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Samantha T. Crown
Rowan University

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ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES COURSE MODULE

Mass Communication and Media: Do News Frames Matter?



College of Communication and Creative Arts, Rowan University

User Guide and Implementation

This module was designed to introduce students to the role of communication and media in the construction of meaning. Specifically, students will learn about the role of news frames in constructing media representations of environmental issues surrounding energy, consumption, and conservation.

Learning Objectives:

- Undergraduate students taking courses in Biology, Geography, Planning, and Sustainability, Environmental and Sustainability Studies, Global Issues, Civil and Environmental Engineering, and other STEM courses can use this module to learn about the impact news frames have on media representations of issues relating to the environment.
- Students will analyze how media representation of key issues surrounding energy, consumption, and conservation impact citizen's knowledge of and understanding of environmental problems and solutions.
- Students will learn about how media representations and news frames are informed by personal and organizational ideologies and how those ideologies impact how a news report is communicated.
- Students will consider how news reports in turn shape and impact citizen's understanding of environmental issues as well as public opinion.

Learning Outcomes

- Develop media literacy skills
- Apply media literacy skills

Lesson Steps

1. INTRODUCTION:

- a. To begin, have students consider the concept of "knowledge production." Ask the class how much credible news is available about environmental issues surrounding energy, conservation, and consumption. Encourage students to consider how much, of the news and information they consume daily relates to energy, conservation and consumption.
- b. Based on students' responses, ask follow up questions regarding how much news and information is available in the mainstream news (newspapers, magazines, broadcast news in both online and traditional platforms) vs some other medium.
- c. As students respond, compile a list of responses on the board. A visual representation of responses will allow for students to begin to see themes and patterns of news consumption.
- d. If student reply that they do not consume stories that speak to those topics, prompt students to consider why they do not read news reports.

- e. Ask a last question: do they think news reports of environmental issues surrounding energy, conservation, and consumption are important for citizens to read? If so, does it matter how news and information about these topics is produced and represented in reports? Why? If not, why not?

Time: 5-10 minutes total

2. PRESENTATION: (PowerPoint presentation, supplemental readings)
 - a. Introduce key concepts in Communication and Media studies surrounding bias and framing in news surrounding environmental issues.
 - b. Explain the role of news media.
 - c. Review foundational concepts of media framing and the process of what should be objective and scientific information pertaining to environmental issues surrounding energy, consumption, and conservation.
 - d. Understand consequences of news framing in relation to policymakers, public understanding, and environmental impact.
 - e. Ask students to consider the socio-cultural, political, and geographic contexts impacted by news frames.
 - f. Discuss how can students, in their current positions as consumers of news and information, and later in life, in their career, challenge and work to change problematic frames used in the production of news and information?

Time: 15- 30 minutes

Suggested Activity

3. ACTIVITY WORKSHEET (Worksheet Included)

In-class Activity: To begin, students (working individually) can use the included worksheet to complete the following activity.

To begin, students (working individually) should identify an environmental issue surrounding energy, consumption, and conservation. They can find a topic using the search tools of Rowan University Library or an internet search using a combination of the following key terms (“Environment” “Energy” “Conservation” “Consumption”). Once a topic has been identified, the student should find two news articles covering the topic. The source of the first article should be a mainstream news outlet (examples include: The New York Times, Fox News, CNN, Chicago Tribune, Philadelphia Inquirer, The Washington Post etc). The source of the second article should be an alternative news outlet (examples include: Lakota Country Times, a county newspaper such as Gloucester County Times, Anchorage Daily News, Sacramento Bee etc.).

Students should then use the provided worksheet to analyze the two news articles. After working individually, students should be divided into groups of 4 or 5 and work together to discuss the

overall findings. The group can compile a list of themes of existing frames. Each group can then discuss these themes in terms of knowledge production. In their group analysis students can discuss the ways frames give insight into knowledge production.

After the group activity is completed a last question may be asked of the entire class. Students can respond to the following question: How can students, in their current positions as consumers of news and information, and later in life, in their career, challenge and work to change problematic frames used in the production of news and information can be discussed.

Time: 30 minutes total

Suggested Assignment

4. REFLECTION PAPER (Suggested supplemental assignment)

Each student should write a one-page reaction paper to the news sources. The objective of the paper is to allow students to connect the concepts discussed in the PowerPoint and class activity using a communicative lens. The students should address how the news sources selected and structured information, assigned importance, interpreted objective information, and communicated this information using certain frames.

Question 1: How well does the news source (newspaper, news article) contribute credible, objective information that can be used by citizens to engage in public discourse that can be used in democratic decision-making process?

Question 2: How might certain frames influence citizen's interpretations of environmental issues? Can you think of how these interpretations may impact public policy debate? What other ways may these frames and constructions impact how a problem is communicated, who or what may be responsible? Possible solutions?

Time to submit assignment: 1 week