

Learning News Literacy Through the Coverage of the Vietnam War

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Aim:

What role did the media play in the Vietnam War? (Were the press mirrors of sentiment or shapers of sentiment?)

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Examine the role of reporters in affecting public perception of the Vietnam conflict.
- Compare mirror theory and elitist opinion theory of the American press.
- Evaluate the impact of photos in bringing about what Henri Cartier-Bresson called “the decisive moment”.
- Examine and discuss the moral and professional implications of journalists engaging in editorial behavior (i.e. Cronkite after Tet).
- Explain the relevance of context in examining photographs,
- Explain the relevance of verification in news reports.

News Literacy Skills

- Detecting bias in news reports
- Differentiating between fact and opinion
- Understanding the importance of verification
- Understanding the importance of context

Introducing And Motivating the Lesson

Students will view the famous photo of a Buddhist monk’s self-immolation in 1963. Students will discuss both the photograph and the photographer’s belief that he somehow feels responsible for the monk’s death. Students will also be asked how this photo can be seen as a kind of unheeded warning regarding the repressive and undemocratic nature of the South Vietnamese government. This photo will serve as a springboard to the lesson itself, which focuses on the extent to which the press may have affected public perceptions of and support for the war in Vietnam.

Lesson Development

- Introduce to students the “mirror theory” and “elitist opinion theory” of the American press in the Vietnam War.
- Read and discuss the article “The Myth of the Media’s Role in Vietnam” by Jeff Cohen (<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2526>.) What point does Cohen make about the reaction of the American press to My Lai? Compare Cohen’s argument to the article “How Wrong Was Walter Cronkite on the Tet Offensive?” (<http://theendzone.blogspot.com/2009/07/how-wrong-was-walter-cronkite-about-tet.html>) Discuss the ramifications of using a blog as a source of information.
- Discuss Walter Cronkite’s editorial commentary following the Tet Offensive.
- View and discuss opening segment of Vietnam documentary, hosted by Charlton Heston. Why do the speakers in the documentary focus on erroneous press reports of Viet Cong inside the US embassy *building* rather than simply inside the wall of the compound. Is this an important distinction? Discuss the relevance of enemy soldiers within the US embassy grounds.
- Examine famous photo of suspected VC being executed. View clip of photographer explaining his feeling (and regrets) concerning the photo.
- Look at photo of two young brothers taken at My Lai. Haberle claimed both were killed moments after the photo was taken. How could he get it wrong? (Can someone “open the freezer” and still be wrong about what is inside?)

Summarizing the Lesson

Explain the *Rashomon* Effect. How can the search for the truth be tempered or skewed by a person’s perceptions?

Lesson Extensions and Connections

- Ask students to read “The Press in Vietnam as Agents of Defeat: A Critical Examination” by William Hammond (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2702936>)
- Compare the images discussed to the photos of Abu Ghraib. In what ways do the role of the US press seem similar / different to that of the Vietnam era.
- Ask students to write a reaction to Cronkite’s Vietnam editorial. Was Cronkite justified in making this assessment? Why or why not? (Students can also be asked to react to Cronkite’s later explanation of his decision: “There is a point at which it seems to me if an individual reporter has gained a reputation for being honest, fair as can be and helps the American people in trying to make a decision on a major issue, I think we

ought to take that opportunity.”) What might separate Cronkite from many of the highly opinionated news personalities on cable today?