

Lesson Plan 3

Propaganda in Context

Students learn about news releases and explore the importance of context in critically analyzing contemporary propaganda

Rationale

Propaganda thrives on ignorance. When propaganda looks like information, people may lack the context to evaluate its quality. Many large companies create and distribute news releases, which are designed to look like news and journalism. As an important form of public relations, news releases provide information but they also communicate the point of view of the company or author who created it. We experience many forms of propaganda as a type of information. By gathering information from many different sources and examining the context of contemporary propaganda, people deepen their ability to evaluate the messages they receive.

Essential Question

- How do people distinguish between propaganda and information?

Learning Outcomes & Key Messages

- Gain knowledge about public relations and the genre of news releases
- Appreciate how propaganda's effectiveness depends on the message, techniques, environment and context, the means of communication and format, and audience receptivity.
- Apply critical thinking skills to analyze propaganda
- Consider the context in evaluating whether propaganda is beneficial or harmful

Preparation

In a high-tech class, provide access to Internet. In a low-tech classroom, display the [MIND OVER MEDIA](#) website and make copies of Worksheet 3.1 for all students.

Activity 3.1 “Board Game Helps Fight Real World Ebola”

Board Game Helps Fight Epidemic

View: <http://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/rate/699>

America's propaganda agency, Voice of America, produced a video news release that shows how the board gaming community is banding together to play a cooperative game about fighting wars against disease as a way to raise awareness and money to fight the spread of Ebola in Africa.

Watch the video and ask students to briefly summarize the video and share their opinions.

Q: What emotions are activated by watching this news release?

A: Answers will vary. Encourage students to use reasoning and evidence from the text to support their ideas.

Q: Is this propaganda? Why or why not?

A: Answers will vary. Encourage students to review the definitions of propaganda from Lesson 1.

Understanding How Context Shapes Interpretation

Explain that understanding of *context* can sometimes change people's interpretations of a media message. Explain more about the context of this message:

- **Message:** This message expresses the idea that board game designers create games to teach players about important global issues and that players are combining play and activism by hosting game parties to raise money for Ebola.
- **Author, Means of Communication & Format:** This video was created by Voice of America, the U.S. propaganda agency which is responsible for promoting U.S. policy around the world. The format of the message is a video news release. It is distributed free via satellite to television stations all around the world
- **Techniques:** The use of close-up images of game play increases people's curiosity and interest in the game. Interviews with the game designer and the players create feelings of emotional closeness.
- **Environment and Context:** The board game, Pandemic, was created by Matt Leacock in 2008 and is available for sale on Amazon for \$30. Seeing this video in the context of a television news program, international viewers are likely to find it credible and believable. They are not likely to interpret it as a promotion designed to increase sales for the board game. They are not likely to interpret it as a form of pro-American propaganda.
- **Audience Receptivity:** The video is likely to promote feelings of warmth and feelings of identification with gamers and game designers. The audience may be responsive to the idea that Americans are creative entrepreneurs who find ways to profit from their playfulness. It's also possible that some people could perceive this in a negative way, as it reflects Americans' superficial approach to important global issues. Because it appears on the news, the audience is unaware that it was created by the U.S. government as a form of propaganda, and so viewers may not truly be free to accept or reject the message.

Discuss: Does more information about the context of the video change your interpretation? Why or why not?

Activity 3.2 Video News Releases: Beneficial or Harmful?

Invite students to consider whether this video about the board game community and Ebola is beneficial or harmful. Depending on your point of view, people will answer this question differently. Assign students to one of four groups and use Worksheet 3.2 for a guided role-play discussion activity.

Students break into four groups for a role-play activity. Each group represents the point of view of one of these groups: (a) the Voice of America, (b) the citizens of the African nation Sierra Leone, (c) doctors and the medical community, and (d) the citizens of the United States.

Discuss: Is this video beneficial or harmful?

Students work in their groups to develop reasoning and evidence to support their ideas. Then each group writes a response to post on the Mind Over Media website.

Conclude the activity by reviewing students' different interpretations and noting that people's understanding of whether a specific example of propaganda is harmful or beneficial depends on their role in society and their point of view.

Activity 3.3 Putting Propaganda in Context

To understand propaganda's potential beneficial or harmful impact, we often need additional information and ideas about the context of the message. Having more information about a message generally helps us understand and evaluate it better.

In this activity, students upload an example of visual propaganda or select one from the online gallery at the [MIND OVER MEDIA](#) website and use the Internet to gather more information to deepen their interpretation of the message. Students complete Worksheet 3.2 to document their learning process.

Review these Key Elements of Context

- **Message:** The nature of the information and ideas being expressed
- **Techniques:** The use of symbols and rhetorical strategies that attract attention and activate emotional response
- **Environment and Context:** Where, when and how people encounter the message
- **Means of Communication & Format:** How the message gets to people and what form it takes
- **Audience Receptivity:** How people think and feel about the message and how free they are to accept or reject it

Search Strategies: Advanced Google Search

Encourage students to gather at a variety of different sources of information about the topic or issue related to the propaganda example they choose to analyze. By learning more about the topic or issue, they gain information and knowledge that helps them analyze and evaluate contemporary propaganda. When people have access to multiple information sources, it can help them to recognize the point of view or bias of a particular message.

A search engine like Google is a powerful and effective tool for exploring contemporary issues. Each example of propaganda will require a unique search strategy as students gather information about the topic or issue.

Learn more about [how Google Search works.](#)

Learn how to [filter and refine your results on Google](#)

Learn how to [filter by reading level](#)

Learn more about [Google Image Search.](#)

Remind students that there is no one "right answer" for this kind of search – each source adds a little to their understanding of the context and helps them make better interpretations of the message.

Teacher Reflection

Information is essential in helping people analyze and evaluate propaganda. Information can also convey propaganda – as the form of news releases and video news releases reveals. We can't take any messages for granted – especially ones that look or seem "informative." Access and using multiple sources of information is

an important strategy that helps us deepen our understanding of the context of messages. Having good skills in searching for information and evaluating the quality of the information we find is an essential life skill today.

Evaluation

Students should be able to gather several sources of information, gaining information to create a summary and analysis of a single example of propaganda. They should be able to use information to support their interpretation of how propaganda's effectiveness depends on the message, techniques, environment and context, the means of communication and format, and audience receptivity.