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Deciding What to Believe in an Age of Information Abundance: Exploring Non-Fiction Television in Education

This paper explores the crucial but largely unconscious decisions that we make each day as we decide which information is believable and truthful. By looking carefully at the ways in which some television messages can be made to seem authentic and credible, teachers can improve students' critical viewing skills through dynamic, interactive learning activities that invite students to ask, "How do I decide what to believe?"

Who hasn't sat in a darkened classroom, listening to the "beep" of the filmstrip or the clacking of the take-up reel, or basking in the blue glow of the television monitor? For nearly 70 years, non-fiction and documentary programs have been used in American public schools. In a recent survey of high school teachers, 22% claimed to use television programs frequently, and teachers also report that more than 50% of the video materials used for instructional purposes were obtained via taping programs at home off the air (Public Broadcasting Service, 1997).

As a result of cable television and the increasing number of choices on television, the elementary school may no longer be the first place where some children encounter television non-fiction. There has been an explosion in the quantity of non-fiction materials available to children in the home, including news programs (*Nick News*), documentaries (*Where in the World?*), and animal programs (*Krafft's Creatures*). However, this increased quantity of educational and informational programming does not ensure that children will be exposed to it. In particular, urban schoolteachers have reported that children have less and less familiarity with

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informational messages of any sort — television news, newspapers, documentaries, animal and nature programming. In an age of information abundance, television can be an escape from reality. In many families, non-fiction programming is not a part of how television is used in the home.

When elementary or secondary teachers use documentaries or other non-fiction materials, they often identify it as "enrichment," resources that enhance their coverage of subject areas, particularly language arts, social studies, history, science, and geography. This often leads to the belief that school-sanctioned media messages are unproblematic — that, like a textbook, the information is just "there." But just as scholars and educators are beginning to identify the biases, myths, and uses of propaganda in textbooks (Loewen), it is critically important that teachers open up a range of questions in the classroom that invite students to become more reflective about the largely unconscious process of deciding what to believe.

Perhaps the fact that non-fiction programs are perceived as believable and trustworthy is the best reason of all to subject them to the process of critical inquiry. Determining the truth value of information has become increasingly difficult in an age of increasing diversity and ease of access to information. While the concept of truth and its uncertain and changing value(s) have been problematized by philosophers, historians, and scholars throughout all of human hisory, this paper presents a more modest and practical approach to the questions about evaluating the truth claims of media messages.

In this paper, we review a number of classroom strategies that teachers have used to examine the construction of authority and authenticity in non-fiction and documentary television programming. Careful analysis of deciding what to believe about non-fiction television can open up opportunities to explore parallel decision-making processes about what we choose to believe when we encounter information in the newspaper, on the radio, in film, from friends and colleagues, and on the Internet. Exploring the domain of non-fiction television can inspire discussion of some of the humanities' important questions about truth, intentionality, meaning, and interpretation in ways that are relevant to young people.

What is Non-Fiction Television?

Many students are familiar with the word "documentary," and teachers are aware of the existing attitudes about beliefs their students have about this genre of film and television programming. By middle school, students can usually identify the specific broadcast and cable channels that feature documentaries, and some will recognize that most documentary programs are not designed for a youth audience. While many students enjoy documentaries, others can have negative attitudes, and label these programs as "boring," "slow," and "tedious." When students are asked, "Who watches documentaries?" they often identify teachers as a target audience. Social class differences are evident in students' background knowledge about documentaries, since students from low-income environments may have less personal home-viewing experience with documentaries than those from middle- and upper-class households.

When Scottish filmmaker John Grierson defined the documentary near the turn of the century as "the creative interpretation of actuality," he recognized that documentaries are creative representations of actual people, groups and events. According to Medhurst, "Grierson established the documentary film as the type dealing with the 'creative treatment of actuality.' For Grierson, both the 'creative' and the 'actuality' dimensions were crucial for a proper understanding of the documentary form" (p. 185).

Under this broad definition, we may also consider reality-based shows like *America's Most Wanted*, *Rescue 911*, and *Cops* to be "creative interpretations of actuality." While many students claim to find "school TV" boring, non-fiction programs are quite popular with young American students in their home viewing environments. Reality-based genre programs have large audiences of pre-adolescent and young teens. These programs are compelling and provocative, purporting to represent the lives of real people in dramatic situations often involving accidents or violence, using a format that often includes recreations, simulations, and manipulation of images and sounds. These programs are reshaping the conventions and routines of both the news and the documentary producer. For young people, these are the present-day, non-school based documentaries, a "creative interpretation of actuality."

Why the national obsession with this sort of voyeuristic entertainment? According to Segal, "The preponderance of these shows is also related to the bottom line: they are extremely inexpensive to produce. Why engage a group of talented writers and producers to make intelligent and exciting TV when it's more profitable to dip into the endless pool of human grief?" (p. 56). Clearly, there are distinct pleasures associated with watching "real" human grief as opposed to fictionalized human grief, as evidenced by the ratings for this disturbing form of entertainment. This phenomenon also explains the recent spate of reality-based programs, including *Most Terrible Car Crashes*, *Wildest Police Videos*, and the like.

Teachers can explore students' understanding of the complex determinations involved in assessing the "realism" of a media message through a classroom activity that explores the boundaries of the genres of non-fiction and fiction television. The activity invites students to place various types of programs on a continuum that ranges from "more real" to "less real." Students quickly discover that, while there is broad consensus about the realism of some programs, others do not fit comfortably on the continuum. Is a televised sports game more real or less real than a game show? Is a newsmagazine program like *20/20* less real than a network sports program? What makes fiction often seem more "real" than non-fiction? By problematizing the concept of realism, this activity invites students to reflect on how much we use genre-based expectations in assessing whether a media message is true or not.

What is the Producer's Purpose?

Because the documentary has a kind of intellectual authority as a "serious" genre in film and television, many viewers assume that the documentary is neutral or objective. But this fallacy is dangerous precisely because it leads away from critically analyzing a message. Since all messages express a point of view, the simplest way to explore the concept of point-of-view is to identify the constellation of motives which drive a producer to create a documentary: to inform, to educate, to entertain, to persuade, for self-expression, for profit.

Identifying the motives of documentary filmmakers has a distinguished intellectual history, as Erik Barnouw first established the enterprise in his landmark history of the genre by identifying each chapter of the book by a label which suggests motive, like "Explorer," "Visionary," and so forth. In his book, *Theorizing Documentary*, Renov identifies similar rhetorical and aesthetic functions of non-fiction arts, but omits the functions of entertainment and profit because he is primarily concerned with independent documentary productions.

Occasionally, teachers make use of the concepts of "bias" and "ideology" to analyze the producer's purpose. Because a producer works in a social, political, and economic context that sets constraints on a program's content, tone, and stylistic elements, there are enormous variations within this genre. Documentaries which are produced in Great Britain through the BBC are usually quite different from those produced by U.S. commercial programming, which differ from independently produced documentaries. In the United States, many people associate the word "documentary" with the particular characteristics which mark the non-fiction programs produced by public television. But in exploring the widest range of documentaries which represent "creative interpretations of actuality," enormous differences are apparent. These differences are more systematic than simply those of stylistic or individual differences between filmmakers. Educators can use the study of the documentary to reveal how technological and economic forces in the broadcasting industry have shaped the representation of historical fact. Rapping notes:

> The contrast between the 1950s documentary approach of *See It Now* and that of contemporary reports is telling. As video technology grew more sophisticated, the triumph of style over content was heightened. This allowed the networks to apply a variety of aesthetically moving and impressive techniques to serious topics. On the other hand, the range of views examined and the depth of the examinations have not changed as much as sometimes seems the case. . . . Documentaries

> now serve the somewhat different purpose of expounding on, and so justifying, policies already in place. They rarely challenge hegemony, they explain it. (p. 117)

How Does the Producer's Purpose Shape the Content?

During the 1950s and 1960s, many documentary producers believed that it was possible for the camera to record "raw" reality, to reduce the intervention of the filmmaker's presence and give viewers "the feeling of being there." Lightweight film equipment and the growing use of the camera as an instrument for scientific observation led to the development of documentary techniques called Direct Cinema, or "cinema verité," films that claimed to objectively capture experience without the use of dramatic structure or narration (Winston; Nichols, 1991). But the goal of capturing "reality" without the intervention of the filmmaker proved to be an illusive and nonsensical goal. The camera must be directed by a human eye and mind, and every choice about where to point the lens is a human decision which shapes the program content (Tobias). Although a documentary can authentically reproduce some aspects of actual experience, a documentary cannot ever be perfectly objective.

Teachers have used student-created media production projects to help students appreciate the creative shaping involved in the construction of a documentary or non-fiction work. In one activity, the teacher breaks the class into six teams, giving each team one of the six motives: to inform, persuade, entertain, expres oneself, teach, or make profit. Using their motives to drive the brain-storming, students identify their target audience, develop a program concept, list the sources who will be featured on their program, and describe some of the important locations and visual images that will be shown.

In one classroom I observed, teams of students were developing six different documentaries about food poisoning. One team developed a documentary about food preparation procedures in the fast food industry, with behind-the-scenes images from MacDonald's and Burger King. Another team, whose purpose was to inform,

used a startling opening featuring stomach-churning shots of midway rides at the state fair to hook viewers into a investigation of salmonella poisoning at the fair. Another team developed a concept that used high-profile celebrities and musicians like Whoopi Goldberg and Seal to tell stories about their food poisoning experiences in order to provide facts and lessons in an entertaining way. By working collaboratively to create a specific message to suit these different motives, students were reflecting on the complex decision-making involved in the choices about what language, sound, or images to use in creating media. It was clear that these students were gaining some insight on how viewers' sensitivity to producer's motivation affects the process of deciding what information is more or less credible.

While it is possible to identify the journalistic "line" or "angle" of a documentary, the structural logic of a work is often created in such a subtle manner that it escapes detection until after the work is completed (Medhurst). Multiple viewings and structural analysis of the choices made by the filmmaker are an important process that teachers can use to help students analyze how the producer's purpose shapes the content.

How are Image, Sound, and Language Used to Manipulate the Message?

As a word, "manipulation" has a bad reputation. But the original meaning of the word manipulation comes from the French word for "handful." When we examine the meanings listed in the dictionary, manipulation means "to operate with the hands in a skillful manner." But it also means to control or play upon "by artful, unfair or insidious means to serve one's own purpose." Manipulation is a necessary part of the creation of film and television. You have to handle images and words — sort them, organize them and put them together — in order to make a message meaningful.

Handling language is a complex affair in the production of the documentary, because the language is largely designed to be heard, not read. A documentary producer has to write a script for the voice over, conduct interviews, and edit them to select only the most relevant and useful soundbites. The most challenging part of

the process consists of organizing the language to present information in a sequence which is compelling.

The producer's ability to control another person's voice — their language, their presentation of self — is an area of documentary production that raises significant ethical issues for consideration by students. For while the subject of the interview controls what he or she chooses to say, the producer can, through editing, reshape the ideas the subject presents. And since the producer controls the choice of language and image, a producer can often make a individual look strong or weak, believable or phony.

Students often first encounter this when they create a video message as part of a school project, and this phenomenon represents an important "teachable moment" when it arises. In one classroom, students conducted an interview with the school principal, and discovered in the editing room that they could make the man look like a fool pretty easily, just by selecting some phrases and ideas and omitting others. The question, "What responsibility does a producer have in representing a source?" acquires depth and meaning when it happens in the context of real-world media production activities.

Language is used to recontextualize the meaning of images used in a documentary, to lead the viewer towards a "correct" or "preferred" interpretation of an image. I saw one simple exercise used by a teacher to illustrate the producers' power and responsibility in shaping a program by the selection of language. The teacher gave students a long (five minute) video interview of an individual, along with a printed transcript of the tape. She asked students to select the one sentence that most closely captured the main thrust of the longer talk. Students made widely different choices, and classroom conversation centered around why students made the choices they did. The teachers then invited students to select a sentence that would make the source look more or less favorable to illustrate the power of the producer in shaping another person's representation.

And of course the camera itself, while it captures some aspects of perception, shapes *images* just by choosing what to focus on, and by the very look of the image itself. Camera techniques like the close up, the pan, the angle shot, the freeze frame, the time lapse, and the aerial view all influence our perceptions of a scene. Lighting, activity within the frame, the pace and rhythm of the

editing all work to influence viewers' emotional responses to the image. A producer and editor can create feelings of excitement, exhaustion or paranoia by using many different images of a single scene to make something look more exciting and interesting. This kind of manipulation is increasingly necessary because contemporary television programming has nurtured a set of expectations in viewers that everything be visually dynamic (Tobias). Perhaps this is a "natural" bias of film and television, or maybe the public has simply been trained to expect that television present a fast-paced and ever-changing visual display.

Often, a producer steps in front of the camera to adjust reality to make it more suitable for the demands of production, to create a more compelling image, to tell a better story. Such practices are common in documentary production. Manipulation of events in front of the camera is still considered inappropriate in the context of television news, as exemplified by the 1993 NBC *Dateline* fake of an explosion in a GM truck to illustrate the design problem in the vehicle (Pavlik). When this story was covered in the news, journalists tended to represent producers' actions in ways that made them appear lazy, sloppy, or unethical.

But re-enactments and the inclusion of fictional elements in documentary have been part of the art form since it was invented. When Robert Flaherty created *Nanook of the North*, he wanted to get a portrait of life inside an igloo. But life inside an igloo is dark, too dark for primitive film cameras. So Flaherty asked the Inuit to build half an igloo and pretend to live in it, so that he could get the shots of sleeping, eating, and getting dressed that he needed (Marshall).

Does it matter whether the producer manipulates events in front of the camera or creates fictional events to represent real events? As more and more complex manipulation of time, space, and reality become commonplace, people need the skills to detect this manipulation and understand why it is used in order to evaluate the messages purporting to represent the world outside our immediate experience. For young people, the best way to understand the ethical issues inherent in the manipulation of image, sound, and language is to experiment with their combination and discover the consequences for themselves (Tyner).

In one school I visited, a teacher told me an interesting story of a team of 9th grade students who were creating a video documentary about the pollution in the pond near their school. On the day of the taping, students arrived at the pond but couldn't find any visible examples of trash. One student rooted around in a nearby trash can and ran up to the teacher. "Could we put this empty Coke can in the shot?" he asked. "I know that this pond usually has a lot of garbage in it, but just not today."

The request generated a major discussion among students in the class, and they asked a number of questions that the teacher didn't know how to answer. "Don't TV journalists change things a little bit to get a more dramatic shot?" asked one. "Would we be lying if we put the can in the pond to illustrate the pollution?" wondered another student. Another inquired, "Would we be lying if we found the garbage at the pond's edge but moved the garbage to show all of it in the same shot?" The teacher recognized the opportunity, and videotaping stopped as they spent the rest of the period exploring whether or not an image has to be literally true in order to tell the truth. This is one of the most difficult and powerful questions in the humanities, and when students can wrestle with the question in terms of their own lives and their own actions, it has far more resonance than when the teacher presents the idea in a lecture.

What Techniques Are Used to Enhance the Authenticity of the Message?

As we have shown already, the word "real" is rather complex when it comes to the study of film and television. Documentary film and television derive their power because the images they provide seem authentic and believable. As Postman notes, "Television is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself. Therefore — and this is the critical point — how television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged" (p. 104).

But the concept of "authenticity" is itself a construction. As Bill Nichols writes, "Our perception of the real is constructed for us by codes and conventions" (1991, p. 189). The most common visual codes which communicate authenticity include the use of

archival footage, the hand-hand camera, the re-enactment, and the use of time-space conflation. Once recognized by viewers, these techniques are easy to spot. When these are identified, viewers consider a wider range of strategies for evaluating a message's authenticity. For example, viewer may assess the backgrounds and qualifications of the experts, the experience of the producer, the use of research evidence, and the internal consistency of the message to evaluate the believability of a message.

It can be an uncomfortable process for teachers to explore their own assumptions about facts they ordinarily do not question (Tyner). As new approaches to teaching history and social studies emphasize historical fact as a construction, teachers are invited to create learning environments where "history," "data," and "information" are concepts which are continually open to critical inquiry and revision (Davidson and Lytle). What are the codes and conventions that communicate believability? The use of archival film footage is one of the most commonly used techniques to enhance authenticity, because the footage encourages us to assume that, because the images are old, they are true (Nichols, 1993). For example, in *In Search of the Edge*, a marvelous "fake" documentary, the program uses old home movie footage, with the grainy texture of 1930's newsreel film, to introduce a research scientist who purportedly discovered that the Earth was flat. The convention of black-and-white archival footage automatically leads viewers to believe that the character is a real person. Only by asking the iterative question, "How do you know what you know?" can students explore the assumptions about believability that are embedded in the use of this technique.

The public's exposure to amateur video and hidden camera techniques also have altered our expectations of what "real" looks like. People's expectations about what images are authentic are influenced by camera techniques that include the shaky camera, the grainy image, the use of time/date stamp. Now, media professionals have made advertising, documentaries, and even fictional programming using these techniques, imitating the look of authentic style to grab viewers' attention. One teacher I know invited students to collect a range of examples of print, film, and video images that used a "homemade" visual style. Students came in with examples

from commercials for gum, sneakers, film, and they found examples from news, reality TV, entertainment news, situation comedies, and dramas. The iconography of amateur video has transcended genres, according to students in this class, because "the wild movement grabs your attention."

Re-enactments are another visual convention for communicating authenticity, an irony not lost on the high school students who wrestle with the paradox of whether you can "make something *seem* more real by faking it." One art teacher I know builds on the connection between re-enactments and other visual conventions that artificially mimic the perceptual process, like perspective drawing. Inauthentic imagery is widely used in the construction of documentary, and often extends the emotional power of a work. For example, when making a program about the Middle Ages, a producer will have no access to authentic film or video of the time period and may need to develop creative ways to produce compelling visual images that convey the mood of the times. Close examination of documentaries which make use of re-enactments, for example James Burke's series, *The Day the Universe Changed*, is a valuable resource to help students see the creative and complex ways in which authenticity is constructed using a range of techniques.

Documentaries are at their most effective when they appear to be fair, neutral, and unbiased. Medhurst has identified techniques that have been used by producers to claim objectivity:

1) introduce widely shared cultural values as a premise that are shown to be violated by the documentary's antagonist;
2) use the technique of historical recall, where several people conjure up from memory details of the past;
3) call attention to details of place and person, that by their naturalness, bear testimony to the filmmaker's integrity;
4) choose a particular type of on-camera host, that because of past associations, can assure the audience of the normative value of the report. (p. 185)

Students can identify these techniques and closely examine their usage in the context of news, documentary, and other non-fiction forms. This experience changes the nature of the viewing experience in ways that may transfer to the world outside the classroom.

What Techniques Are Used to Enhance the Authority of the Message?

Many documentaries use experts or authorities whose explanations, claims, and presentation of information serve as the substance of the program. "Though striving to appear fair, neutral and objective, the privileged narrator "knows" more than the audience and successfully communicates that superior knowledge through intonation, interpretation, and assertion" (Medhurst, p. 187). However, the documentary also uses a number of techniques to represent the "expert" visually, to communicate to the viewer that we are watching an individual whose ideas have credibility. Producers take advantage of viewers' expectations about how experts should look, how they should sound, in what kinds of locations they should be situated, and even how they should look at the camera. "Our willingness to agree with what is said [by experts or witnesses] relies to a surprisingly large extent on rhetorical suasion and documentary convention. The implicit rule in documentaries is 'Trust those who speak to the camera unless given reason to do otherwise' " (Nichols, 1991, p. 157).

Students can be invited to look at how experts are framed visually in television news and documentary production to determine what the "rules" are for the visual representation of experts. On *60 Minutes*, students can identify several kinds of "head shots" that are used in framing sources, with an extreme close-up commonly used when sources are being critically attacked by the hosts.

In another exercise, students take a non-fiction program and count the demographic characteristics of the experts. Who gets to be an expert? Experts who are middle-aged, white, well-educated men are the mainstays of the television news and documentary programming. When teachers invite students to consider the reasons

why these patterns exist, students respond in various ways. For some subject areas and topics, they could be the only available people who knew about the topic. For some producers, the choice of male experts could be unconscious effort to find "credible types," still associated with white men. Could the dominance of older white males, in subtle ways, shape people's expectations about who is entitled to be an expert? This is an essential question to explore with secondary students.

Exploring the convention of the "voice of God" narrator affords another opportunity for critical analysis. This narrator, always invisible, speaks in a voice that is flat and unemotional, as though the "facts" speak for themselves. "The narrative voices enjoy the privilege that accompanies suspension of disbelief" (Medhurst, p. 62). Often, a teacher can dig up an old documentary film or tape with a "voice of God" narrator, and invite students to listen and to identify the assumptions, values, and interpretive language embedded in the narration.

What Techniques Are Used to Involve or Engage the Viewer in the Message?

One of the most important challenges faced by a producer of a news or documentary program is how to get the viewer involved in the program. Michael Curtin has called this "packaging reality," the process of giving non-fictional messages a dramatic shape (Ohmann). Getting viewers' attention and keeping their attention is one of the classic concerns of all media makers.

The need to monitor our environment to search for visual change, especially changes that relate to sex and aggression, has been essential for our survival. Keeping a keen eye out to monitor sex and aggression is one of those skills that has been biologically useful to the maintenance of humans as social creatures. The driving force behind most commercial programming is ratings, and programs which feature sex, violence, children, animals, and UFOs (the staples of sensationalism) will attract viewers. (For example, the Discovery Channel has found that large animals, especially sharks and others that can eat you, generate the highest ratings.) These five elements embedded in most commercial television programs have been

recognized as highly effective in attracting and maintaining attention when viewers have a lot of programming choices. Students can be invited to look for these elements in top-rated shows, to discover the predictability that is built in to the construction of a hit program.

Another powerful technique to attract audience attention is the use of narrative structure. Stories have long been recognized as the most powerful way to organize ideas. By focusing on heroes, victims, and villains, producers can increase the likelihood that viewers will be engaged with the topic. However, the use of typical story elements in non-fiction can also distort and constrict the complexity of an issue. Nichols notes:

> Most documentary films also adopt many of the strategies and structures of narrative (though not necessarily those of the popular entertainment film). . . . [M]any "social problem" fiction films are made with as civic-minded and socially responsible a purpose as many documentaries. Thus documentary fails to identify any structure or purpose of its own entirely absent from fiction or narrative. The terms become a little like our everyday, but unrigorous, distinction between fruits and vegetables. (1991, p. 36)

When students can appreciate that both fiction and non-fiction genres are in the business of storytelling, they gain insight on the social constructedness of messages in the cultural environment, and appreciate the ways in which people can effectively communicate with each other.

Television has an important influence on our perception of reality and our understanding of the world around us. Because children and young people have so much less experience with the real "real world," it hard for them to make good judgments about whether the life of a police officer is accurately represented by *Cops*. Young people who watch a lot of TV often find that TV's "reality" seems more real that their own day-to-day experience.

Helping young people develop reasoning skills about the constructed nature of TV is the essence of media literacy education. Parents and teachers need to make this an integral part of a child's education, both in school and at home.

Television producers also expect that viewers are media literate. According to TV producer Susan Fales, "The audience has a responsibility to distinguish between history and fiction, truth and fantasy. If someone can't tell the difference between the Civil War and *Glory* then they deserve to be ignorant" (Braxton and Welkos). With attitudes like this well-entrenched among members of the Hollywood community, viewers need to be increasingly vigilant about deciding what to believe among the many choices of programs we see on TV. Most importantly, we need to reshape the way we use media and technology, so that we are actively involved in questioning the messages we receive.

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