An Introduction to Media Literacy

Basic Questions
Media has a great influence on our perceptions of the world, and it has come to play a critical role in shaping current events. Exploring what is covered on the news, by whom it is covered, how it is covered, and what is not covered is an important exercise for all called to “faithful citizenship,” as the U.S. Bishops have called our vocation as members of a national and an international community.

Where do you learn about current events, what media sources do you use to gather information?
Do you know who owns these sources, what other industries they own, and who they give political donations to? Do you know what kind of background and in-depth knowledge of the issues the reporters you read or listen to have?
Do you know how they identify the “experts” they interview?
Do you believe you are getting a balance among different perspectives in the media?
Do you feel some issues are given too much coverage and other issues do not receive enough, or any coverage?
Do you think that the media you are familiar with balances negative messages and images of violence with more positive messages and images? Should it do so?
Do you think that the different cultures in the U.S. are well represented in our media?
Do you think the voices of all segments of our society get an equitable opportunity to be recognized and heard?

Corporate Influence on the Media
A small group of multinational companies dominate the world of media through their ownership of media stations and outlets. This ownership is becoming ever more concentrated as mega-mergers continue, and fewer companies have greater political and economic power than ever before in the history of the U.S. media.

The interests of multinational corporations play a role in shaping the news that we read, hear and watch. News stories may be biased or simply omitted because of particular corporate interests. These practices can lead to a lack of diversity of perspectives, along with a lack of depth of content, available to the public.

To read more about the ten largest media conglomerates and what they own, visit the web site of The Nation (http://www.thenation.com/special/bigten.html). There you will find familiar names such as Disney, Viacom, AOL Time Warner, General Electric, Sony, and AT&T with charts that break down what media outlets each of the ten media giants control.

Discussion Questions
Taking into account the fact that many media stations and outlets are owned by multinational corporations whose bottom line is maximum profit, how might they slant or frame the news on the following topics: free trade, minimum wage, CEO salaries, campaign finance reform, corporate accountability, and consumerism.

According to Catholic Social Teaching, the promotion of the common good involves working on developing in society all those conditions of social living through with each and every person can be enabled to more fully achieve their authentic human development. On June 1, 2003, Pope John Paul II stated that the aim of the media was “service of the universal common good.” How do you think the influence of corporate interests on media reporting affect the development of the universal common good?

For more information on this topic, see the EfJ Unit entitled, “Media Conglomeration.”
Peace Journalism

Journalism has changed throughout the years. One type of journalism that emerged in the 1970s is known as peace journalism, also referred to as new journalism or holistic journalism.

Peace Journalism draws on the insights of conflict analysis and transformation. Peace journalists avoid oversimplifying a conflict as a two-party contest in which the logical outcome is for one to win and the other to lose. Instead, they respect the complexity of a conflict by identifying a multitude of parties, pursuing many goals, thus opening up more creative potential for a range of outcomes. Peace Journalism is based on the proposition that the decisions journalists make while covering conflicts contribute to the momentum towards war or the momentum towards peace.

Activities

1) As a group, read the chart on page 4, which compares Peace Journalism with War/Violence Journalism. Compare and contrast the characteristics of the two types of journalism.

Next, apply your insights to a current news article. Choose an article from a newspaper or from the Internet that reports on the war in Iraq. Photocopy the article so that each person has a copy of the article. Give group members time to read the article. As a group, discuss the following questions:

What aspects of the article reflect peace journalism?

What aspects of the article reflect war/violence journalism?

If you were an editor, what aspects of the article would you change so that it contributed to a momentum towards a peaceful resolution?

2) Discuss the general coverage of the war on Iraq through the following questions. Relate your answers to what you have learned in the reading on Peace Journalism.

Do you think the mainstream U.S. media has presented an objective, unbiased account of events in Iraq thus far?

Have you seen or read news about other countries’ reaction to the war? Why or why not?

The New York Times published two stories on April 4, 2003, both looking at the way the Arab media are covering the war. While one article, by an American, declares the Arab media “portray war as a Killing Field,” the other article, on “The War Americans Don’t See,” by an editor of Jordanian newspaper, declares that the Arabic press is “neither monolithic nor uniformly anti-American.” Are such articles important news? Why do you think the Times published both?

Have you heard or read any debate about the ethical issues of the events in Iraq or read reactions of major Church leaders around the world to the war and occupation? Is this no longer news?

What alternative media sources of information on are you aware of? (If group members are unable to name any alternative sources, see page 7 for a listing of various media sources outside of the mainstream media.) Is it important to have alternatives to mainstream media?

What do you think is the emotional and spiritual effect of constantly seeing and hearing battle news throughout the day? Does this distort one’s perspective in any way?

What happens to reporting on social justice issues when battle coverage is the main focus 24 hours a day?

Read the quote below. What does it mean to treat the war “as a soccer match?” Has the media you have read or heard treated the war in Iraq as a sporting event? What kind of reporting respects the human dignity, a major tenet of Catholic Social Teachin, of both the people of Iraq and the American people? Do you think that the media you are familiar with balances negative messages and images of violence with more positive messages and images?

“[In Iraq] we face the question of the tragedy of those who die. There are soldiers who fall on both sides; there is the drama of the civilian population that is affected by this war. So we should be very anguished at this time . . . [the media must stop treating the war in Iraq] as if it were a soccer match.”

March 28, 2003, Cardinal Roberto Tucci, Vatican Official
### Peace Journalism Activity (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PEACE JOURNALISM</th>
<th>WAR/VIOLENCE JOURNALISM</th>
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| **I. PEACE-ORIENTATED**  
Exploration of roots of conflict  
Acknowledgment of complexity of conflict: multiple parties in conflict over multiple issues with multiple goals  
Outcome: win-win situations are possible | **I. WAR-ORIENTATED**  
Focus on conflict arena  
Simplification of conflict: two opposing parties in conflict over one issue with only one goal (to win)  
Outcome: one winner and one loser |
| Conflict takes place in reality: open space, open time  
Reporting of causes and outcomes of conflict are not restricted to the theater of the conflict  
Conflict occurs within a historical and cultural context  
Conflict is made transparent | Conflict is isolated: closed space, closed time  
Reporting of causes and outcomes of conflict are restricted to the theater of the conflict  
Little or no mention of historical and cultural contexts of conflict  
Conflict is made opaque/secret |
| Voice to all parties in the conflict  
Perception that conflict/war is the problem  
Humanization of all parties in conflict  
Proactive reporting: prevention reporting, before any violence/war occurs | Propaganda and voice for “us” (not the “enemy”)  
Perception that the “enemy” is the problem  
Dehumanization of the “enemy”  
Reactive reporting: waiting for violence to start before reporting |
| Focus on invisible effects of violence (trauma of individuals and groups, damage to societal structure and culture) | Focus on visible effect of violence (number of people wounded or killed, material damage, etc.) |
| **II. TRUTH-ORIENTATED**  
Expose untruths on all sides  
Uncover all cover-ups | **II. PROPAGANDA-ORIENTATED**  
Expose the untruths of the “enemy”  
Help “our” cover-ups/lies |
| **III. PEOPLE-ORIENTATED**  
Focus on the suffering of all parties: women, children, civilians, etc., giving voice to voiceless  
Give name to all evil-doers  
Focus on “everyday people” peace-makers | **III. ELITE-ORIENTATED**  
Focus on “our” suffering with able-bodied elite males serving as mouth-piece  
Give name to “enemy” evil-doers  
Focus on elite peace-makers |
| **IV. SOLUTION-ORIENTATED**  
Peace = non-violence + creativity  
Highlight peace initiatives  
Focus on structure, culture, the peaceful society  
Aftermath: resolution, reconstruction, reconciliation | **IV. VICTORY-ORIENTATED**  
Peace = victory + ceasefire  
Conceal peace-initiatives until victory is at hand  
Focus on treaty, institution, the controlled society  
Aftermath: leaving for another war, return if deemed necessary |

*Adapted from work of Professor Johan Galtung, http://www.transcend.org/pjmanual.htm*
Message of the Holy Father for the 37th World Communications Day, June 1, 2003

Theme: The Communications Media at the Service of Authentic Peace in the Light of *Pacem in Terris*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. In the dark days of the Cold War, Blessed Pope John XXIII’s Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris* came as a beacon of hope to men and women of good will. Declaring that authentic peace requires “diligent observance of the divinely established order” (*Pacem in Terris*, 1), the Holy Father pointed to truth, justice, charity and freedom as the pillars of a peaceful society (ibid., 37).

The emergence of the power of modern social communications formed an important part of the Encyclical’s background. Pope John XXIII had the media especially in mind when he called for “fairness and impartiality” in the use of “instruments for the promotion and spread of mutual understanding between nations” afforded by science and technology; he decried “ways of disseminating information which violate the principles of truth and justice, and injure the reputation of another nation” (ibid., 90).

2. Today, as we observe the fortieth anniversary of *Pacem in Terris*, the division of peoples into opposing blocs is mostly a painful memory, but peace, justice and social stability are still lacking in many parts of the world. Terrorism, conflict in the Middle East and other regions, threats and counter-threats, injustice, exploitation, and assaults upon the dignity and sanctity of human life both before and after birth are dismaying realities of our times.

Meanwhile, the power of the media to shape human relationships and influence political and social life, both for good and for ill, has enormously increased. Hence the timeliness of the theme chosen for the Thirty-seventh World Day of Communications: “The Communications Media at the Service of Authentic Peace in the Light of *Pacem in Terris*”. The world and the media still have much to learn from the message of Blessed Pope John XXIII.

3. Media and Truth. The fundamental moral requirement of all communication is respect for and service of the truth. Freedom to seek and speak what is true is essential to human communication, not only in relation to facts and information but also, and especially, regarding the nature and destiny of the human person, regarding society and the common good, regarding our relationship with God. The mass media have an inescapable responsibility in this sense, since they constitute the modern arena in which ideas are shared and people can grow in mutual understanding and solidarity. This is why Pope John XXIII defended the right “to freedom in investigating the truth and - within the limits of the moral order and the common good - to freedom of speech and publication” as necessary conditions for social peace (*Pacem in Terris*, 12).

In fact, the media often do render courageous service to the truth; but sometimes they function as agents of propaganda and disinformation in the service of narrow interests, national, ethnic, racial, and religious prejudices, material greed and false ideologies of various kinds. It is imperative that the pressures brought to bear on the media to err in such ways be resisted first of all by the men and women of the media themselves, but also by the Church and other concerned groups.

4. Media and Justice. Blessed Pope John XXIII spoke eloquently in *Pacem in Terris* of the universal human good--“the good, that is, of the whole human family” (No.132)--in which every individual and all peoples have a right to share.

The global outreach of the media carries with it special responsibilities in this regard. While it is true that the media often belong to particular interest groups, private and public, the very nature of their impact on life requires that they must not serve to set one group against another - for example, in the name of class conflict, exaggerated nationalism, racial supremacy, ethnic cleansing, and the like. Setting some against others in the name of religion is a particularly serious failure against truth and justice, as is discriminatory treatment of religious beliefs, since these belong to the deepest realm of the human person’s dignity and freedom.
By accurately reporting events, correctly explaining issues and fairly representing diverse points of view, the media have a strict duty to foster justice and solidarity in human relationships at all levels of society. This does not mean glossing over grievances and divisions but getting at their roots so that they can be understood and healed.

5. Media and Freedom. Freedom is a precondition of true peace as well as one of its most precious fruits. The media serve freedom by serving truth: they obstruct freedom to the extent that they depart from what is true by disseminating falsehoods or creating a climate of unsound emotional reaction to events. Only when people have free access to true and sufficient information can they pursue the common good and hold public authority accountable.

If the media are to serve freedom, they themselves must be free and correctly use that freedom. Their privileged status obliges the media to rise above purely commercial concerns and serve society’s true needs and interests. Although some public regulation of the media in the interests of the common good is appropriate, government control is not. Reporters and commentators in particular have a grave duty to follow the demands of their moral conscience and to resist pressures to “adapt” the truth to satisfy the demands of wealth or political power.

As a practical matter, ways must be found not only to give the weaker sectors of society access to the information which they need for their individual and social development, but also to ensure that they are not excluded from having an effective and responsible role in deciding media content and determining the structures and policies of social communications.

6. Media and Love. “The anger of man does not work the righteousness of God” (James 1:20). At the height of the Cold War, Blessed Pope John XXIII expressed this simple but profound thought on what the path to peace entailed: “The preservation of peace will have to be dependent on a radically different principle from the one which is operative at the present time. True peace among nations must depend not on the possession of an equal supply of weapons, but solely upon mutual trust” (Pacem in Terris, 113).

The communications media are key actors in today’s world, and they have an immense role to play in building that trust. Their power is such that in a few short days they can create the positive or negative public reaction to events which suits their purposes. Reasonable people will realize that such enormous power calls for the highest standards of commitment to truth and goodness. In this sense the men and women of the media are especially bound to contribute to peace in all parts of the world by breaking down the barriers of mistrust, fostering consideration of the point of view of others, and striving always to bring peoples and nations together in mutual understanding and respect - and beyond understanding and respect, to reconciliation and mercy!

“Where hatred and the thirst for revenge dominate, where war brings suffering and death to the innocent, there the grace of mercy is needed in order to settle human minds and hearts and to bring about peace” (Homily at the Shrine of Divine Mercy at Krakow-Lagiewniki, 17 August 2002, No.5).

Challenging as all this is, it is by no means asking too much of the men and women of the media. For by vocation as well as by profession they are called to be agents of truth, justice, freedom, and love, contributing by their important work to a social order “founded on truth, built up on justice, nurtured and animated by charity, and brought into effect under the auspices of freedom” (Pacem in Terris, 167).

My prayer therefore on this year’s World Communications Day is that the men and women of the media will ever more wholly live up to the challenge of their calling: service of the universal common good. Their personal fulfillment and the peace and happiness of the world depend greatly on this. May God bless them with light and courage.
Discussion Questions

In section two, Pope John Paul II comments that “the power of the media to shape human relationships and influence political and social life, both for good and for ill, has enormously increased.” List some examples of ways in which media can influence human relationships and political and social life.

In section three, the Pope states that “the fundamental moral requirement of all communication is respect for and service of the truth”; however, he then notes that “sometimes they function as agents of propaganda and disinformation in the service of narrow interests, national, ethnic, racial and religious prejudices, material greed and false ideologies of various kinds.” List some examples of when the media has functioned as agents of propaganda and disinformation. Whose/what interests were they serving?

“By accurately reporting events, correctly explaining issues and fairly representing diverse points of view, the media have a strict duty to foster justice and solidarity in human relationships at all levels of society” [4]. List some possible outcomes of inaccurate reporting or explanation of issues?

Why is it important that “the weaker sectors of society . . . are not excluded from having an effective and responsible role in deciding media content and determining the structures and policies of social communications” [5]? What has been the outcome of the exclusion of the voice of the weaker sectors of society from the media?

In section six, Pope John Paul II writes that the media have the power to “create the positive or negative public reaction to events which suit their purposes.” What are some ways in which you and your group can work to hold the media accountable?

“My prayer therefore on this year’s World Communications Day is that the men and women of the media will ever more wholly live up to the challenge of their calling: service of the universal common good” [6]. List some examples of ways in which the media has helped develop the universal common good. List some ways in which the media has worked against the common good.

Share some reflections on the similarities of Peace Journalism and the type of journalism encouraged by Pope John Paul II.
Resources

It is important to locate alternate sources of media (outside of the U.S. mainstream) in order to gain a well-rounded understanding of news items.

Below are a list of some alternate sources of media:

**UN News Centre**

**Common Dreams News Center**
http://www.commondreams.org/

**Alternet.org**
http://www.alternet.org/

**Reuters**
http://www.reuters.com/

Another way to gain different perspectives on an issue is to read the newspapers of foreign countries. These are often available on the Internet and in specialized news stands.

To learn more about media literacy, visit the sites below:

**Global Issues**
http://www.globalissues.org/HumanRights/Media.asp

**Center for Media Literacy**
http://www.medialit.org/

**Media Awareness Network**
http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/index.cfm