

## Lesson 4

### Do we control the media – or do the media control us?

#### The media – an instrument of communication and of power

This matrix sums up the information a teacher needs to plan and deliver the lesson.


Competence training refers directly to EDC/HRE.

The learning objective indicates what students know and understand.

The student task(s), together with the method, form the core element of the learning process.

The materials checklist supports lesson preparation.

The time budget gives a rough guideline for the teacher's time management.

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|-------------------------|---|
| Competence training     | Reflecting on choices and their impact.   |
| Learning objective      | The media are a powerful instrument of communication and control.   |
| Student tasks           | The students compare and reflect on their choices and decisions.  |
| Materials and resources | Display of wall newspapers.<br> Materials for teachers 9A. |
| Method                  | Reports, plenary discussion.<br>Lecture.  |
| Time budget             | 1. The students compare their choices and decisions. <span style="float: right;">15 min</span>  |
|                         | 2. The students reflect on their construction of messages. <span style="float: right;">10 min</span>  |
|                         | 3. Teacher's lecture: agenda setting, gatekeeping. <span style="float: right;">5 min</span>   |
|                         | 4. Follow-up discussion. <span style="float: right;">10 min</span>  |

#### Information box

The students reflect on their experience in this project. They do not read each other's newspapers for the sake of information, but focus on the decisions involved in selecting the topics and pictures – they explore the role of media as gatekeepers and agenda setters.

The reporters present the background information on the discussions in the teams, and the students compare and reflect on their experience.

The teacher adds the concepts – media as gatekeepers and agenda setters – in a brief lecture. This is an example of how constructivist learning is enriched by systematic instruction. The students' experience creates the context in which the teacher's instruction provides a new perspective and enables the students to understand their experience on a more advanced, abstract level of thinking and understanding.

Different options of extending this project and applying its insights are possible. These can be discussed at the end of the lesson.

## Lesson description

The students are expected to have read each other's newspapers before this lesson.

### Stage 1: The students explain and compare their choices

In turn, each presenter reports on the decisions made by their teams and explains the reasons behind them. Guided by the briefing notes (≈ student handout 9.3) the presenters should address the following points:

- choice of lead stories;
- what topics the team considered, and why certain topics were included or dropped;
- the choice of photographs;
- other points and issues of importance.

The presentations focus on the decisions of gatekeeping and agenda setting rather than the contents of the newspapers themselves. They provide the material that the teacher focuses on in his/her brief lecture, highlighting the shared experience of the teams by adding some key concepts of media literacy. In this way, constructivist learning sets the context for the delivery of conceptual knowledge through systematic, brief instruction.

### Stage 2: The students reflect on their construction of messages

The teacher asks the students to compare the reasons for their teams' decisions.

- Can we identify any predominant criteria, e.g. newsworthiness?
- To what extent did we consider aspects of competition – e.g. by using eye-catchers?
- ...

The presenters' reports and the comparison of choices can give rise to a critical discussion. The students may problematise the strong influence of the media on what information we receive, or what we never hear about. The teacher chairs the discussion. As he/she will take the floor shortly, there is no need for the teacher to comment on the students' statements.

### Stage 3: Teacher's lecture

#### Step 3.1 The basic lecture

 Materials for teachers 9A

As indicated above (see stage 1), the teacher links the points of this brief input to the context of the experience and questions that the students have created. This requires an element of flexibility in presenting the following key statements:

1. All media messages are constructed. One basic aspect of message construction is choosing a small set of information that is turned into stories, and omitting many other pieces of information. The students explored this aspect of message construction when they edited their newspapers.
2. By selecting and omitting information, news editors and producers in the media act as gatekeepers and agenda setters. They strongly influence public opinion and political decision making, and how we take part in democracy. To what extent this influence turns into control depends on whether we exercise our role of gatekeepers or not.

These two points are closely linked to the students' experience in this small project. The teacher can conclude the input here, as the points certainly provide enough food for thought, or can add further

points, depending on the students' interests and questions. In this case, the time frame may need to be extended.

### **Step 3.2 Extensions to the lecture**

1. On the other hand, as commercial enterprises, the media compete with each other to attract our attention. Media producers take care to meet their audience's interests and expectations. Their commercial success depends on the choices of media users.
2. We depend on the media for our perception of the world. In this lesson, the students focused on a classic medium, the newspaper. However, new types of media have emerged, and we use them for different purposes. We still have the classic mass media (broadcast media) – magazines, newspapers, TV and radio – that we use mainly as sources of information and for entertainment. Then we have the new media based on the Internet (websites, e-mail, blogs, facebook-type networks, twitter), not forgetting SMS. We use these for many purposes, but particularly for communication with each other, and as the students will know best, the young generation is more familiar with these than their parents and most of their teachers.
3. Today, we live in a media culture. Society is a network of interaction between its members. Social interaction is, to a large extent, communication. Communication is supported, channelled and shaped by media, and the media messages not only reflect, but also refract reality.

### **Stage 4: Follow up discussion and conclusion of the unit**

The students should have the opportunity to react to the teacher's lecture.

They may have comprehension questions, or they may problematise the power of mass media as gatekeepers and agenda setters.

The teacher finally raises the question whether and how to continue the project, for example by making one of the following suggestions:

- The wall newspapers could be displayed in school.
- The students could invite a professional journalist to visit the class. They could show him/her the newspapers, asking for feedback, and discuss the issue of gatekeeping.
- A team of editors could continue with this news project in school and produce a school (wall) newspaper.
- The students could report on the media that most strongly shape and influence public opinion.
- The students could stick to an issue that they have reported on and take action. Links to other units in this manual are possible.