


MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE



Challenging media

TOXIC SLUDGE IS GOOD FOR YOU

THE PUBLIC RELATIONS INDUSTRY UNSPUN

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TOXIC SLUDGE IS GOOD FOR YOU

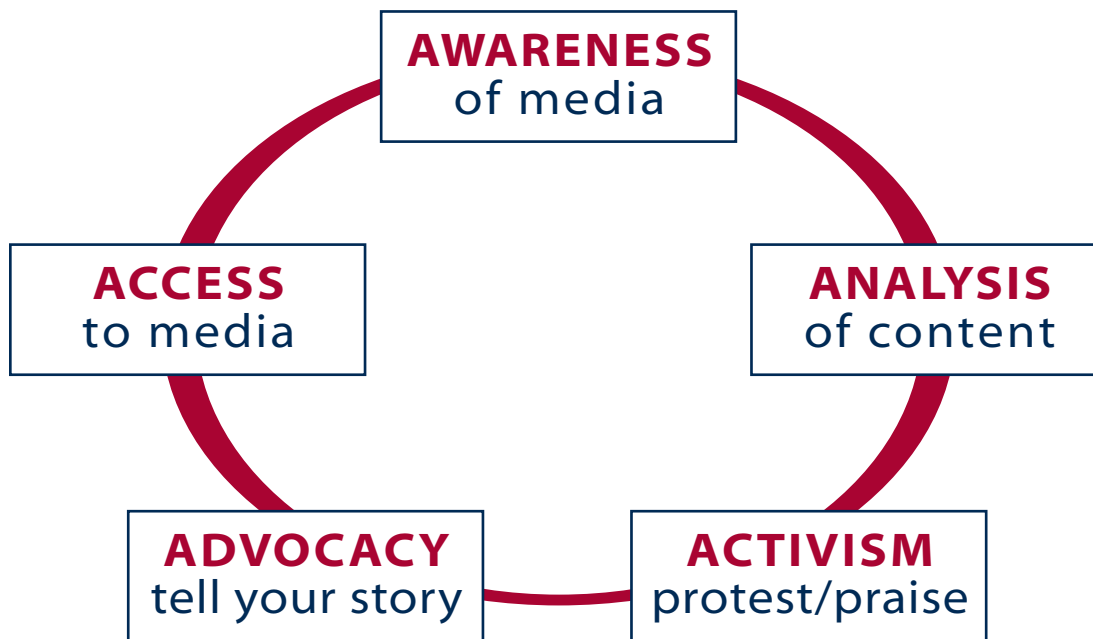
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USING THIS VIDEO IN THE CLASSROOM

- » View the video prior to showing it to your students.
- » Review the study guide and choose which exercises you will use with your students.
- » Use the previewing activities to help your students prepare for the ideas presented by the video.
- » Encourage *active listening*. Because the content of this video is likely to elicit emotional responses from the students, it is important that the students engage with each other in ways that ensure everybody has the opportunity both to speak and to be listened to. It is advised that you set guidelines or norms to ways to “actively listen” in advance of classroom discussions. Check out MEF’s handout, *Techniques for Active Listening*. (<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdf/ActiveListening.pdf>)
- » Have the students keep a journal. It will be an effective place for them to explore their own attitudes and opinions and to record their observations about the media.
- » Review and discuss the handout *How to be a Critical Media Viewer*. (<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdf/CriticalViewing.pdf>)
- » Incorporate activism and advocacy into your media literacy study. They are an important part of empowering students.

THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT¹



THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT EXPLAINED

AWARENESS

Students learn about the pervasiveness of the media in their lives.

ANALYSIS

Students discuss the forms and contents of the media's various messages as well as the intent of most media to persuade an audience.

ACTIVISM

Students develop their own opinions about the negative and positive effects of the media and decide to do something about it – this can be in the form of praise for healthy media, protest of unhealthy media, or development of campaigns to educate others with regard to the media, to change media messages, etc.

ADVOCACY

Students learn how to work with media and use their own media to develop and publicize messages that are healthy, constructive, and all too often ignored by our society.

ACCESS

Students gain access to the media – radio, newspaper, internet, television, etc. – to spread their own message. This in turn leads to further awareness of the media and how it works, which leads to a deeper analysis and so forth.

1. Diagram and explanation adopted from E.D.A.P.'s GO GIRLS! Curriculum, (c) 1999 (<http://www.edap.org/gogirls.html>)

SYNOPSIS

TOXIC SLUDGE IS GOOD FOR YOU: THE PUBLIC RELATIONS INDUSTRY UNSPUN

While advertising is the visible component of the corporate system, perhaps even more important and pervasive is its invisible partner, the public relations industry. This video illuminates this hidden sphere of our culture and examines the way in which the management of 'the public mind' has become central to how our democracy is controlled by political and economic elites. *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You* illustrates how much of what we think of as independent, unbiased news and information has its origins in the boardrooms of the public relations companies.

PR critics include *PR Watch* founder **John Stauber**, cultural scholars **Mark Crispin Miller** and **Stuart Ewen**. *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You* tracks the development of the PR industry from early efforts to win popular American support for World War I to the role of crisis management in controlling the damage to corporate image. The video analyzes the tools public relations professionals use to shift our perceptions, including a look at the coordinated PR campaign to slip genetically engineered produce past public scrutiny.

Toxic Sludge Is Good For You urges viewers to question the experts and follow the money back to the public relations industry to challenge its hold on democracy.

PREVIEWING EXERCISES

1. Questions for discussion or writing:

- a. What is public relations?
- b. What does a public relations firm do?

2. Tape record the local 10 o'clock newscast. Have your students watch it in class and discuss the program's content. Compile a list of their observations about what the newscast presents, a list of the kinds of stories, and the facts, opinions and style of coverage for a few specific stories.

INTRODUCTION

KEY POINTS

- » Propaganda, by definition, is designed to influence thought and behavior.
- » In the United States, we believe that we aren't influenced by propaganda because we live in a democracy.
- » Marketing, advertising and public relations are all forms of propaganda, thus making propaganda universal in democratic societies.
- » Propaganda in the United States is so embedded in culture that we don't notice that it is there, much less the influence it has on our lives.
- » We need to question who funds and benefits from the propaganda we have in the United States.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you define propaganda? When have you heard the term propaganda used?
2. Why does **John Stauber** describe marketing, advertising and public relations as propaganda?
3. Why don't we think of marketing and advertising as propaganda? How might somebody who defends these institutions distinguish between what they do and what propagandists do?

THE PR INDUSTRY

KEY POINTS

- » The public relations industry employs over 200,000 people and collects millions of dollars every year from clients ranging from wealthy individuals and corporations to government agencies.
- » *Fleishman Hillard, Weber Shandwick Worldwide, Hill & Knowlton, Burson Marsteller and Citigate/Incepta* lead the public relations industry in total revenues.
- » Public relations firms go out of their way to keep their campaigns hidden from the public they seek to influence.
- » The public relations industry is owned by the advertising industry and its mission is to influence public opinion, news information and public policy on behalf of its clients.
- » The biggest PR clients include the tobacco industry, the chemical industry, the petroleum industry, the logging industry, the mining industry, and the drug industry.
- » Big business has the connections, money and time to insert their messages into the media, giving them a tremendous advantage in public opinion debates (over less connected and moneyed people and organizations).
- » PR continuously integrates new technologies into its toolbox of strategies for swaying public opinion.
- » Public relations isn't always problematic – press releases, press conferences and other publicity serve to inform the public about things happening around them.
- » The problem arises when public relations is allowed to remain hidden and unexamined in ways that benefit specific interests that themselves remain hidden.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does the PR industry want to remain out of view?
2. Why do corporations invest in public relations instead of advertising? What is the difference between an ad campaign and a public relations campaign?
3. What role does money play in public relations?
4. What new technologies might the public relations industry find useful?
5. Is public relations inherently problematic?

ROOTS IN CONFLICT

KEY POINTS

- » The PR industry's origins can be traced to the turn of the twentieth century when conflict between capital and labor came to a head. Big business and government turned to early PR practitioners to ease increasing social unrest.
- » World War I was one of the first coordinated PR campaigns, orchestrated by **President Wilson** to convince Americans to support U.S. involvement in the war.
- » *The Creel Committee*, also known as the *Committee on Public Information*, formed by Wilson and comprised of leading journalists, advertisers and writers of the day, sought to persuade Americans to support Wilson's decision to enter WWI.
- » The success of the *Creel Committee's* efforts demonstrated to government and industry alike the importance of using propaganda when introducing campaigns to the public.
- » **Edward Bernays**, who was a member of the *Creel Committee* and is often credited as the grandfather of PR, knew how to use the media to help spread corporate messages. He staged and publicized women smoking in the 1929 Easter Day parade. The campaign, which was funded by the *American Tobacco Company*, helped to break the taboo of women smoking in public.
- » This campaign successfully demonstrated how the use of hidden techniques could help business ultimately prosper – into what today has become billion dollar markets.
- » By some estimates, as much as 50% of the information we think of as news originated from a PR company.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Woodrow Wilson** was able to change his stance on World War I using public relations. How and why do you think the *Creel Committee's* PR activities succeeded in shifting public opinion?
2. If these early PR campaigns were investigated and widely reported to the public, do you think there would have been public outcry? Is the PR industry overly dependent on secrecy?
3. What sorts of stories that are packaged as news do you think originate from public relations?

EXERCISES

1. **Creating News.** In the late 20th century, historian **Daniel Boorstin** coined the term “pseudo-events” to describe events and situations that are primarily created for the sake of generating press coverage. An early example is the *Miss America* contest, which was started more than 75 years ago and is still going strong.
2. **Create an event.** Consider staging the event to see what kind of press coverage it receives in the local press. Here are some suggestions for how to go about getting coverage ¹.
 - a. Tie in with news events of the day.
 - b. Cooperate with another organization on a joint project.
 - c. Conduct a poll or survey.
 - d. Issue a report or a summary of events.
 - e. Arrange an interview with a celebrity.
 - f. Take part in a controversy.
 - g. Arrange for a speech or testimonial.

1. Wilcox, Dennis L, et al. *Public Relations Strategies and Tactics*, 4th ed. (New York: HarperCollins), 1995, p. 300.

ROOTS IN CONFLICT

- h.** Make an analysis or prediction.
- i.** Form and announce names for committees, advisory boards, blue ribbon commissions, etc.
- j.** Hold an election.
- k.** Celebrate an anniversary or tie in with a holiday.
- l.** Make a trip or organize a tour.
- m.** Create an award or hold a contest.
- n.** Adapt national reports and surveys for local use.
- o.** Stage a debate.

According to **Andrea Ernst**, a PR specialist in Madison, Wisconsin, a sure fire way to get coverage for any event is to include kids or puppies.

NOT LOCAL, NOT NEWS

KEY POINTS

- » Surveys show that the public most trusts their local news team to tell them what is happening in the world, but local news departments are increasingly facing severe budgetary cutbacks which impact their ability to produce newsworthy reporting.
- » Public relations firms provide ready-made, pre-packaged stories to news stations around the country. These stories, known as video news releases (VNRs), are created for clients and produced by former journalists who are now PR professionals.
- » Because of the budgetary crisis, TV news departments are using VNRs in their news broadcast. News directors could label them, but if they did, they would be admitting that they use stories not produced by journalists.
- » Spotting video news releases in the news requires a careful eye. Watch for camera shots that a local news team wouldn't be able to gather.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does anyone in your family watch the nightly news? What other news sources do you and your family members have?
2. Video news releases are created for a company, produced by a PR firm, aired on a news program, and absorbed by the public. Who has the greatest responsibility to tell us that VNRs are regularly used – the company, PR firm or journalists?
3. Is a VNR a valid news source? What makes a VNR different from a news report done by journalists?

EXERCISES

1. Have students tape local and national news for several days. Have them try to identify the use of video news release footage. Review suspect reporting in class. Students may want to call their local station to ask if the news department used VNR footage for the story in question (*Note: the students may not get a truthful answer, but if they do, have them engage the person they are speaking with about the station's policy on using VNRs.*)

THIRD PARTY ADVOCACY

KEY POINTS

- » One of the most popular PR techniques relies on a third party, a person with no apparent connections to the company or industry, to advocate for a client's product or issue. The idea is that the public wouldn't trust a car manufacturer that said global warming isn't a problem, but would more likely trust an atmospheric scientist saying the same thing.
- » Third party advocacy works because what experts say is generally trusted by the public.
- » Whenever you see an expert saying something you suspect isn't true, type his/her name into an Internet search engine to research his/her affiliations.
- » Another strategy used by PR firms is the front group, an organization – usually non-profit – that is set up to look independent, but which is funded and controlled by an industry.
- » Whenever you hear a euphemistic sounding name such as the *Water Environment Federation* or the *Temperate Forest Council*, you can likely turn the needle 180 degrees and find out who's really behind the organization.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is expertise so widely trusted?
2. How else, aside from expertise, might information be conveyed to the public?
3. Third party advocacy and front groups both seek to distance messages from their source. Can we make sound decisions about political, social and economic issues in our lives if we don't know where information is coming from?

EXERCISES

- 1. Creating a front group.** After reviewing the concept of front groups, create one. Divide students into groups and have them create a name and mission statement for such an organization. Then, have each group present their front group to the class. The rest of the class will try to guess what the front group's real agenda is and who would likely fund such a group (which interests would want such a group created).
- 2. Find front groups using the Internet.** Which organizations do students think may be purposefully hiding their true agendas. How might the funding source affect what you see as the group's position on a specific issue?

MANAGING CRISIS

KEY POINTS

- » Corporations have learned that they don't actually have to address crises that happen, but rather they need to manage the public perception about the crisis.
- » The *Tylenol* poisoning case is often used to illustrate how a crisis was handled properly. *Johnson & Johnson*, the parent company, upon hearing that some of their capsules were found laced with cyanide, began a full-scale campaign to reassure Americans that the problem would be resolved.
- » The *Exxon-Valdez* oil spill is an example of a company handling crisis poorly. Because the company did very little to reassure the American public about its efforts to rectify the problems caused by the spill, it still has to contend with poor public relations.
- » Public relations firms are now helping companies not only with immediate damage control, but also are strategizing how they can help their clients avert future crises.
- » When *Alar*, a pesticide used on apples, came under attack by consumer groups, the *American Council on Science and Health*, an industry-funded non-profit organization, wrote language for a food disparagement law, which would make it illegal to publicly criticize food products.
- » In 1996, **Oprah Winfrey** hosted a show on Mad Cow Disease. When she stated she would never eat beef again, some Texas ranchers took her to court citing the Texas food disparagement law. She ultimately won the case, but the law remains on the book and the cost of the trial serves as a deterrent to journalists throughout the United States.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How has crisis management changed since the days of the Tylenol scare and the Exxon Valdez spill?
2. How is the food disparagement law an example of crisis management?
3. Besides writing governmental laws to protect corporations, how else might public relations help companies avoid future crises?

EXERCISES

1. You are the public relations director for a *Fortune 500* corporation. An accident occurs at one of your company's plants. You know that within days negative headlines and TV news stories will appear throughout the country.
 - a. What do you do first?
 - b. What publics are you most concerned with?
 - c. How will you respond to the media?
 - d. Why is it important that you respond?
2. Select a wealthy individual, corporation or politician who/which is currently in the news for some scandal, improper behavior, etc. and investigate how they handled the crisis. Can you figure out who their PR agent is – try *O'Dwyer's* or study news reports. Especially with individuals, news organizations will often report on PR activities.

SILENCING DEBATE

KEY POINTS

- » Genetically engineered food was first available on the market in the mid-1990s.
- » In Europe, there was widespread concern that there hadn't been enough testing on genetically engineered plants to be producing food for general consumption.
- » In response to this concern, the biotechnology industry hired public relations firms in the United States to begin assuring the people that there was no reason for alarm, that genetically-engineered food was not only safe, but also essential for feeding and nourishing people in third world countries.
- » Public interest groups have attempted to pass legislation that requires that all GMO (genetically-modified organism) food available on supermarket shelves be labeled, but Congress has repeatedly failed to pass this legislation.
- » The debate on genetically engineered food in the United States has been largely one-sided, favoring industry over public concern about the effect this technology could have on agriculture, science and public health.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think there was such widespread concern about genetically-engineered food in Europe, but not in the United States?
2. How did public relations help to shape the public discussion regarding GMO foods?
3. Why do you think the biotechnology industry opposes labeling?

POST-VIEWING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- » What role does public relations play in a democracy?
- » What is the value of PR?
- » How have new technologies facilitated the growth and success of the public relations industry?
- » Why do you think public relations works so well in the United States?
- » How might it be possible for public interest groups to compete with public relations?
- » How does corporate ownership of mainstream journalism serve the goals and interests of the big players within public relations industry? How might it work against the interests of smaller public relations efforts?

EXERCISES FOR RESEARCH & WRITING

1. Who are the Toxic Sludge experts? What is their agenda? (See Appendix for bios on each of the people interviewed for Toxic Sludge.)
2. Debate: The foundation of professional ethics lies in each individual's personal ethical beliefs. Different schools of thought exist amongst practitioners about the most ethical approach to practicing public relations. Here are a couple positions. Divide students up and have them debate these perspectives. (source: Diane Samples, *Media Knowledge*)
 - a. Some PR professionals see themselves as lawyers in the court of public opinion and believe that all parties have a right to tell their side of the story and to be represented by public relations counsel. These professionals have no ethical dilemma in representing all entities who seek counsel, including governments accused of human rights violations (Kuwait, Argentina, etc.), a racist hate group, or a cigarette company.
 - b. Other PR professionals dispute this legal metaphor, citing that a courtroom is a highly controlled environment where one legal counsel battles it out with another under the supervision of an expert judge who enforces ground rules. These ground rules include severe penalties for lying, fair representation, and equal amounts of time to present information for each point of view. In the arena of public opinion, these ground rules don't exist. As a result, organizations that cannot afford PR counsel have severe disadvantages in communicating their message and countering false claims.
3. Pick out a company. Go to its website and visit the press page to get a sense of the press releases they've been sending out to journalists. Then do a search of recent news stories about the company. (Lexis-Nexis is a great resource for this kind of search if your school has access to it.) Are there similarities between the company press releases and news stories?
4. Study press kits (you can usually get these by calling the PR department of a corporation and asking for them). Compile a list of all the various pieces in the kit and what you think is its purpose for being there. Then, write a paragraph about the company/product based only on what they have learned from reviewing the kit. Follow up by doing a news search of the company and see what information wasn't included in the press kit (source: Diane Samples, *Media Knowledge*).
5. Follow an issue. Study who is interviewed and their organizations. You can do this for any media content – newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and internet content. Carefully read, listen or watch a story and then follow the content back to its source – who did the reporter talk to? What kind of organizations are the interviewees from? Research the topic further. Who didn't the reporter talk to? Are there people interviewed who aren't spokespersons for government or industry?
6. Have students study the PR industry's guidelines for ethical conduct. An updated version of the *Public Relations Society of America's Code of Ethics* is available on their website (http://www.prsa.org/_About/ethics/pledge.asp?ident=eth6) or is downloadable in PDF file form. How does the code of ethics contrast with information provided in the video?

APPENDIX

BIOGRAPHIES

Karen Charman is a New York–based investigative journalist specializing in agriculture, the environment and health. She began reporting on biotechnology in 1988.

Stuart Ewen, social critic and professor of media studies at Hunter College in New York, is the author of numerous books on the media and public relations, most recently *PR: A Social History of Spin*.

Jessica Hayes is the national coordinator for the *Genetic Engineering Action Network* (www.geaction.org), which is a diverse network of grassroots activists, national and community non-governmental organizations (NGOs), farmer and farm advocacy groups, academics and scientists who have come together to work on the myriad of issues surrounding biotechnology.

Dr. Martha Herbert (DVD) is a pediatric neurologist and brain development researcher at Massachusetts General Hospital. Dr. Herbert has written and taught extensively on the sociology and philosophy of science.

Mark Crispin Miller is a media critic, professor at New York University, and the author of *Boxed In: The Culture of TV* and *The Bush Dyslexicon*.

Arthur Rowse, is a veteran newsman and media critic. He retired from *U.S. News & World Report* after serving on city desks of *The Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald/Traveler* and *Washington Post*. He is a former prize-winning columnist, newsletter publisher and *National Public Radio* commentator. He is also the author of numerous books and articles on the news business, including *Drive-By Journalism: The Assault on Your Need to Know*.

Diane Samples teaches a media literacy course at Sacred Heart University in Connecticut and is the Director of *Media Knowledge, Inc.*, a media literacy organization which began hosting Media Mania camps for teenagers.

Eric Sparling worked for a short time in public relations. When he left the industry, he wrote an article for the *Toronto Star* entitled *Confessions of a Spin Doctor*. He now works in journalism, as an editor at a sports magazine.

John Stauber (www.prwatch.org) is the founder and director of the non-profit *Center for Media and Democracy*. He publishes *PR Watch*, a quarterly newsletter examining the public relations industry, and co-wrote with

Sheldon Rampton *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry; Mad Cow USA: Could the Nightmare Happen Here?* and *Trust Us, We're Experts: How Industry Manipulates Science and Gambles with Your Future*.