

Presentation:
International Communications –
A Media Literacy Approach
Dr. Art Silverblatt
Webster University
St. Louis, Missouri, USA
July 2004

Table of Contents

<i>Contents</i>	<i>Page Number(s)</i>
1.) Article Text	2-8
2.) Case Study	
A.) Ideology of the News	9-10
B.) Headlines	11-12
C.) Ownership	13-14
D.) Inclusion/Omission	15-21
E.) Word Choice	22-27
F.) Vague Authority	28-29
G.) Passive Catch-Phrase	30
H.) Relative Position	31
I.) Photographs	32-38
3.) Breakdown Analysis by News Source	39-66

**PRESENTATION: INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS –
A MEDIA LITERACY APPROACH**

Dr. Art Silverblatt
Webster University
St. Louis, Missouri (USA)
July 2004

Introduction

In large measure, becoming an educated person in the 21st century requires an understanding of international communications. International communications has an impact on the way that we think about other countries and their people, sets the agenda of the issues that face the global community, and influences our attitudes toward these issues.

Innovations in media technology such as the Internet and communications satellites have obliterated traditional borders. As UN Secretary General Kofi Annan observes, “Today’s real borders are not between nations, but between powerful and powerless, free and fettered, privileged and humiliated.”¹ Thanks to media technology, people are now engaged in daily conversations across the globe. To illustrate, in 2000, an estimated 400 million people communicated and conducted business online.

These channels of mass communication bring people together who share beliefs, attitudes, backgrounds, and experiences. Media technology now empowers political activists to organize at levels once available only to governments. For instance, in October 2002, individuals opposed to the impending U.S.-led invasion of Iraq built an anti-war coalition throughout the world by exchanging anti-war messages via email. One of these messages, which originated in France, found its way to sympathizers in Switzerland, Scotland, Sweden, Finland, New Zealand, England, Ecuador, Hong Kong, South Africa, Spain, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, and a number of cities throughout the U.S. This form of “virtual social activism” played a significant role in the rise of the international anti-war movement.

International media have emerged as a significant factor in the geopolitical arena as well. In November 2001, the U.S. captured members of the Taliban in Afghanistan and took them to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Initially, there was little critical discussion on the part of the American media regarding the treatment of these prisoners. However, photographs showing the prisoners locked in 6 by 8 foot open air chainlink cages were published by the British press. These photos launched a global campaign to pressure the U.S. government to grant the prisoners basic amenities, as stipulated by the Geneva Accords. As a result, the U.S. modified its policy, granting the captives status as prisoners of war and distributing copies of the Koran among the prisoners.

In addition, small revolutions occur every day around the world, thanks to the media. To illustrate, in 2002, students from the remote town of Robatkarim, Iran organized an environment project in their community, researching information and programs on the Internet that convinced their parents and their school to begin a recycling plan.

International communications now affects people on a personal level. For instance, family members from around the world now are able to maintain contact and even hold “virtual family reunions” on the Internet.

Why Study International Communications?

The study of international communications can lead to a broader understanding of issues and events that shape our lives. Unfortunately, many people remain woefully oblivious to international issues. To illustrate, until the events of 9/11, international stories made up of only six percent of the news stories appearing on U.S. television. This ethnocentrism can lead to intolerance and misunderstandings between nations. Studies show that the less Americans know about the world, the more likely they are to favor punitive actions over diplomacy when dealing with troublesome foreign countries.

However, given recent events in the world, Americans have begun to seek out international sources of information. At the outbreak of the most recent Iraq war, UK news websites experienced huge increases in the number of American visitors as Americans sought broader coverage of the conflict. In the week immediately following the outbreak of Gulf War II in March 2003, war traffic to the BBC News site from the US increased by 47%, while traffic to the Guardian website soared by 83%.²

The study of international communication can introduce individuals to a diversity of global perspectives and ways of seeing the world that enables them to move beyond the provincialism of their national media. Significantly, in May 2004, the *New York Times* issued an apology for “coverage (of the Iraq war) that was not as rigorous as it should have been.” They add, “Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining claims (of weapons of mass destruction) as new evidence emerged – or failed to emerge.”³

Examining international sources of news can also disclose the prevailing attitudes in other countries. On July 3, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas D. Kristof wrote

If President Bush wants to rescue his Iraqi adventure, here's a suggestion: Spend less time with C.I.A. sycophants like George Tenet and more time watching Al Jazeera television.

The Bush administration's central intelligence failure was not that it failed to tap enough telephones. Rather, it didn't bother to understand the mind-set in Iraq or the larger Arab world – and it still doesn't.

The transfer of sovereignty is a useful moment to look back at what went wrong in Iraq. As I see it, the root problem was hubris born in a Washington echo chamber, and a resulting conviction that Iraqis would welcome us with flowers.

If the Arab world is going to break out of its self-pitying self-absorption, it's going to have to understand American attitudes – and it could do worse than switching its televisions from Al Jazeera to Fox. And if the Bush administration is going to turn Iraq around and engage the Arab world effectively, then it must try harder to escape the echo chamber and understand the Arabs – and it could do worse than switching from the reassuring euphony of Fox to Al Jazeera.⁴

In addition, comparing international media coverage can disclose the prevailing point of view of an individual's national media. The national perspective of a country's media often assumes a disarming naturalness – in part because this point of view is presented by respected media communicators on a consistent basis. This underscores the value of consulting international sources of information.

The study of international communications can also anticipate new developments around the globe.

Finally, international communications promotes democracy on a global scale by broadening peoples' access to the flow of information worldwide. For instance, a coalition of environmental, labor, and human rights groups, including the Sierra Club, Oxfam, Amnesty International, and the A.F.L.-C.I.O., have argued for an *international right to know*, in order to avert human rights violations, suffering, and oppression.

A Media Literacy Approach to International Communications

Media literacy is a discipline that is particularly well suited to the study of international communications. Media literacy is a critical thinking skill that is applied to the source of most of our information – the channels of mass communications. Within this context, media literacy

focuses on ways to make sense of the information that we are receiving through international channels of mass communications.

Media may be defined as a channel of mass communication that enables a media communicator to convey information to a mass audience that is separated in time and space. The major channels of mass media are print, photography, radio, film, television, and the Internet. Other, less obvious forms of mass communication include billboards, designer clothing labels, and product packaging.

As mentioned earlier, individuals have more access to international *media presentations* (e.g., newspapers, magazines, films, and television programs) than ever before. However, universal access to the media should not be confused with media literacy. Media literacy involves the ability to *analyze* and *discuss* the information being conveyed over the channels of mass communication. A major goal of media literacy is to empower individuals to develop a critical distance from the information they receive through the media. In that way, they are in a position to make independent judgments about what programming they choose to watch, to read, or hear, as well as how to interpret the information that they receive through the channels of mass communication.

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman provides a striking example of the need to develop a critical approach to media messages:

An Indonesian working for the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, who had just visited the Islamic fundamentalist stronghold of Jog Jakarta, told me this story: "For the first time I saw signs on the streets there saying things like, 'The only solution to the Arab-Israel conflict is jihad, if you are true Muslim, register yourself to be a volunteer.' I heard people saying, 'We have to do something, otherwise the Christians or Jewish will kill us.' When we talked to people to find out where (they got these ideas), they said from the Internet. They took for granted that anything they learned from the Internet is true. They believed in a Jewish conspiracy and that 4,000 Jews were warned not to come to work at the World Trade Center (on September 11). It was on the Internet."

At its best, the Internet can educate more people faster than any media tool we've ever had. At its worst, it can make people dumber faster than any media tool we've ever had. The lie that 4,000 Jews were warned not to go into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11 was spread entirely over the internet and is now thoroughly believed in the Muslim world. Because the Internet has an aura of "technology" surrounding it, the uneducated believe information from it even more. They don't realize that the Internet,

at its ugliest, is just an open sewer: an electronic conduit for untreated, unfiltered information.⁵

Definitions of Media Literacy

As applied to international communications, media literacy can be defined as follows:

Understanding the process of mass communication

Media Literacy focuses attention on the production, transmission, and interpretation of media message: who is constructing the message, what the function (or purpose) of the message is, and how the audience interprets the content.

An awareness of the impact of the media on the individual and society

The media have revolutionized the ways we think about each other, our world, and ourselves. Media literacy focuses attention on the global impact of international media systems on the attitudes, values, and behaviors of traditional societies.

The development of strategies with which to analyze and discuss media messages

Media literacy offers a theoretical framework for the systematic analysis of *media messages* (that is, the underlying themes or ideas contained in a media presentation).

These strategies also provide a framework that can facilitate the discussion of media content with others – including children, peers, and the people responsible for producing media programming.

An awareness of media content as a cultural “text”

Media presentations provide insight into the attitudes, values, behaviors, preoccupations, patterns of thought, and myths that define cultures. Within this context, media presentations such as newspapers, films, and television shows, can serve as texts, which furnish perspective into the prevailing cultural, historical, political, economic, religious, and legal sensibilities of a country. And conversely, the study of a country’s history, culture, political system, and economic structure offers insight into its national media system.

Understanding the range of media systems around the world

There is an enormous difference in the ways in which individual countries construct messages and distribute information through the media. A country’s media system is largely determined by its political, economic, and cultural systems. The distinctive nature of a nation’s media system, in turn, has an impact on the films, television shows, newspapers, and web pages

it produces. At the same time, media literacy strategies identify common elements in the media system within different countries.

The cultivation of an enhanced enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation of media content.

Media literacy should not be understood merely as an opportunity to bash the media. A well-produced media presentation can be enormously worthwhile, exposing people to different ideas and cultures. Media literacy should not detract from your enjoyment of programs. Indeed, critical interpretations should enhance your enjoyment and appreciation of media at its best: insightful articles, informative news programs, and uplifting films.

In the case of international media communicators: the ability to produce effective and responsible media messages

In order to be effective in a global arena, media communicators must demonstrate an awareness of the complexities presented by communicating with an international audience. But further, in order to improve the media industry, media communicators must understand the responsibilities involved in producing programming that serves the best interests of the public.

Endnotes

¹ Kofi Annan, in a speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway. BBC World News, December 10, 2001.

² Owen Gibson, "U.S. turns to British News," The Guardian (London) May 12, 2003.

³ From the Editors: "The Times and Iraq," New York Times, May 26, 2004

⁴ Nicholas Kristof "Al Jazeera: Out-Foxing Fox," New York Times, July 3, 2004, Section A; Column 1; Editorial Desk; Pg. 15.

⁵ Friedman, Thomas, "Global Village Idiocy," New York Times, May 12, 2002 NYT Feb. 20, 2002, A23.