

## **Catalyzing Media**

The 36th Catalyst Institute of the New Mexico Media Literacy Project  
Albuquerque, New Mexico August 1 - 4, 2005

By Karen VanMeenen AfterImage, Nov/Dec 2005

In August 2005, the New Mexico Media Literacy Project (NMMLP), based in Albuquerque, hosted its 36th Catalyst Institute. NMMLP, housed on the campus of Albuquerque Academy, a private middle and high school, is the largest independent, activist media literacy project in the United States. It is dedicated to “educat[ing] future citizens in skills that will allow them to better analyze, access, and produce media.” As part of this mission, which also includes offering hundreds of presentations in schools, corporate settings, and organizations across the country and overseas each year, NMMLP also facilitates a four-day intensive called the Catalyst Institute twice a year. Twenty-nine people (half from New Mexico) participated in the most recent workshop, including educators (from all levels and several disciplines including language arts, sexual education, media art production, and science), counselors, activists, public health care workers, and two independent media producers. The four days of the Institute included a mix of lectures; presentations replete with media examples; and hands-on activities in groups where media was discussed, analyzed, and created.

On day one, we jumped right in with clips from *Over There* (2005), a new television show about the current war in Iraq created by Steven Bochco of *Hill Street Blues* fame. The fantasy offered by this fictional television show was immediately contrasted with the reality of the news show *Nightline*, which read the names and displayed pictures of American soldiers killed in Iraq, in silence. Although both the fictional program and the nightly news program focus on American loss of life, the differing mediums in which similar information is conveyed highlights the importance of how it is perceived, and underscores the need to educate youth to seek out varied sources of information, and to question what they (are encouraged to) consume.

As a basis for the content of the Catalyst Institute, we began with an extended version of the basic concepts of media literacy upon which the study of the field rests. These include, but not limited to, the premises that media construct our culture; media effects are complex; individuals construct their own meanings from media; and our media system reflects the power dynamics in our society. In our first exercise in small groups, we used this information to deconstruct media examples in the form of television and print ads. After also being given instruction on specific tools used in media production—including the many facets of “the language of persuasion,” which include the use of symbols, hyperbole, fear, humor, flattery, bribery, nostalgia, and simple solutions, among other tools of manipulation—we worked in groups to create and enact ad skits.

The group watched and discussed several critical analyses of the media or other cultural indices. The first and most jarring was the video *The Persuaders*, which aired on the PBS program *Frontline* in November 2004 (clips and study guides are available on [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)). In this documentary, media critics and theorists including Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo* (2000), and cultural scholar Mark Crispin Miller, a professor of culture and communication at New York University, explain how advertisers work to get consumers to buy into “loyalty beyond reason.” Clotaire Rapaille, a French psychologist turned marketing guru, delights in how the reptilian brain “always wins,” a fact advertisers use to their advantage.

In a session with a focus on gender and media, the group discussed the stereotype encapsulated in the phrase “be a man,” including how the concept of manhood is constructed by family, friends, parents, and institutions including the church, the military, toymakers, and of course the media. To “be a lady,” women have to negotiate the complexity of what is essentially the Madonna vs. whore dilemma. The disparity between the elements of these two stereotypes is a set up for violence in many forms. The video *Wrestling with Manhood: Boys, Bullying & Battering* (2002), produced by the Media Education Foundation, provided examples of how professional wrestling (as the most prevalent form of “sports entertainment”) normalizes gender violence, and furthers the disjuncture of fantasy and reality.

In a focus on “Marketing Culture,” we learned about the increase in disposable products and numerous statistics such as that the average grocery store in the U.S. contains 20,000-40,000 different products (and therefore, in the most formal terms, displays that many media messages). The history of tobacco advertising using Native American iconography was explored and several examples of Hispanic culture being used in targeted media and marketing campaigns were shared. The point was brought home that whoever creates the images ultimately defines the culture those images are representing.

As Miller states in *The Persuaders*, “Once a culture is entirely advertising friendly, it ceases to be a culture at all, or one worthy of the name.” The placement of advertising everywhere from sports stadiums to restrooms to airplane tray tables, demonstrates how pervasive “ad creep” is across the globe, as advertising expands from merely a marketing tool to a way of life. Branding occurs when a consumer item becomes more than just a product or service used when a consumer is in need of what that product or service provides. These brands instead become a lifestyle, an image, inviting consumers to be a part of that desirable world. This marketing is often aimed at youth—in an effort to begin a branding process that marketers hope will last a consumer’s lifetime. Viral marketing is also being used more frequently in youth culture. *The Persuaders* offered a specific example of a new type of viral marketing in the United Kingdom: schoolgirls being “hired” to promote boy bands for Universal. Their charge is to convince friends and peers to attend concerts and purchase CDs,

and they receive Universal products in exchange. Issues of health for teens are central to media literacy work and we examined several ways that youth are manipulated by mainstream media into harmful behaviors ranging from smoking and drinking alcohol to having unsafe sex to succumbing to eating disorders. A vivid example of the former was demonstrated using NMMLP's "Something Stinks in Hollywood" DVD. Studies show that Hollywood movies are the single largest trigger for youth smoking, more influential than either peer pressure or parental smoking.

Our every day lives are permeated with messages intended to influence our thought and behavior. If there was any doubt, a viewing of the 2002 film *Toxic Sludge is Good for You: The Public Relations Industry Unspun* (based on John Stauber's 1995 book *Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*), produced by the Media Education Foundation, confirmed that Americans are the most propaganda-ed people in history, with some studies suggesting that Americans are exposed to 3000 advertising messages a day. According to NMMLP, the results of this rash of consumerism targeted to youth culture include increased materialism, desensitization to violence, non-sustainable living, stunted play and creativity, and fragmentation of families and friends.

In an in-depth session on media ownership and corporate control was enlightening. A group exercise demonstrated the complicated history of the merger, monopoly, and conglomeration system of American media over the past three decades, much of this free trade free-for-all resulting from the 1996 Telecommunications Act. The general concern for media reform wound its way through the Institute. In a session highlighting activism, we learned that Bill Moyers, at the 2005 National Conference for Media Reform, spoke of the United States having deviated from the First Amendment ideals of a press independent of the government. Several examples of media reform organizations and efforts were highlighted over the course of the Institute, including the Independent Media Center, founded in Seattle in 1999 and inspired by World Trade Organization protests, and Backfence.com, which provides grassroots online news from and for communities of 100,000 people or fewer. Other examples of organizations and projects working to combat commercialism include Adbusters ([adbusters.org](http://adbusters.org)), Commercial Alert ([commercialalert.org](http://commercialalert.org)), Center for a New American Dream ([newdream.org](http://newdream.org)), and Sweatshop Watch ([sweatshopwatch.org](http://sweatshopwatch.org)). It was noted that media justice has a long history in minority communities and a local success story was offered as a recent example. In 2004, a Tecate beer ad depicting a cold bottle and the text "Finally, a cold Latina," was removed from billboards in Albuquerque after protests from the Latina community.

Part of NMMLP's mission, especially during the Catalyst Institute, is to expand the base of individuals trained to do media literacy work. To this end, Catalyst participants were given numerous tools for facilitating workshops and an opportunity to present a brief media literacy session of their own devising in a

small group. A model of a presentation for middle and high school students, using clips from NMMLP's CD-ROM "Reversing Addiction," provided participants with a practical example of how they might take the information learned during the Catalyst Institute back to their own workplace. As so much of media literacy work takes place in K-12 classrooms, curriculum standards (across disciplines) were discussed and how media examples can be used in educational settings was addressed in detail.

Finally, attendees were given an update on NMMLP's future plans: the Web site is being updated to include a calendar of events, links, and a "Media Deconstruction of the Month." The "Media Literacy Online" project is a newly funded endeavor intended to disseminate lesson plans online, using contemporary ads in a timely manner (for example, SuperBowl ads will be deconstructed online within a couple of days of their airing). After being given ample opportunity to experience all of NMMLP's CD-ROM products, each participant was given their choice of three CDs to take home to begin implementing their new knowledge of media literacy education.

By offering a valuable mixture of comprehensive theoretical grounding and numerous practical tools, the Catalyst Institute provided participants with information and experience with which to begin and/or enhance their own media literacy work. With this intensive and their growing list of products, NMMLP offers a valuable service and continues to serve as leader in the growing field of media literacy.

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