Jamieson (1984) reported that more viewers watch spot advertisements than network news. Additionally, voters are increasingly aware and accepting of the information contained in political advertisements. According to a *New York Times*/CBS poll, one-fourth of all voters in the 1988 presidential campaign admitted that political advertisements had been helpful in making a choice (Oreskes, 1988). Clearly, both candidates and voters believe that political advertisements are a key aspect of electoral choice-making and consequently it is important to explore the strategies these ads use in their pursuit of voters.

To help foster media literacy in regard to the persuasive strategies used in political advertisements, we have found semiotics to be particularly useful. The semiotic perspective reveals that "it is not just language that means; there are many signifying systems. Images, movements, social behavior, codes of conduct, clothing, all are systems of meaning" (Trenholm, 1991, p. 47). Discourses and contexts have ideological importance which func-

tion to reinforce the status quo. Thus, the semiotic perspective attempts to "uncover the latent ideological meanings hidden beneath the surface of communication" (Trenholm, 1991, p. 46). Although semiotics is a powerful theoretical approach, it is frequently very difficult for students to grasp. We have found that political advertisements can operationalize the theory. To illustrate the approach, we will briefly apply the perspective to the Reagan ad "Morning in America."

"Morning in America" can be thought of as signifying an ideology that "America is good" and Reagan is identified with these "signifiers" of America's goodness. The meanings in the ad stem from the set of rules used to decode the signs within the ad and Reagan's role in it. Thus, the ad should not be considered as a montage of images: a boat, a busy city, a wedding, a new home, a flag, etc. (all the individual parts), but rather on how the ad as a whole can be interpreted on a variety of different levels as a result of the experiences of the viewer. For some viewers, America is a way of life, for others America signifies progress, for others it means freedom, for others it is patriotism. But despite the variety of signified interpretations available, all powerfully portray positive meanings for Ronald Reagan.

The ad reinforces the idea that it is good to be able to wake up in America because one can be proud to be a fisherman, an executive (male or female), a cowboy, a fireman, etc. Regardless of the career decision one makes, the Reagan administration provides opportunities for all. The voice-over strengthens this interpretation by stating that "Today, more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history." Furthermore, the voice-over states that inflation and interest rates are under control. This statement signifies that Reagan is "good" not only for business but for the average consumer, because the Reagan administration provides opportunities for all. Families can buy new homes and businesses can expand. The ad signifies the idea that freedom and prosperity in America extend to all: children, elderly, minorities, and individuals in all walks of life. Through the use of signs carefully presented in context, the ad creates the consensual meaning that Reagan is responsible for the freedom and abundance that Americans can enjoy when they wake up. The signifier of "waking up" calls up an array of powerful and positive signified meanings and complex layers of connotation. Beyond the most basic signification of the privilege of waking up (living in) a land like America, the term represents rebirth, the very American ideal of a fresh start, the notion of awareness or "waking up" to an ideal, and the concept of beginnings as opposed to endings. To show the power of the signified, the instructor can contrast the significance of "morning in America" and "waking up" with its polar opposites, "evening in America" or "going to sleep in America" and explore the different sorts of connotations that arise.

The system of meaning extended in the Reagan ad reinforces and naturalizes the presumed goodness of economic development, and the belief that hard work will inevitably translate to economic and personal success in Reagan's world. It invests the commercial with moral significance, a significance that then, by extension, belongs to Ronald Reagan. At the same time, it glosses over the social and material conditions of many individuals who are not waking up to a good "morning in America" and whose hard work has not resulted in Reaganesque success.

In relation to media literacy, semiotic analysis allows the deconstruction and analysis of a text (a mass-mediated message) in very concrete ways, showing how signs and systems of meaning which have powerful connotations for a culture can be deployed to tremendous effect in the service of a politician's ambitions. As a result, the application of semiotics to political advertisements enables students to gain an awareness of the power of symbols as well as the latent and culturally derived meanings within those symbols. Useful readings in semiotics also include Jamieson and Campbell's (1992) *Interplay of influence*, Jamieson's (1984) *Packaging the Presidency*, and Larson's (1982) discussion of media metaphors in analyzing advertisements. Additionally, Rank's (1976) discussion of how persuasive mes-

sages may be analyzed by examining what is intensified and what is downplayed in an ad is also an accessible and revealing method of analysis for undergraduates.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Are video news releases, media kits, and advertisements worthy of all this attention? We would respond that the study of real-world cultural production *is* important, but only when it is analyzed and discussed based on theory and historical context. The application of communication theories to real world phenomena empowers individuals to "better learn how to analyze things, to recognize patterns, to sort out incoming information, to see the parts, the processes, the structure, the relationships, within things so common in our everyday environment" (Larson, 1992, p. 398).

We have found that the proposed techniques enable students to sort out, analyze, and process mass mediated information. Both anecdotal evidence and results of student evaluations suggest that these techniques do indeed foster media literacy. Comments that are frequently repeated by students include: "I can't watch a television ad without thinking about hidden agendas," "I can't read a magazine without thinking about how women are portrayed," "When I read a magazine I can't help but notice the positioning of advertisements and feature articles," and, "My spouse hates it when I point out the values expressed in national newscasts." Moreover, students are asked in projects or on exams to analyze and deconstruct ads of their choice. Responses indicate substantial understanding of the concepts and the ability to apply theoretical approaches to actual media products.

Ellen Wartella (1994) urges communication scholars to address the vital issues of contemporary society. In fact, she argues that it is our field's responsibility to select research questions that are relevant to societal problems and to teach "new generations to be communications literate" (p. 60). Media literacy is a vital issue that communication scholars can address. We believe that it is our responsibility to apply our knowledge and research in very practical and useful ways and to share pedagogical approaches we have found useful. The approach to media literacy described in this essay helps to bridge the chasm between research and teaching at the undergraduate level and to make our research relevant to students and to society.

As communication scholars, it is our responsibility to empower students to critically evaluate mass mediated messages. As a result of our courses, they should be critical and active consumers of the media. They should possess the technical language necessary for understanding the visual and symbolic persuasive strategies used by media practitioners to manipulate attitudes, values, and behavior. In short, they should be media literate. Through application of theory to real media practices, achieving this special sort of literacy becomes feasible. By operationalizing theoretical approaches with real world artifacts, students are empowered to "see" theory in action. Theory becomes more than "textbook stuff"—it becomes extraordinarily practical.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

J. Michael Gotcher (Ph.D., Louisiana State University, 1990) is Associate Professor of Speech, Communication and Theatre at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, TN 37044

Margaret Duffy (Ph.D., University of Iowa, 1995) is Assistant Professor of Speech, Communication and Theatre at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, TN 37044

Bagdikian, B. (1990). *Media monopolies*. Boston: Beacon.

Barthel, D. (1988). *Women in a man's world: Putting on appearances*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality*. NY: Doubleday.
- Berko, R. (1995, December). Literacy celebrated minus speaking and listening. *Spectra*, 13(12), 8.
- Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1995). *Great transitions: Preparing adolescents for a new century*. New York: Carnegie Corporation.
- Cohen, J., & Kinsey, D.F. (1994). "Doing good" and scholarship: A service-learning study. *Journalism Educator*, 48, 4-14.
- Considine, D. M. (1994, January). The media and the message. *School Library Journal*, 24-28.
- Considine, D. M. (1987). Visual literacy and the curriculum: More to it than meets the eye. *Language Arts*, 64, 634-640.
- Foss, S. K. (1989). *Rhetorical Criticism*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.
- Gandy, O. (1982). *Beyond agenda setting: Information subsidies an public policy*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Gandy, O. (1992). PR and public policy. In E. L. Toth & R. L. Heath (Eds.), *Rhetorical and critical approaches to public relations* (pp. 131-163). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Herman, E., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of mass media*. New York: Pantheon.
- Jamieson, K. H. (1984). *Packaging the presidency: A history and criticism of presidential campaign advertising*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jamieson, K. H., & Campbell, K. K. (1992). *The interplay of influence* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Kaid, L. L., Leland, C. M., & Whitney, S. (1992). The impact of televised political ads: Evoking viewer responses in the 1988 presidential campaign. *The Southern Communication Journal*, 57, 285-295.
- Kellner, D. (1988). Reading images critically: Toward a postmodern pedagogy. *Journal of Education*, 170, 31-52.
- Larson, C. U. (1992). *Persuasion: Reception and responsibility* (6th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Larson, C. U. (1982). Media metaphors: Two models for rhetorically criticizing the political television spot advertisement. *Central States Speech Journal*, 33, 533-546.
- Lewis, C. (1991). Images and ideology: A theoretical framework for critical research in visual literacy. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 11, 9-34.
- Lieberman, D. (1992, 22 February). Fake news. *TV Guide*, 10-26.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York: The New American Library.
- Messararis, P. (1994). *Visual "literacy": Image, mind, and reality*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Oreskes, M. (1988, 30 October). TV's role in '88: The medium is the election. *New York Times*, pp. 1, 19.
- Rakow, L. (1992). "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful": Feminist resistance to advertising's irresistible meanings. *The Southern Communication Journal*, 57, 132-142.
- Rank, H. (1976). Teaching about public persuasion. In D. Dietrick (Ed.), *Teaching and doublespeak*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Salomon, G. (1979). *The interaction of media, cognition, and learning*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Steinem, G. (1990 July/August). Sex, lies and advertising. *Ms.*, 18-28.
- Trenholm, S. (1991). *Human communication theory* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Walker, D. (1993, March 6). Media literacy: The Vatican echoes McLuhan. *America*, 4-5.
- Wartella, E. (1994). Challenge to the profession. *Communication Education*, 43, 54-62.
- YM Media Kit (1994). Letter to advertisers from Victoria Lasdon.