



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 7-12

About the Author: This unit was created for MediaSmarts by Media Educator, Maureen Baron.

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Beyond Media Messages: Media Portrayal of Global Issues

Overview

In this three-day unit, students assess media coverage of natural disasters and their aftermath. Students explore how sensationalism plays a role in determining what is newsworthy, and how that can distort our perception of issues in developing nations.

What makes a story newsworthy? What positive results follow the natural disasters and how, where and when are those reported in the media? How do distorted perceptions of developing nations affect our attitudes and behaviours toward them?

As an extension activity, students may prepare a mock press conference in which they draw attention to reconstruction and recovery efforts following a natural disaster

Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- articulate their views of developing nations
- define and recognize sensationalism, and identify it in news coverage
- demonstrate how news coverage influences our perception by focusing on particular aspects of developing nations
- use research and authentication skills to present a more complete picture of developing nations

Activities Overview

Day One: Our Perceptions of Developing Nations

Activities

- a. Graphic representation of developing nations (30 minutes)
- b. Definitions of “developing nation” and “global development,” and class discussion (25 minutes)
- c. Reflection (20 minutes or homework)



Day Two: Portrayal of Natural Disasters in Developing Nations

Activities

- a. Defining how news is constructed (20 minutes)
- b. Research and deconstruction (40 minutes)
- c. Sharing the findings (15 minutes)

Day Three: The Missing Picture

Activities

- a. Researching and writing about what is missing (50 minutes)
- b. Reflection (25 minutes or homework)

Extension Activity: Announcing Good News (one-day lesson)

Activities

- a. Forming groups
- b. Creating an action plan
- c. Question and answer period
- d. News conference

Preparation and Materials

- Have on hand large sheets of blank paper, markers, lined paper, and tape or thumbtacks
- Arrange for access to computers or a computer lab with Internet connections
- Make available graphic organizers, from www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer or www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/learning/lr1grorg.htm

Photocopy the following handouts:

- *Defining a Concept*
- *News Deconstruction Chart* (four copies for each group)
- *Sensationalism Techniques*

Evaluation

Evaluation should take place throughout the unit. Use the attached rubric to evaluate students on:

- the quality of their research
- their ability to recognize and identify sensational media coverage



- their ability to recognize and identify gaps in media coverage of developing nations
- their written reflection

Procedure

Day One: Our Perceptions of Developing Nations

Graphic representation of developing nations

Divide the class into five groups. Ask each group to list words that represent ideas or images that they associate with the subject of developing nations. The group must make a graphic representation of their word associations by using a graphic organizer, such as a concept map, spider web, fishbone or flow chart.

Ask students to consider and list places or sources where they encounter images of or information about developing nations.

Definitions of “developing nation” and “global development”

Provide students with the following definition of the term “developing nation”:

A country with a low standard of living, generally indicated by severe poverty, low income and education levels, high birth rate, and poorly developed social, economic, and technological infrastructure.

PBS

To make the concept more concrete to students, explain that many people in developing nations lack the basic amenities we take for granted, such as plumbing, clean drinking water, education, health care, and reliable electricity or public sanitation. Stress that we use the term “**developing** nation,” and give some examples of nations that have advanced significantly in providing these amenities in different ways (South Korea in economic terms, India in terms of democracy, Bhutan in terms of transition to modernity, etc.). Also touch on the differences between the term “developing nation” and the older term “third world”: what negative stereotypes are associated with the older term?

You may also wish to introduce the alternative term “Global South” and discuss why some people prefer it to both “third world” and “developing nation.” (A comparison of the various terms can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_south#Etymology.) What might be the advantages of each term? What is included in each and what is left out? Discuss with the class what might be meant by the term “global development.” What might be various aspects of global development? (For example food aid, disaster relief, promoting women’s rights, building infrastructure and ensuring access to clean water.) How can countries like Canada be involved in helping less developed nations become more developed? What types of people or organizations, other than governments, may be involved in global development? (Examples might include individuals, non-governmental organizations, the United Nations and celebrities drawing attention to a cause.)

Class discussion on perceptions of developing nations

Direct the students to create, through class discussion, one graphic representation (in a format of the class’s own choosing) to summarize the ideas discussed in class. During the discussion, guide the students to include how developing nations are represented in the media and, in particular, how natural disasters in developing countries are portrayed.



Reflection

Ask the students to write a short response on the topic or aspect relating to developing nations that held the most associations for them. Have students identify why they selected this topic or aspect (a student might have roots or relatives in a particular developing nation, for instance, or might have been particularly affected by news coverage of a specific event).

Day Two: Portrayal of Natural Disasters in Developing Nations*Defining how news is constructed*

Explain to the students that you will be introducing and defining a concept relating to news reporting, by working together as a class and working backwards from examples.

Don't reveal the concept ("sensationalism") being defined at the beginning if you are working with older classes. But for younger classes, provide the term to be defined at the beginning of the exercise.

Distribute the *Defining a Concept* handout and explain that each of the 12 statements either **is** or **is not** an example of the concept you are defining. Do the first four for the class, and then ask students to guess together which of the next four statements are examples. Provide answers for each as you proceed, and then have students guess the last four privately. Ask students to share their guesses with the class and then give them the correct answers.

Answer key: 1=YES, 2=NO, 3=NO, 4=YES, 5=NO, 6=YES, 7=NO, 8=YES, 9=NO, 10=YES, 11=YES, 12=YES.

Explain that the concept you have been defining is "**sensationalism**." From these answers, ask the class what they know about the concept being defined: how are the sensational statements different from the non-sensational statements? (Answers should include the following: they make you worried, they are more exciting, and they present things as being more serious or important than they actually are.)

Develop a brief definition of the concept with the class for students to write on the bottom of the handout. The final definition should be something like this one, which is from the New Zealand Broadcasting Standards Authority: "Making a bigger deal about something (exaggerating) than is needed, in order to increase the audience's interest."

Distribute the handout *Sensationalism Techniques* and review it with the class, looking at how the statements they discussed earlier are examples of different techniques.

Research and deconstruction

To better understand how sensationalism may be used, students will deconstruct a series of news articles relating to natural disasters.

Organize students into small groups and direct them to choose one of the three natural disaster events listed below. Then instruct students to research and record the key, unembellished and objective facts that answer the five Ws: who, what, where, when and why. Ask them to also do this for five or six images that support the facts of the disaster. Tell students that they must cite the sources of their information and images.

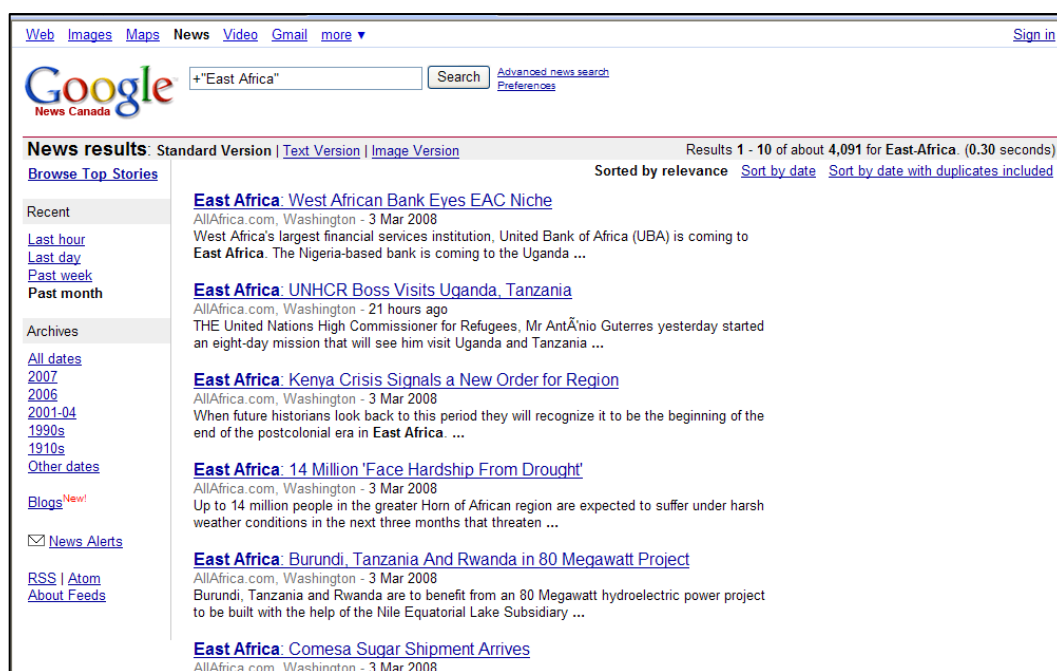
- East Africa food crisis of 2006
- Mozambique floods of 2005-06
- Pakistan earthquake of 2005



Instruct students to work as a group to find four news sources for the event that they have chosen. Remind them to include both text and images. Tell them that the text and/or image of each news source must meet the following criteria:

- dealing with destruction and devastation
- dealing with the needs of those suffering after the event
- calling for aid/help/resources for the immediate and long-term recovery and rebuilding processes
- dealing with successful recovery and rebuilding after the event

To help students find online news sources, direct them to an online news resource such as Google News. Show them the *Google News* tab at the top of the Google page and instruct them to click on it and then select *All dates* under *Archives* at the left side of the screen.



Tell students to compare their four sources, completing one copy of the *News Deconstruction Chart* for each source, to determine:

- which ones were more sensational and why they were
- what was deemed "newsworthy" and why
- why this event was newsworthy
- what elements in the stories about the events were considered important enough for several news sources to report
- whether there was any news about recovery and rebuilding following the event, and how difficult it was to find this information



You may wish to select an event and complete a chart with the whole class before instructing students to complete the charts in their groups.

Sharing the findings

When the charts have been completed, ask students to discuss their findings in their groups. Working together, each group of students should try to identify elements of the news story that were or might have been left out of the media coverage. **Each student must identify at least three missing elements in his or her story.**

Day Three: The Missing Picture

Researching and writing about what is missing

Ask students to research the missing elements they have identified and to write an account of the event that emphasizes these elements. If students are not already familiar with news writing, use the MediaSmarts resource *Formula for a Well-Written News Article* (available as a handout in the lesson plan *Writing a Newspaper Article* <http://mediasmarts.ca/lessonplan/writing-newspaper-article-lesson>).

Reflection

Using the *News Deconstruction Chart*, ask students to write a response in which they consider the following:

- the purpose of the media representations of the event
- who the different audiences were for the media representations of the event
- the effects of the media representations of the event on the different audiences
- any ethical or moral concerns they think there might be regarding the media representations of the event

The response may be in the form of short answers to the above questions (for younger students) or a paragraph/essay answer (for older students).

Evaluation

The students may be evaluated on:

- the quality of their research
- their ability to recognize and identify sensational media coverage
- their ability to recognize and identify gaps in media coverage of developing nations
- their written reflection

Extension Activity: Announcing Good News (one-day lesson)

Introduction

In this activity, students will conduct a five-minute news conference announcing recovery and rebuilding successes since the event.



Preparation and Materials

- Distribute the *News Deconstruction Charts* collected on Day Two
- Ensure access to a computer and desktop publishing software
- Refer to *Disasters and Emergencies Overseas: How You Can Help*, available at www.worldvolunteerweb.org/fileadmin/docdb/pdf/2006/disaster_uk.pdf
- Refer to *How the Government of Canada Responds to Natural Disasters Abroad*, available at www.international.gc.ca/foreign_policy/human-rights/ha5-natural-faq-en.asp

Evaluation

Students may be evaluated on their:

- understanding of the news conference format
- understanding of the issues involved in international global development and reconstruction following natural disasters
- work in staging the news conference

Procedure

Forming groups

Return students to their groups from Day Two (the members of each group will have studied the same event on Day Two). Ask each group to choose whether to represent an NGO (non-governmental organization) or the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs.

Explain that each group will prepare for, and stage, a news conference on what has happened in the region since the natural disaster, including information on the reconstruction efforts and successes following the disaster studied in Day Two.

As part of preparing for the news conference, ask the groups to create the following documents:

- one-page text for the person delivering the information at the news conference
- short PowerPoint presentation (six to eight slides) to accompany the text
- two-page, bulleted backgrounder/fact sheet/information document for the journalists attending the news conference
- one- or two-page pamphlet, including text and images, for potential donors, detailing what has been accomplished and what still needs to be done

Instruct students to decide which group member will take responsibility for each element required for the news conference.



Creating an action plan

Ask students to create an action plan detailing the following tasks or roles and who is responsible for them:

- Time frame leading to delivery date of the news conference.
- Principal creator for each document for the event.
- Associate/assistant creator for each document.
- Traffic director/coordinator/leader for the group – this person reports to the teacher regarding the work of the group.
- Technical advisor – finds solutions to any technical or production issue or problem.
- Recording secretary – records minutes of planning sessions and group meetings, and tracks and records the sources used in the preparation for the news conference.

Logistics coordinator – sets up the area for the news conference, invites the journalists and other interested parties, and prints the documents. He or she distributes the documents during the news conference as well as distributing the background information document to the teacher and class before the event.

Question and answer period

As part of a news conference, journalists and guests may ask questions of the speaker. Based on the prepared information document, each group of students will prepare two questions to ask at the news conferences delivered by the other groups. These questions should be submitted to, and approved by, the teacher (before the news conferences take place).

The news conference

Stage the news conference, complete with the question and answer session and the presentation of the other documents.



News Deconstruction Chart

Event:

Ws	Objective Fact	Descriptive Words in the Text	Image Elements That Support the Descriptive Text	Source of the Text or Image	Sensational Element(s)	Effects of the Image and Text on the Audience
Who						
What						
Where						
When						
Why						

Defining a Concept

Each of the following statements either **is** or **is not** an example of a concept related to news reporting. Circle **YES** if you think **it is** an example and **NO** if you think **it is not** an example.

1. Scientists have found links between tooth decay and heart attacks. **YES / NO**
2. Dogs sometimes bite people. **YES / NO**
3. Approximately 60 per cent of people will be infected by a flu virus in the next year. **YES / NO**
4. Astronomers warn that a meteor, perhaps as large as the one that killed the dinosaurs, might strike the Earth in any given year. **YES / NO**
5. There have been four burglaries in suburban neighbourhoods in the last month. **YES / NO**
6. Police are closely monitoring an abandoned truck on Highway 15. **YES / NO**
7. Elderly people with serious tooth decay have an increased risk of experiencing irregular heartbeats. **YES / NO**
8. A truck has been found abandoned on Highway 15. Police say that if it is not claimed within the next six hours, it will be towed to the impound lot. **YES / NO**
9. Many meteors strike the Earth each year, most landing in the ocean. Meteors large enough to cause widespread damage are thought to strike only once in every several million years. **YES / NO**
10. A new survey found that many of us will be infected by a potentially deadly virus in the next year. **YES / NO**
11. The Bedroom Burglar is thought to have struck nearly half a dozen times in the last month. **YES / NO**
12. You may have a deadly animal in your home. **YES / NO**

Definition:



Sensationalism Techniques

These are some common techniques used in news reporting to make a story more gripping. Often you will see more than one in the same story!

False Novelty

Making something look like news when, in fact, it has been known for a long time.

“A new survey found that many of us will be infected by a potentially deadly virus in the next year.” The virus is the flu, which is rarely deadly for healthy people.

False Urgency

Creating a sense that things are happening quickly or developing, to add drama to the story.

“Police are closely monitoring an abandoned truck on Highway 15.” Traffic police, that is, who are waiting to see if the driver comes back before they tow the truck to the impound lot.

Exaggerated Risk

Reporting on a very unlikely danger without giving the chance of it actually happening.

“Astronomers warn that a meteor, perhaps as large as the one that killed the dinosaurs, might strike the Earth in any given year.” But it probably won't; there's no record of a major asteroid impact at any time in human history.

Leaving Out Details

Skipping parts of the story that might make it less exciting.

“Scientists have found links between tooth decay and heart attacks.” **Serious** tooth decay in **elderly** people is linked to an **increased** risk of having irregular heartbeats, which **can** lead to heart attacks. Does it still sound scary?

Emotional Language and Imagery

Using words or images guaranteed to excite or anger people.

“You may have a deadly animal in your home.” A deadly animal! In your home! In fact it's your dog; there are a small number of fatal dog attacks every year.

Naming News

Giving titles or nicknames to people (especially unknown people) or events in the news to make the story seem more dramatic, like a movie.

“The Bedroom Burglar is thought to have struck nearly half a dozen times in the last month.” We don't know who this person is, or even if the invasions were all by the same burglar. But the story's more exciting if we give him a name.

EVALUATION RUBRIC

	Below Level 1	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Knowledge/ Understanding	Fails to show an ability to define and recognize sensationalism, and identify it in news coverage	Shows a beginning ability to define and recognize sensationalism, and identify it in news coverage	Shows a developing ability to define and recognize sensationalism, and identify it in news coverage	Shows a competent ability to define and recognize sensationalism, and identify it in news coverage	Shows a confident ability to define and recognize sensationalism, and identify it in news coverage
Thinking/Inquiry	Fails to show an ability to use research and authentication skills to present a more complete picture of developing nations	Shows a beginning ability to use research and authentication skills to present a more complete picture of developing nations	Shows a developing ability to use research and authentication skills to present a more complete picture of developing nations	Shows a competent ability to use research and authentication skills to present a more complete picture of developing nations	Shows a confident ability to use research and authentication skills to present a more complete picture of developing nations
Communication	Fails to show an ability to articulate views of developing nations	Shows a beginning ability to articulate views of developing nations	Shows a developing ability to articulate views of developing nations	Shows a competent ability to articulate views of developing nations	Shows a confident ability to articulate views of developing nations
Application	Fails to show an ability to demonstrate how news coverage influences our perception by focusing on particular aspects of developing nations	Shows a beginning ability to demonstrate how news coverage influences our perception by focusing on particular aspects of developing nations	Shows a developing ability to demonstrate how news coverage influences our perception by focusing on particular aspects of developing nations	Shows a competent ability to demonstrate how news coverage influences our perception by focusing on particular aspects of developing nations	Shows a confident ability to demonstrate how news coverage influences our perception by focusing on particular aspects of developing nations