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AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY, INC.

LESSON PLAN: *Journalism in War Time : What Does the Public Need to Know?*

FILM

This lesson plan is designed to be used in conjunction with viewing the film "War Feels Like War," an hour-long documentary about American and European independent journalists covering Iraq who were not embedded with the U.S. military. As the invading armies sweep into the country, some journalists in Kuwait decide to risk their lives to travel to the front lines, hungry to discover the true impact of war on civilians. Using a small digital camera, filmmaker Esteban Uyarra records their frustration, fear, shock and horror as they work their way around military control to get access to real events and not just staged photo opportunities.

By following the journalists as they worked, and by interviewing them, often as they were working, "War Feels Like War" also reveals the addictive nature of modern war reporting - how it affects journalists personally and how hard it is to return to a normal life back home. As the reporters and photographers make on-the-spot decisions, viewers and journalists alike are challenged to consider the ethical dilemmas involved in covering a war. Because the journalists are covering a war being waged by a democracy, the film also offer viewers an opportunity to think deeply about the importance of accurate and comprehensive reporting to the ability to make decisions as citizens.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Assess the role of journalists in a democracy
- Consider the challenges and ethics of reporting from a war zone
- Decide what kinds of information is needed in order to function as Jefferson's classic ideal of an "informed citizen"
- Gain skills they can use to analyze and evaluate media information

This lesson will also provide students with an opportunity to practice writing, speaking, listening, research, and critical thinking skills.

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

SUBJECT AREAS: Civics / Government, Ethics, Journalism, Media, Literacy, Social Studies (U.S. History)

MATERIALS:

- Videotape of "War Feels Like War" and equipment to show it
- Internet access for student research
- Index cards or paper with "employers" written on them – see Part 1 instructions for list
- Handout with ethics dilemmas from film – 1 copy per student

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED: 5-10 class periods, depending on the length of the class, the amount of research done as homework, and the amount of time devoted to discussion

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The war in Iraq presents issues of concern to all Americans, but especially for young people. Will the military draft need to be reinstated? Will the cost of keeping a friendly government in power necessitate a reduction in funds available for education? Will interest rates for student loans rise? Will there be alternatives that don't require service in Iraq for those who were depending on military service as a means to obtain a college education or advanced job training?

Some Americans get information about the ongoing events in Iraq from personal experience or from talking with friends or loved ones who have been in Iraq. But for the vast majority of Americans, there are only two sources of information: government announcements or hearings and media reports. This lesson provides students with tools they can use to assess that information as it helps students consider the importance of information to citizenship and deepens understanding of how media reports about war are constructed.

The activity puts every student into two different roles. First they will be asked to think like a reporter. Then they will be put into the role of editor or news director.

** Keep in mind that this is a film documenting actual war coverage. As such, it contains some graphic visuals and language. Please screen the film prior to showing it in class to decide which segments are appropriate for your students to view.

ACTIVITY

PART 1

Step 1 – The Assignment

Tell students that they are going to imagine that they are reporters covering Iraq. In a moment, you will tell each student (or team) who their employer is. Irrespective of their particular employer, they all have the same core assignment:

Presidential elections are coming up. The candidates have different positions on the war. What does the American voter need to know about what is happening in Iraq to make an informed choice? In other words, what stories will you seek out to make sure that people “back home” have the information they need in order to choose who they will vote for?

Assign each student or small team of students to any of the following employers. Make sure that a diversity of employment situations are represented in the class:

Associated Press	<i>U.S. News and World Report</i>
BBC America	<i>Slate</i> (online magazine)
Fox News	<i>Alternet.org</i>
ABC News (or CBS or NBC)	<i>Stars & Stripes</i>
CNN	National Public Radio
Gannett newspapers	<i>Democracy Now</i>
<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>Wall Street Journal</i>
<i>The Washington Post</i>	<i>Time</i>
<i>The Chicago Defender</i>	<i>Newsweek</i>
<i>The Nation</i> (magazine)	<i>MTV News</i>
<i>The National Review</i>	

To supplement this list, or as an alternative, you might also want to check on what news sources are regularly used by students' families. These might include newspapers or satellite feeds from other countries, journals or websites not included on this list, or sources in languages other than English.

Step 2 – Research

Students will need to know the expectations of the media outlets for whom they are reporting, so students who are not familiar with the media outlets to which they have been assigned will need to investigate those outlets. What kinds of stories do they do? Long? Short? Do they use more pictures or more text? Do they (or their owners) support a particular political point of view? Who is their target audience?

Once they understand the needs of their publication, students can go back to consider the original assignment: What do Americans need to know about the war in Iraq? The way they should answer this question is by making a list of what questions they intend to ask, what stories they intend to seek, and/or what pictures they intend to take.

Make sure that students are clear that you are not interested in the content of the final stories they would report, since it would be hard to know what one would find before going to Iraq. Rather, this is an exercise focusing on what the questions should be. Encourage students to think comprehensively. What would voters need to know about soldiers, civilians, and/or contractors? What would they need to know about the environment, economy, or culture? How about education, media, or religion? Students who know nothing about Iraq or the region might need to do some additional research on the history, culture, and economy of the country before they make their final list.

Step 3 – Compare results

Students should be prepared to orally share their final lists, and to explain why they included the items on their list.

Once students have had a chance to present their results, lead a discussion comparing the questions. Were questions open-ended (e.g., what kinds of casualties were caused by the latest bomb) or did they tend to pre-determine the answer (e.g., I will need pictures of gruesome civilian casualties)? Since everyone was given the same assignment, how did the variable of the employer for whom you were assigned to work influence what kinds of information you thought was important?

Step 4 – View "War Feels Like War"

Screen the film, "War Feels Like War" with your class. Ask students to compare the kinds of information that the reporters in the film were after with the kinds of information they had included on their lists. Do they think that the reporters in the film were reporting the information that Americans needed? Do they think the reporters were fair, accurate, and complete? Do the students ever get their information from the news sources that these reporters worked for?

* Note: If possible, avoid using the words "balanced" or "objective" in reference to reporting. Reporters should be expected to be accurate, fair, and as comprehensive as possible. But everyone has a perspective through which they interpret the world, so objectivity is impossible. And "balanced" often implies that a story has only two sides, when, in fact, most stories have many angles.

Step 5 – The Challenge of War Coverage

Remind students of the following excerpts from the film:

... you will have to be prepared to see a lot of dead bodies. The big thing is I don't want to ever become hard. I think it's going to be a problem if I ever become the type of person who doesn't mind seeing dead people it should always bother you... People got excited today when we had to photograph dead people. Like when you ran across people that were dead, the whole time we've been here we haven't really seen dead people. And its just... a really twisted thought. I mean I don't think they happy about it but they were happy to be having good pictures from it. And I kind of felt the same way and then you feel like a really bad person because you're happy about that.

– *Stephanie Sinclair*

From a journalistic point of view it [suffering] makes very good pictures. We are cynical, we have to admit it, good picture when people are as desperate like that, because it's real. It's great TV. It's human suffering, it's tears, desperation whatever, feelings emotions - very, very strong emotions, and was a fantastic good story, was best we've done here

– *Jan Kruse*

Ask students whether or not these descriptions matched what they imagined themselves doing as reporters. Are these the kinds of pictures or stories they would strive to get? Why or why not?

PART 2

Step 1 - The Assignment

Tell students that they are either editors or news directors. These are the people who would be receiving the stories and photos filed by reporters in the field and who have to decide what to include, what not to include, and how much time or space to devote to a particular story.

Hand out the ethical dilemmas. Each of these are scenarios that come up in the film. Let each student decide what they would do in each instance.

In discussing their choices, pay particular attention the criteria that was used to reach a decision. For example, should they show graphic images in order to demonstrate the horror of war or attract viewers or readers, or withhold such images to preserve support for the soldiers or preserve the privacy of the victims? Would their decision change if they were working for a news journal or newspaper as opposed to a television network, or if they were working for an owner who supported the war in contrast to an owner who opposed the war?

Step 2 – Connecting to History and Democracy

Summarize by reviewing and discussing the following statements made by Thomas Jefferson in a letter to Colonel Charles Yancy, January 6, 1816:

“If a Nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be...”

and

“If we are to guard against ignorance and remain free, it is the responsibility of every American to be informed.”

Ask students to discuss or write about how these statements relate to the activity.

Step 3 (optional) – What Have I Learned?

As a way of wrapping up this activity, ask each student in the class to complete the sentence, “From this activity I learned...” or “One new insight I gained from this activity was...”

ASSESSMENT

Have students follow various media sources of their choice for a week with an eye towards seeking out which one they think best provides the information they would want to know about the situation in Iraq if they were able to vote. Assign each student to write a brief (one page or shorter) persuasive piece on why Americans should watch, listen to, or read the news source they have chosen as doing the best job of informing the American public about the war.

EXTENSIONS & ADAPTATIONS

- Use the resource list below to help students explore the difference between war coverage in U.S. press sources and news outlets in other countries. Ask students to list all the possible reasons for the differences in coverage. Note: To avoid simplistic answers or a repetition of ideological rhetoric that students have heard about the war, it is important to ask students to list ALL the possible reasons for differences and not just assign a general question such as, “Explain the differences you see.”
- Ask students to assume that they are working war correspondents. Their boss has offered them an opportunity to apply to be either an embedded journalist or a non-embedded journalist covering Iraq. Assign them to complete an “application” for the position that includes a statement about why they want to work in either an embedded or non-embedded situation.
- As an option, when you assign employers to students in Part 1 of the activity, you may wish to assign some students to report for publications whose main audience is not residents of the U.S., (e.g., *Al Jazeera*, *Le Monde*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *The Guardian*, etc.). This would add a level of comparison to reporting that has no obligation to serve the needs of U.S. voters.

RESOURCES

www.pbs.org/pov/warfeelslikewar - POV’s website includes additional interviews with journalists featured in the film, links to relevant journalism websites, additional background on the debate over embedded journalists, and much more. This site is the ideal starting point for research and preparation.

www.journalism.org - The website of the Center for Excellence in Journalism, run by the Poynter Institute and the Pew Charitable Trust, includes a wide variety of resources and links related to journalistic ethics and war coverage.

www.newslink.org - A handy gateway for links to every major news outlet in the world. Despite its .org suffix, the site, run by an academic consulting group that focuses on online journalism services, does contain some ads.

<http://www.cjr.org/issues/2003/3/standard-smith.asp> - This link to an article by PBS’s Newshour correspondent, Terence Smith, summarizes many of the issues related to embedded journalists in Iraq. A search on the word “embed” from the homepage of the Columbia Journalism Review,

will link to many other articles. The CJR also provides links to a wide variety journalism tools, including easy links to online newspapers and contact information for TV and radio stations around the world.

www.defenselink.mil/news/Feb2003/d20030228pag.pdf - A link to the Department of Defense's official policy on embedded media. You might also go to the DOD's home page to compare their news releases about the war in Iraq with the kinds of stories you see in "War Feels Like War."

STANDARDS

Level IV Grade: 9-12

Listening and Speaking

Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

Viewing

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media
2. Uses a variety of criteria (e.g., clarity, accuracy, effectiveness, bias, relevance of facts) to evaluate informational media (e.g., web sites, documentaries, news programs)

Media

Standard 10: Understands the characteristics and components of the media

Civics

Standard 19: Understands what is meant by "the public agenda," how it is set, and how it is influenced by public opinion and the media

Standard 22, #5: Understands the process by which United States foreign policy is made, including the roles of federal agencies, domestic interest groups, the media, and the public; and knows the ways in which Americans can influence foreign policy

Language Arts – Writing

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Standard 2: Uses the rhetorical and stylistics aspects of writing

Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes

Reading

Standard 5: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process

Thinking and Reasoning

Standard 1: Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument

Standard 2: Understands and applies basic principles of logic and reasoning

Standard 3: Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences

Standard 6: Applies decision-making techniques

JOURNALISM ETHICS DILEMMAS
from *War Feels Like War*

1. *Stephanie Sinclair says:* We saw some of the grossest stuff today, I mean, serious injuries and they said that those were civilians. They'd both been shot in the face and one guy had the whole back of his neck blown out, and the hospital was so bad that they didn't even like really fix it, they just stitched some of it together and some of it was just open, at the back. It was really hardcore.

Would you print or show the photos that Stephanie took of these civilians? Why or why not?

2. *Stephanie Sinclair says of journalists:* We're not allowed to carry guns.

If a war correspondent asked you for permission to carry a firearm for protection, would you grant it? Why or why not?

3. *Stephanie Sinclair says about covering a funeral:* I can't imagine like, I can't imagine people photographing if I was in that situation. That's what just kills me. If that was like my mother or my brother or something, it's asking a lot for us to be there for those moments, and be right in the middle of it. I mean I was in front of her and it was the only way I could get a picture, otherwise I couldn't see. Then there's no point in us being there. And she was just like wailing right in my ear and I felt it through my whole body...

I stopped taking photos at the cemetery not because it was too painful to photograph for me. I felt like the women didn't want us to photograph them. And so that's why I stopped taking pictures. But here the family was definitely comfortable with my being there and so I felt very comfortable taking every picture. I mean I took tons and tons and tons of pictures while I was there and the mother was so wrapped up in her own grief that she didn't care at all, You feel more comfortable like being this intimate because it's so important because this was a huge, huge, huge negative consequence of the war and people needed to see it. And it was something the world needed to see...

Should funerals be off limits as private moments, or should they be shown? Why or why not?

4. *Stephanie Sinclair is brought to a civilian home to take pictures. Her translator tells her that she is standing in what used to be a bedroom:* Now the room is destroyed. He said, I don't have money to renew this house. I am poor. Even this guy beside us he told me why the American bombed us and destroyed this house, now the people come and stole their stuff. The glass mixed with the sugar, from the window, not able to use it. That means the whole family are destroyed. No stuff, no water, the house is destroyed.

Sinclair asks, Are they happy that Saddam is no longer controlling the area or how do they feel, what are their thoughts?

The translator responds: She says, we need peace, we need security, without Saddam, whatever, we need peace, we need security. We are not interested in who will rule us.

Would you tell the story of this family, including the pictures of their bombed out house? Why or why not?

5. *On various occasions, the reporters encounter soldiers who are clearly afraid or somewhat confused.* Would you allow footage of these soldiers to reach U.S. audiences? Why or why not?