

Media Messages, Tactics, and Their Effect on Youth

Angie Wanke

Academic Setting

Del Norte High School

I teach both Freshman and Senior English at Del Norte High School in northeast Albuquerque. Del Norte has the lowest number of students enrolled in any regular Albuquerque high school, about 1600. Student enrollment is quite diverse, encompassing all of the community's economic and ethnic groups. Student ethnicity at Del Norte reflects the ethnicity of the state of New Mexico: Hispanic (42%), Anglo (41%), Native American (8%), African American (6%), Asian (2%), and a smattering of "other." Del Norte's population of Anglo and Hispanic is somewhat less than APS' average, but its population of Native American and African American is twice the APS average. Ethnic representation at Del Norte falls between the more concentrated Anglo population of the far northeast heights and the more Hispanic population of the southwestern quadrant of the city. Unfortunately, the Hispanic dropout rate is also the highest of the student groups.

Classes

This unit would fit into either an English 9 or English 12 class that is offered throughout APS. English 9 is an introductory overview of literature genres—the short story, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and the epic. Also included are elements of composition and grammar. English 12 covers World and British Literature, as well as refining composition techniques to include research and presentations. However, this unit would also fit very nicely into any Communication Skills, Applied Communications, Media Studies, or Humanities course in both middle and high schools.

A major part of Language Arts is literacy. Part of this literacy, in turn, asks students to not only read literature, but also to examine it, react critically to it, and identify symbols/symbolism in it. I feel strongly that this literacy should also include media literacy. Just as literature surrounds them, so do the media. Students should be able to examine various forms of media, react critically to them, and identify symbols in them. I feel that this would be extremely useful to my students, given the role that media seem to be play in their lives. My students deserve to become media literate as much as they should be "literature literate".

Meeting State Standards

Skills to be addressed fall under the broad goals of the Language Arts curriculum: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Specific state benchmarks that will be addressed are:

- **Content Standard I D:** (Reading and Listening for Comprehension) Students shall apply knowledge of the reading process to evaluate print, non-print, and technology-based information.
- **Content Standard III A:**(Literature and Media) Students shall use media to understand the role of the individual as a member of many cultures.

Within these standards, there are performance benchmarks utilizing specific skills. But of course, many activities encompass more than one content standard.

Rationale

There is no doubt that the media occupy a large part of adolescents' lives. From the brand-name clothes they wear, to the snack foods they eat in my classes, to the music they listen to...it is obvious that they are a captive audience to media. How pervasive are these influences? Children watch an average of four hours of TV a day, 28 hours per week (Wulf). Children ages ten-17 will spend nearly a third of their lives on the Internet. Studies have shown that children today are more isolated from their peers than the previous generation (Kelly). Hence, it is postulated that various forms of media may exert a greater influence upon children's development than we realize.

Many people who watch television today will no doubt notice the amount, content, and strategies of advertising. But do adolescents? Advertising today is a different animal than advertising of their parents' or their grandparents' generations. Advertising today displays more graphics, is flashier, is more pervasive, and promotes intense brand loyalty (Baran). Where ads of yesteryear tended to rely on narration and testimonials, with a proportionally smaller space given to pictures (of course, keep in mind that photography was not as well developed as it is now), ads today rely on vivid graphics, bold pictures, celebrities, and dubious slogans. Older people have an historical background to compare ads. But adolescents do not possess these memories. Advertisements have become more intrusive than they used to be. It could be argued that since ads are everywhere—posters in schools, buses, bus stop benches, street corners—adolescents may not even realize just how intrusive they are. Ads, to many of them, are just another section of a newspaper page to

skim over, another part of a magazine to pore over, and just another part of their favorite television program to be mesmerized (or mute!). Many adolescents are not aware, on the surface, of how much advertisement is a part of their media. They just take it for granted.

This is precisely the reason my students should become media literate. They need to understand that they need not be passive recipients of the media. They deserve to have tools to arm themselves with as they sort through media messages. I envision helping them to become more skilled and knowledgeable "consumers" of all kinds of different media. For instance, school itself contains many media—media are everywhere—and I hope to not only utilize reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, but to also integrate media literacy skills with critical thinking skills.

Elements of Media Literacy

The definition of *literate* is to be able to read and write. It is also defined as being versed in literature and creative writing. We as teachers, particularly Language Arts teachers, teach this every day. Literacy is a given part of our lessons and objectives. But what is *media literacy*? Students do not just learn from reading textbooks. In "real life," information comes from a huge variety of sources: television, newspapers, books, magazines, videos, billboards, the Internet, movies, and even advertisements. A good teacher provides a wide variety of print and non-print sources in their classroom. Today, literacy should mean being able to comprehend a wide variety of information from a variety of sources, because of the development and widespread reliance on different types of media. Therefore, *media literacy*

should mean the ability to effectively and efficiently comprehend and utilize *any* form of communication (Baran 48). Media literacy includes these characteristics:

1. An awareness of the impact of media.
2. An understanding of the process of mass communication.
3. Strategies for analyzing and discussing media messages.
4. An understanding of media content as a means of providing insight into our culture and our lives.
5. The ability to enjoy, appreciate, understand media content.
6. An understanding of the ethical and moral obligations of the media.
7. Development of appropriate and effective production skills.

Media literacy is important to teach because we should inspire our students to think critically about the media, since media is such a big part of their lives. We owe it to them to teach them how to balance

what they hear and what they believe. We all depend on media to give us information. But children may not know how to process this information in a constructive way. Teaching them to understand media gives them a valuable skill, especially since they are so often encouraged by the media themselves to see media content as real and credible.

Narrative

How much do the media pervade adolescents' lives? I will illustrate one immediate example. Each morning, the school day begins with *Channel One*, a hip, MTV-style current events program. The students are generally captivated by it. Why? Its delivery is fast, hip, clever, and completely youth-oriented. However, during its twelve-minute running time, there are three or four commercials! The commercials are overwhelmingly for candy, soda, and apparel. However, to its credit, an anti-drug, anti-smoking, or anti-alcohol ad is almost always included. I worry that these kids will think that the only interesting or noteworthy news out there comes from only these types of programs. Typical classroom follow-up ranges from teachers completely ignoring *Channel One* to teachers requiring their students to take notes on its news content for part of their grade. At Del Norte, *Channel One* begins the day, before the first class period. At other schools, *Channel One* is played at different times of the day. A few schools have elected not to show *Channel One* at all, due to parent complaints or staff/administration concerns.

Reaction to Channel One on the students' part varies. While most are captivated, several of my students deride it and perform mini "deconstructions" of their own. I have heard comments such as "it's too fake", "I hate how the ads use celebrities all the time", and "the music is too intense...it's louder than the news portion". According to some research, other students' reactions are mixed as well. One viewer complained about the trendy hosts and the effort "to follow every fad" (Barnhurst and Wartella 287). Another complained about too many commercials. However, this same study reflects many of my students' positive feelings about Channel One. Many of my students like the younger news anchors—they could identify with them—and the way that Channel One tries to "hook" the viewers with some comment or lead-on that relates directly to their lives.

Content aside, *Channel One* does carry many commercials. *Channel One* operates in schools because its parent company, Primedia, agreed to install televisions in schools in exchange for the opportunity to present its news programs and commercials (Obligation, Inc). At the same time, its major advertiser, PepsiCo, installed its soda machines

in these schools. Do students realize the marketing tactic? They see commercials for Pepsi on *Channel One*, and then they pass a Pepsi vending machine in the halls later that day. Of course, some of them are genuinely thirsty, but some will want to buy a soda because they remember that it was "suggested" to them earlier in the day. How many of them make the connection? In my unit, I will show them this deliberate marketing tactic.

Media in schools take the form of plenty of advertising. In addition to *Channel One*, there are vending machines, posters for food products, book covers with ads for the latest teen products, free candy giveaways, and notebooks covered with ads. I worry about how much these forms of advertising affect my students' lives. How much do they notice these ads? Are they mere filler and background? Or have they wound themselves deeply into the kids' subconscious?

Media Usage by Children

Studies indicate that by high school graduation, a student will have spent more time watching television than they have in a classroom. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, kids watch three to four hours of television *a day* (Pemberton-Butler 1). Fifty-four % of kids have their own television sets in their rooms (Wulf). Several of my students have told me that they turn on their sets as soon as they get home and do their homework with it on. They listen to music while they go about their routines. They surf the Net while watching television. According to an article by Katy Kelly, childrens' daily media habits break down as follows:

Television: 2 hours and 46 minutes

Computer: 21 minutes

Video games: 20 minutes

Internet: 8 minutes

Listening to CDs and tapes: 48 minutes

Reading or being read to: 44 minutes

Listening to the radio: 39 minutes

This works out to a total of five hours and 29 minutes using some kind of media! I believe that many of my students do not realize how much time they spend involved with some kind of media. I would like to share this with them. Why? Because then they might begin to understand not only how much time they are involved with the media, but also how much advertising time they are exposed to.

Media are everywhere. It could be argued that media influence us more than we realize. The average child spends more time with the

television than he or she spends interacting with parents and peers, attending school, or reading books (Kaufman). Add to this the amount of hours children spend interacting with other media, and the total amount of time that children interact with the media adds up to more than six hours a day. Therefore, time spent interacting with media *takes the place of* family time, play time, and reading time for many of these kids.

This is a serious issue for teenagers. We see how much media compete with other influences in kids' lives (parents, peers, teachers, etc...). As teens continue to form attitudes, values, and morals, they draw upon their influences. Due to the number of hours that teens spend interacting with media, we can assume that media play a major role in shaping teens' value systems.

Cultural and Communication Theories at Work

This relationship between media usage and teens' value systems is supported by a pair of cultural theories in the field of mass communication. The first is Dependency theory. This postulates that, in our increasingly complex and changing world, people have become increasingly dependent on media and media content to understand what is going on around them, and then learn how to behave meaningfully (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 263). In other words, we tend to rely on mass media such as the television news, the newspaper, and the radio for immediate news reporting in the wake of, say, a disaster such as a major plane crash. We are dependent on the media to understand what happened, what to do, and where to turn. Now, think of the crises that our students face everyday—reaching puberty, beginning to date, peer/social roles, etc... Dependency theories can help explain childrens' media usage and how it may impact them in these situations. We read earlier how media and television usage by children often usurps time spent with parents, peers, and school. Television, magazines, and other forms of media contain strong messages for teens who are floating around in their own crises. But kids do not just turn to the media for simple answers. Dependency theory supports that teens may naturally turn to the media to "tell them what to do." Have a look at the many teen-oriented magazines today. The information contained within seems to take on a "surrogate" peer/parent role. They contain advice on dating, peer/social relationships, sexuality, health, news, entertainment, and a host of other very personal issues. We can apply the above research showing how much media interactions usurp teens' time with "real" interactions such as parents, peers, and teachers, and see how these teen magazines, for example, give teens advice in their lives.

However, the messages contained in these magazines (and other media) bears close examination. A large part of this unit's lesson plans deal with tools that students ought to learn and apply in order to examine these messages. For example, what type of "messages" are the media giving them about gender roles, stereotypes, and personal/self images? Part of a curriculum unit dealing with these questions ought to include deconstructing advertisements in the media (such as these teen magazines) in order to examine and understand media messages.

A second cultural theory within the area of mass communication that comes into play in this unit is Cultivation Analysis. This states that television cultivates or constructs a reality which becomes accepted as truth (Baran 333). This assumes that television is one of the "cultural arms" of U.S. society, due to its nature — it is in the home, does not require mobility, it is free, and requires little or no reading ability. Children who watch television, particularly if they watch a lot of it, are taking part in Cultivation Analysis theory because they are part of a shared, television-constructed reality of how things are. If we watch television to gather news, we can assume that we are being told the truth. Remember that Dependency theory states that we turn to the news broadcasted through media for understanding the world around us. If so, we then base our judgements and actions in the world on this cultivated reality. These theories help support the idea that children use media and television to give them answers that they might otherwise have gotten from their peers, parents, or teachers.

Advertising Tactics

Those who are exposed to lots of media may not be aware of the issue of agenda setting. One aspect of agenda setting is physical placement of a story on the page of a newspaper or a magazine. The reader attaches importance to that story due to its placement on the page (Baran 327). For example, a story placed on the upper right section of a page will be more likely to be noticed and read. I would argue that the same idea applies to advertisements as well. Ever notice that many magazines open with the most flashy, expensive, multi-page advertisements? Surely students can be taught to notice this as well. Advertisers want to make the most profit from their ads. Ads that are placed boldly and prominently in magazines get noticed more readily. Once the students are shown this, their understanding of marketing techniques might deepen.

In illustrating differing marketing techniques with my students, it would be extremely relevant to discuss the study of demographics. According to Baran, demographics is the practice of appealing to

audiences according to their ethnicity, race, gender, age, and economic level. Advertisers target certain segments of the population to make the most from their investments. Students may already be aware of demographics in a limited way when they watch Saturday morning cartoons. They may notice that the ads during Saturday morning cartoons are predominantly for toys and junk food. They may also have noticed that ads during NBA games are for athletic gear and energy drinks, that ads during soap operas are for household cleaning products and women's products, and that ads during prime-time youth-oriented network shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are for candy, soda, and apparel. I believe this would be a fun part of a media literacy unit. Students could tape commercials during these different types of shows and view them, react critically to them, and identify symbols in them. This fits in with the goal of teaching literacy to students—not just through literature, but through the media. Students could also create their own ads after learning a variety of different marketing techniques. This fits in with some of New Mexico State Standards and Benchmark pertaining to reading, speaking, listening, and writing.

I would argue that a unit on media literacy is very important. There are so many influences on my students' lives. Media is a major part of those influences. But it is not enough to examine messages in the media. I want my students to be able to become critical thinkers about the messages television and other media are sending them as they try to navigate through their world. Students who are media literate can sift through advertisements and identify who is being targeted, what the ads are really trying to sell, and the reasons behind those tactics. They will come to understand that they are not just passive receivers in an outmoded communication theory model. Modern communication theory states that we consumers interact with the media, provide feedback, and influence its content (Baran 7). Once students are shown that the media employs such techniques as agenda setting, demographics, and polls, they will understand that they are a major part of the process of media messages. They will become media literate and learn to interact with the media and its "themes," just as they should become "literature literate" and learn how to identify literature's themes.

Implementation

This unit could easily take one month since there is so much background information to cover. Some lecture time would be needed, especially for the lessons covering demographics. However, for lower grades (around grades 7-9), lecture time could be cut considerably and discussion could replace that. Also, the amount of information that a

teacher wishes to disseminate to her students can vary widely, depending on her students' ability levels and interest. This unit could fall during any part of the school year, provided the students have had some work in critical thinking skills. For example, it might not be a good idea to start the school year off with this unit, since there must be some note-taking, discussion, and use of critical thinking skills. These skills naturally build during different points of the school year. Therefore, it might be a good idea to implement this unit later in the year when the students know each other well, have good note-taking skills, and have developed (taught by you, of course!) some critical thinking skills.

Note: some of the following lessons may take more than one day to complete, whereas some of these lessons are shorter and can be combined with another to ensure enough material to cover in one day. These lessons are intended to be followed chronologically, and can be adapted for length. Depending on your class and objectives, some lessons can be eliminated.

Refer to "Meeting State Standards" section above to check which performance standards of the state of New Mexico are being met.

Lessons #1 – 3 (would make excellent introductory "sponge"-type lessons.)

Lesson #1: **Discuss** why the students wear what they do and buy the foods/snacks that they do. List reasons on the board. What factors influence what you wear? **Class activity:** Develop a **poll** that students must conduct of their classmates and peers (outside the classroom) asking these some kinds of questions. Students may either copy poll questions, or the teacher can type up and make copies to distribute the next day. After polls are conducted (agree on number of responses beforehand), students report responses.

Lesson #2: **Count** advertisements in: school, newspapers, magazines (a trip to the library would be a good resource), books, radio programs, and anywhere else you can do so. This could be a noisy activity. Consider partners or individual work to cut down on noise, and to ensure everybody is counting. The idea is to get numbers on the amount of ads and how pervasive they are. This could also be homework (it increases the amount of places/mediums in which ads occur). Compare results.

Lesson #3: **Discuss** everywhere ads are seen. **Discuss** all the other new places ads could be placed. Airplanes? Starships? Mountainsides? Arroyos? Let their imaginations run wild...the idea is to get them thinking about how ads are everywhere, but there are still

more places to put ads.

Lesson #4: **View** video *Just Do Media Literacy*. May be edited for understanding, short attention spans, or for sections you feel would be relevant for the students to see.

Lesson #5: **Lecture** on history of advertising (see bibliography on Stanley Baran's excellent book which gives background on this.). Show examples of old ads, especially for products still used today: Ivory soap, Coca-Cola, Ford Cars, Kenmore appliances, etc. Possible trip to the **computer lab** to look up Internet sites that deal with this. An excellent site is: www.adflip.com This site catalogues old ads according to type of product as well as chronologically. Students **write** up the impressions they get from these old ads. **Compare** with current ads. How are they different? How are they similar?

Lesson #6: Short **lecture** on advertising techniques. The students should love this. Again, Baran's book is an excellent resource. Lecture/discussion should cover ad placement (agenda setting), colors, graphics, fonts, content, use of people/celebrities, slogans, claims used in ads, facts, quotes, etc... Students may be familiar with techniques such as celebrity usage or slogans, but their eyes may be opened by a discussion of placement of ads. It would be very helpful if the teacher has lots of ads/posters to show students while covering this. Should generate lots of lively discussion.

Lesson #7: **Deconstruction** of ads. Sample worksheet included. This activity could take one day or several. Students will be very eager and opinionated about what they see and perceive. Also should generate lots of lively discussion.

Lesson #8: In order to introduce concept of **demographics**, have students **examine** various magazines for their advertisements. Good sources: *Rolling Stone*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Outside*.

Have them **write** what types of ads they saw and have them postulate why those ads are there. Discuss this.

Lesson #9: (optional) Continuing demographics research, have students **view** types of ads during Saturday morning cartoons, NBA or NFL games (or other major sports broadcasts), NBC's "Must See Thursdays", daytime soap operas, news programs, and popular teen-oriented shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Popular*. Have them write down every single ad they see, and why they think those ads are included. Discuss this. Obviously, this will be homework, but **fun** homework that they might actually do!

Lesson #10: Short **lecture** on demographics may be given. Baran's book is helpful here, too. Discuss history, usage of demographics.

Lesson #11: **Discuss** what types of ads you might expect to see before movies in movie theaters and why. Conversely, discuss what types of movie trailers/ads you might expect to see on certain television shows, magazines, newspapers, etc..., and why. This also deals with demographics.

Lesson #12: **Discuss** how a play in Shakespeare's day, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, might have advertised itself. I choose Shakespeare because all English 9 and English 12 students are taught Shakespeare during the school year, but you may choose another work of literature from a long-ago time period, such as *Beowulf*, *Gilgamesh*, or *Canterbury Tales*. The idea is to choose a work of literature that is covered during the year which is old and, hence, came before the advent of modern advertising techniques. **Discuss** how *Romeo and Juliet* was actually advertised around town in Shakespeare's day. Have students **predict** how it might be advertised today. **Utilize** their lesson on demographics and discuss: To whom would the ads be directed to? What images would you see in an ad for *Romeo*? What magazines would carry these ads? Before what types of movies would it be advertised? (meaning the ads that come on in theaters before the movie begins)? Which television shows would carry the Romeo ads? Which parts of the play would the ads emphasize? **Critical thinking skills** would be utilized here as students adapt different ads for a modern-day version of *Romeo and Juliet* to different audiences. They should have some experience with this. How might the ads differ for an audience of university professors? Teenagers? Parents? A foreign audience? Students could get creative.

Alternative assessment: This lesson could be assigned as a **major paper** for a higher-level (honors or English 12) class. Students must follow all conventions and the paper could be a five paragraph expository paper.

Lesson #13: **Major project: Create** your own magazine, complete with advertisements! Divide students into **small groups**. Assign each student a specific task to ensure all students do work, and not just the "leader." Be sure to discuss beforehand: What is your topic/ specialty? Who is your audience? What types of ads will be portrayed? Their magazines **must** contain ads - How many ads should there be? These questions determine the layout, look, colors, graphics, and appeal of the magazine. This assignment will take several days, but in consideration of time you may assign this as homework so as to use class time for more instruction.

Lesson #14: (optional - good follow-up activity) Have students go for 24 hours (or 48 hours, or 72...it's up to you) with NO media usage whatsoever. That's right; no television, no magazines, no radio, no Internet, no video games. You may wish to check with their other teachers during this time to see how this may or may not fit with current work/homework projects students are doing for other classes. You'll be depending on an honor system here. Students must **write** up their experience. What was difficult about that time period? What were some "nice" discoveries they made? What surprised them? Would they go through that experience again? Then, assign them to go for 24 hours (or more) with intense media saturation. Encourage them to watch television shows they normally do not view, read magazines they normally do not read, listen to a radio station that they normally do not listen to, etc. Students must also **write** about this experience as well (answering the same questions as before). These activities may surprise your students—both those who are self-proclaimed media avoiders, as well as those who are self-proclaimed media masters.

Alternative assessment: If Lesson # 12 was not assigned as a **major paper**, this lesson fulfills an assignment such as this. Students must follow all conventions, although this will probably be much longer than a five-paragraph paper.

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DECONSTRUCTING AN ADVERTISEMENT (ACTIVITY – Lesson #7)

1. Pick a commercial or print ad to deconstruct/analyze for this activity.
2. Describe/summarize what happens in this commercial/ad.
3. Name the main colors, graphics, slogans, quotes, and claims used in this ad. Which seems to be its **main** focus?
4. Name one or two persuasion techniques used in this advertisement, and tell how you know that technique was used.
5. Look at the person/people in this ad. How are they portrayed? Happy? Depressed? Angry? Bored? Is their image realistic? Which ethnicities/races are shown? What stereotypes are employed, if any, regarding that person/people?
6. Do you see any gender stereotyping (roles that the male or female person in that ad seem to be filling)?
7. Was there music in the commercial? What emotions did it arouse?
8. What is the "message" the company wants you to get from the commercial/ad?
9. Who is the target audience of this commercial/ad?
10. What values are taught in this ad? (Look for: wedding rings, gender roles, clothes, attitudes, display of wealth or poverty, dominant or submissive roles, etc...)