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Professional Resource:
One Water (2007)

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Chatterjee, Sanjeev. 2007. *One Water*, film. Miami, FL: University of Miami.

One Water, an hour-long documentary produced by the Knight Center for International Media at the University of Miami, unfolds simply, with little dialogue or narration. The film delivers a powerful message: either we face up to the dwindling supplies of fresh water around the globe, or we'll be unprepared to face the multiple crises this looming shortage is sure to present as the planet's climate continues to change. While not explicitly created for use within a media literacy curriculum, if properly framed the documentary can present instructors with a useful tool for the classroom. It is a film that challenges us as teachers and educators to think about the use of media in addressing a global problem, the vital and flexible role of the audience, and how advocacy storytelling might be translated into societal change.

Written and directed by Sanjeev Chatterjee, a professor at the University of Miami and executive director of the Knight Center, *One Water* uses a series of beautifully shot sequences to illustrate the vital importance that water holds for all cultures—from glacial ice gathering high in the Andes to the harsh effects of arsenic poisoning from groundwater in rural India. A vivid soundtrack recorded by the Russian National orchestra accompanies the imagery. Viewers are left with a sense of urgency about the challenges confronting us as we face a future with more people and less water, and the film makes a strong case for immediate and sustained action in order to ensure continued access to fresh water for all. For example, at the end of the opening sequence, Donna Shalala, one of the film's interviewees, talks about the impact a new well had on the lives of the women in a small African village. "Water as a tool for women's liberation," she says.

"Now there's a powerful concept" (Chatterjee 2007). Also interviewed in the film are such global figures as the Dalai Lama, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., economist Jeffrey Sachs, and author Vandana Shiva, who eloquently illustrate the web of moral, cultural, political, and economic threads that are all woven deeply into the issue of providing fresh water to the world's populations.

Advocacy storytelling is an integral aspect of *One Water*, but there are elements of the film that also make it an ideal media literacy teaching tool. Essentially, the film has two audiences: those in industrialized nations, who are challenged to think more deeply about the issues presented and encouraged to take action in their daily lives; and audiences in those poorer countries where the growing scarcity of fresh water is going to have the most immediate and devastating impact. Used within a college classroom setting, in the field, or with younger students, *One Water* as a piece of mediated information presents a potentially useful case study within a media literacy curriculum. Students who watch the film will most likely be struck by the power of the images, many of which present a stark, and often hidden, reality that exists for countless people around the globe. They may also feel compelled to question their own water usage and to take action to conserve water in ways that the film suggests. However, by drawing on principles laid out in media literacy guides such as those provided by the National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), instructors can use the film as a natural jumping off point for classroom discussion. As NAMLE's "Core Principles of Media Education in the United States" point out, media messages are created "for particular purposes" and bring with them "different characteristics, strengths, and a unique 'language' of construction" (NAMLE). *One Water*, with its clear message and emphasis on social awareness and change, chal-

lenges viewers to look beyond the images and dig deeper into the ardent plea for awareness and action made by the film. When framed within a media literacy context, the avenues opened up for discussion are evident and multiple, from a dissection of ways the filmmaker chose to piece each segment together, to a comparison and contrast of the different cultural contexts in which water consumption is presented and how they challenge any preconceived notions we may have about universal access to clean, safe water.

The second audience mentioned above plays a role within the documentary itself, as people from different locations around the world are shown viewing the film in a group setting. Viewed within the context of media literacy—defined here as “a type of ‘critical’ literacy based on reflection, analysis, and evaluation... of the social, economic, political, and historical contexts in which messages are created, disseminated, and used by audiences” (Hobbs 2005, 865)—is engagement with the audience presents an excellent opportunity for analysis. As these viewers interact with the film, they are consuming a piece of advocacy media of which they are not just a passive audience, but actively engaged participants. It is a process that highlights the type of critical thinking that Paulo Freire, Latin American educator and theorist of critical pedagogy, aptly recognized as “thinking that discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking that perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity” (Freire 2000, 92).

The film opens with a man on a gondola trolling the banks of the Ganges at sunset. Through a megaphone, he calls out to all within earshot: “Tonight, there will be a screening of the film *One Water!*” The following sequences show the people from surrounding villages gathering to watch the documentary projected onto a large canvas; what they see are images taken directly from the context of their lives. This inclusion of the audience is an act of incorporation and reflexivity not usually afforded to the subjects of documentaries produced in remote and exotic locales, for consumption by Western audiences. By seeing a film that is about their lives, the observed become observers, and are thus intimately linked with the media being presented. It is a powerful argument for many of the tenets of media literacy, which stress the critical consumption of mediated images, and can be an obvious jumping off point for enriching classroom discus-

sions on the role of the audience within the creation, distribution, and consumption of media.

Instructors who include the film in their classes should remember that this documentary was not produced with the goals of media literacy in mind. This is an effort by a filmmaker to bring to the public’s attention a looming crisis; to do so, he marshals the tools of visual storytelling in order to create as compelling a message as possible. In order to build a lesson on media literacy an effort must be made to place the film within the context of a larger media landscape. This could include comparing the film to other media that focus on the environmental issues related to climate change, exploring the discussion of journalistic objectivity versus advocacy, and examining the flow of technology, information, imagery, and messages among diverse cultures and between industrialized and developing nations.

These exercises could lead to a number of media literacy questions for students to consider and discuss: How is the proactive message contained within *One Water* constructed through the use of images, music, interviews, and narration? What decisions were made in the production of this film that either strengthen or weaken its overall impact? How might this documentary differ if it had been produced for commercial rather than educational purposes? What can a film like this one, which attempts to bring the stark realities of the lives of people whose tenuous existence is growing ever more fragile as water supplies shrink with audiences who may not have given the issue much thought, truly accomplish? If this groundwork is laid, then perhaps the discussion that ensues will be a step toward giving students the tools to consume media “not merely as selective, receptive, and accepting but also as participating, critical; in short, not merely as consumers but also as citizens” (Livingston 2004, 11).

For more information on *One Water*, go to the film’s website, www.onewater.org. There you will find clips from the film, information on screenings, as well as a variety of multimedia outreach components that are part of an ongoing effort to build a dialogue about water.

References

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