

# REPORTING AMERICA AT WAR

## CLASSROOM MATERIALS

### Message Control

**SUBJECT:**

Journalism, Social Studies, English

**ESTIMATED****TIME REQUIRED:**

One class period.

**OVERVIEW:**

To most people, the word “propaganda” has negative connotations. It usually conjures up the image of a state bureaucracy, totalitarian in nature, running a highly-controlled information machine. We commonly associate propaganda with individuals or organizations whose intentions are suspect, and we may be especially alert to its use during a time of war. Propaganda is an effective weapon in a war of ideas, and thus it is a major part of the arsenal in the battle for hearts and minds that accompanies every shooting war. But propaganda is not just a tool of the state. It also can be—and is—used for other purposes. Propaganda is found in business communications, political speeches, and advertising. In other words, propaganda is a tool that is used by anyone who has something to sell— whether an idea, an ideology, or a product.

This lesson will examine various forms of propaganda and how they are used to manipulate public opinion. Students will:

- review the techniques of propaganda;
- learn to recognize propaganda in oral, written, and visual communications;
- practice creating persuasive messages.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Students will have the opportunity to apply the following critical thinking skills:

- Detect bias in data presented in various forms: visual, oral, print
- Compare and contrast credibility of differing accounts of the same event
- Form opinion based on critical examination of relevant information
- Communicate orally, visually, and in writing
- Test the validity of the information, using such criteria as source, objectivity, technical correctness, and currency

**RESOURCES FOR THIS LESSON:**

- Computers with Internet access
- List of propaganda techniques [link]
- LCD projector

**SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES**

The “Propaganda” category contains comprehensive resources, including articles, lesson plans, books and much more [www.med.sc.edu:1081](http://www.med.sc.edu:1081)

*Toxic Sludge is Good for You! Lies, Dams Lies and the Public Relations Industry* by John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton (Common Courage Press, 1995)

*When You Ride ALONE You Ride with Bin Laden: What the Government Should Be Telling Us to Help Fight the War on Terrorism* by Bill Maher (New Millennium Press, 2002)

Propaganda Remix Project – the following book and Web site contain old propaganda posters with new wording to reflect current political conditions: *You Back the Attack! We’ll Bomb Who We Want!* By Micah Ian Wright (Seven Stories Press, 2003)

[www.antiwarposters.com](http://www.antiwarposters.com)

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### STRATEGY FOR THIS LESSON:

#### DEFINITIONS AND TECHNIQUES

Ascertain the students' level of knowledge and understanding of propaganda by discussing the following questions:

1. What is propaganda? Can you give an example?
2. What is the purpose or function of propaganda?
3. Who uses propaganda?

Explain that, because we are bombarded daily with hundreds of media messages, it is important to develop skills that help us sort through those messages and choose those that have the most relevance to our lives. It is also important to know how to determine if a source of information is credible. By examining the messages more closely we can come to understand how the different media can influence our beliefs and our actions. This knowledge can empower us to make better choices for ourselves.

Distribute the list of propaganda techniques to the class. Review each technique and ask for additional examples to add to those given for each one. Remind the students that these techniques can also be found in advertising.

#### LOOKING FOR PROPAGANDA

This activity can be done in class or as a homework assignment. Divide the class into small groups of 4-5 students each. Have each group choose one of the articles in the "Examples" section of the Propaganda Critic web site [www.propagandacritic.com](http://www.propagandacritic.com). They include "America First Party" through "Maoist International Movement".

[Please note: You may want to print out these articles ahead of time and hand them out to the groups.] Students should read the article and identify any propaganda techniques they find, then report back to the class.

**Optional: Students can create power point presentations of their findings to share with the class.**

#### U.S. AND IRAQ

Ask the students to read the texts of two televised speeches, President Bush's address on the start of the war in Iraq [www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,918031,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,918031,00.html) and Saddam Hussein's speech a few days later [www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,920868,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,920868,00.html). Again, the students should analyze both speeches for their use of propaganda techniques. What similarities and differences do they find in the two speeches?

#### THE BEGINNINGS AND BEYOND

In the United States, the large-scale use of propaganda techniques and mass distribution of propagandistic communications began during World War I. It created a legacy that has lasted to the present day. As a homework assignment have students read the World War I article on the Propaganda Critic web site [link]. It is divided into four sections, beginning with "The drift towards war" and ending with "Post-war propaganda"—a total of about seven pages. Discuss the following questions with the class:

1. What are your general reactions to the article?
2. Did anything in the article surprise you?
3. What parallels do you recognize in our current information environment to what was occurring in World War I?
4. What is the role of the press in reporting the government's messages? The press has been accused in the past—and currently— of being complicit in spreading the official government point of view, especially in time of war. Do you think this is a fair criticism?

Ask the students to bring in examples of what they consider to be propagandistic, or other highly persuasive, communications. These can include newspaper or web site editorials, texts or videotapes of a political speech, audiotapes of a radio talk show, or an issue ad (e.g., about the environment, political prisoners, health insurance, etc.) from the newspaper or TV. Review these with the class, looking for uses of propaganda techniques. Discuss

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ways individuals can determine the credibility of the information presented in these various sources, that is, what other sources of information can they find on a given topic? If statistics are used, how can they be verified?

### WRITING EXERCISE

Present these quotes to the class:

*“Public opinion wins wars.” - President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander during World War II*

*“Truth is the first casualty of war.”*

Have students consider these two quotes and write an essay reflecting on them in light of the World War I article and current information on the conduct of the war in Iraq.

### PICTORIAL PROPAGANDA

During World War I and World War II posters were used to convey the government’s message and gain popular support for the war. Examples of these posters can be found in the following collections:

American Propaganda Posters [www.earthstation1.com/America\\_Propaganda\\_Posters.html](http://www.earthstation1.com/America_Propaganda_Posters.html)

Classic Propaganda Posters [www.med.sc.edu:1081](http://www.med.sc.edu:1081); click on Propaganda, choose Classic Propaganda Posters

Faces of the Enemy [www.classroomtools.com/faces.htm](http://www.classroomtools.com/faces.htm)

Choose a poster from one of these sites. Recommended - from American Propaganda Posters site:

- *Come On*
- *Hasten the Homecoming*
- *When You Ride Alone*
- *We Can Do It!*
- *Shadow*

Show the poster to the class and have the students analyze it by answering the following questions:

1. What is depicted in the poster?
2. How are the elements arranged? What is the effect of that arrangement?
3. How is color used? What is the effect?
4. What other elements are used to enhance the message?
5. What emotions are aroused by this poster?
6. What audience is this poster designed to appeal to?
7. What message do you get besides the one that’s printed on the poster?

*Please note: This same analysis may be done using photographs. See the lesson The Power of Pictures.*

### PROMOTING A CAUSE

Give the students the opportunity to try out their persuasive powers. Ask them to think of something they feel strongly about and create a persuasive communication about that subject. They can choose to do this in the form of a poster, an advertisement, or in written form. Students can share these with the class and critique each other’s work.

### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

During the 2004 presidential race have the students monitor the propaganda and persuasion techniques used by the candidates. Divide the class into groups, each group keeping track of a different candidate. Periodically, have the students provide updates on the techniques they find in the candidates’ speeches, published photos, and television ads. Compare the techniques used by different candidates.

Have the students analyze advertisements to see how propaganda techniques are applied in the selling of products.

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### STANDARDS LIST

Media Standards established by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) Understands the ways in which image-makers carefully construct meaning

*Understands influences on the construction of media messages and images*

*Understands that media messages have economic, political, social, and aesthetic purposes*

*Understands the influence of media on society as a whole*

*Understands the role of the media in addressing social and cultural issues*

### STANDARDS FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS (NCTE AND IRA)

**Standard 4.** Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

**Standard 6.** Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

**Standard 12.** Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

### SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS LEARNING STANDARDS)

#### Power, Authority & Governance

Explain the purpose of government and analyze how its powers are acquired, used, and justified

#### Civic Ideals and Practices

Locate, access, analyze, organize, synthesize, evaluate, and apply information about selected public issues—identifying, describing, and evaluating multiple points of view

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Karen Zill is the former Manager of Educational Outreach at WETA, Washington, D.C. She is currently an independent consultant who writes educational materials, develops outreach campaigns, and conducts media literacy classes and workshops.