



Truth or Money

Subjects: Health, Communication Arts, Social Studies

Overview:

Students explore how advertising leverage can lead to censorship of information about public health issues. They discuss the types of interest groups that seek to influence public opinion about smoking, as well as the strategies used by each group. Students then discuss the ways in which the tobacco industry has censored magazine messages about the health risks associated with smoking. To give students a chance to experience a smoking-related moral dilemma, they are placed in the role of a journalist whose article has been rejected because it could antagonize the magazine's cigarette advertisers. They must then decide how to respond to the editor.

Suggested Time:

One Class Session

Resources/Materials:

Photocopy the following:

- Censorship in the Media
- The Dilemma

Procedure:

1. Class Discussion (10-15 min.)

To introduce the lesson, ask the class the following questions:

- Which interest groups might want to influence public opinion about smoking? (*Write answers on the board. Examples may include: the tobacco industry, government officials, health agencies, concerned citizens, educators, ex-smokers, relatives of cancer patients.*)

OBJECTIVES:



Students will demonstrate:

1. an awareness of the potential influence of advertisers on magazine content
2. an understanding of the role tobacco advertisers may play in censoring information about public health issues in magazines
3. an awareness of possible connections between tobacco companies and companies that, on the surface, are not connected to tobacco products

Procedure (cont.):

- What is the likely position of each of these groups?
- How can these groups get their messages across?
Answers might include such things as:
 - *through education*
 - *through the media, using ads, articles, and letters to editors*
 - *through statistics or persuasive language that appeals to cherished values*
- Which interest group would be likely to:
 - Call a smoker a "nicotine addict?"
 - Refer to bronchitis, cancer, and emphysema as "alleged health hazards?"
 - Describe nicotine as a "killer drug?"
 - Talk about health advocacy groups as "anti-smoking fanatics?"
- Besides stating their message in words, how else can interest groups influence public opinion? (Answers might include: *through images in ads, or "spoof ads," or by controlling the media through economic influence.*)



2. Distribute "Censorship in the Media."
Discuss the notion of censorship, and how it can be politically or economically driven.

- Ask students, "Is omission of information just as bad as biased or slanted information?" Why or why not?



3. Activity: *The Dilemma*

- Have students complete the assignment described in *The Dilemma* individually, or in small groups.
- Invite class discussion of "The Dilemma."
- Following the discussion, be sure the class understands that while the "letter" is fictitious, the issue is quite real. Also, you might want to ask them why the magazine editor wrote that "the connections between smoking and cancer are still controversial." Why didn't she just come out and say that publishing an article that talks about the dangers of smoking would offend one of their major advertisers?



Method of Evaluation

- Completed "*The Dilemma*" assignment

Extension Activities

- Discuss the concept of an "advertorial" (advertising disguised as an article).
- Have students watch a news program and list the TV commercials that air during it. Ask them, "Do you think there are any news stories that are less likely to get covered for fear of offending the advertisers?"



Censorship in the Media

In some parts of the world, the government controls the media. This means that no one can broadcast or publish anything a government considers immoral or harmful, or that threatens the country's "stability" (which usually means the government's own power base). This is what we usually think of when we hear the word "censorship."

Democratic countries, on the other hand, take pride in upholding the principle of freedom of speech. People are free to say and write whatever they wish. There are a few exceptions, of course. You can't yell "fire!" in a crowded theater, for example. Still, for the most part, people are free to express their views. The government doesn't engage in censorship.

But even in democratic countries, there is a hidden form of censorship. This hidden censorship is controlled by the power of money. Consider magazines. In North America, most magazines depend on two sources of income: subscriptions and advertisers. Both connect to money. And both will influence editors' decisions about what gets published in the magazine. Readers must find the magazine interesting, tasteful, and entertaining, or they will drop their subscriptions and the magazine will lose money. So editors look for articles or stories that are interesting, tasteful, and entertaining. No problem. The problem comes from the other source of revenue – advertising. Companies might stop advertising in magazines if they think the magazine contains articles or stories that make it more difficult to sell their might undermine or challenge their products.

Consider the following:

- The tobacco industry has enormous advertising power. According to the Federal Trade Commission, annual advertising and promotions expenditures for the U.S. tobacco industry in 2000 were over \$9.5 billion.

The tobacco industry's economic clout goes beyond tobacco products.

- R. J. Reynolds Tobacco, for example, owns Nabisco foods.
- Philip Morris also owns Kraft Foods, the largest packaged food company in North America.

Does the tobacco industry influence news coverage in magazines? Consider this:

- Between 1950 and 1969, *Time*, *U.S. News* and *Newsweek* between them wrote 210 articles about cigarettes and tobacco – most of these related to the health dangers of smoking. On January 1, 1971, cigarette advertising was outlawed on U.S. television, and advertising revenue began to flow into the print media. What happened? Between 1970 and 1986, *Time*, *U.S. News* and *Newsweek* included only 64 articles about tobacco and cigarettes, and most of these dealt with political or business issues, not health. Not only did these three major national news publications fail to cover the health dangers of smoking, they routinely failed to mention smoking in most articles about cancer and heart disease.

- In November 1983, *Newsweek* ran a 16-page special health supplement written by the American Medical Association. Although the original AMA manuscript included information on tobacco addiction, *Newsweek* resisted any mention of cigarettes. Do you think it was just a coincidence that that issue of *Newsweek* had 12 full-page cigarette ads?
- According to a 2001 study by the American Council on Science and Health: “*Women’s magazines continue to publish cigarette ads, but rarely include information on the negative health effects of smoking. Of the 2,414 health-related articles published, only 24 articles – less than 1 per cent – addressed the health effects of tobacco. Moreover, the image of female smokers as independent, attractive and lean was portrayed overwhelmingly in the advertisements.*”

We rely on the media for our health information, but the information that we get is tremendously distorted and censored, on behalf of the advertisers ...Many studies have shown that magazines don’t bite the hands that feed them.

*-Jean Kilbourne in the video
“Pack of Lies”*

The Dilemma

Imagine you are a new journalist and have written an article about the causes of cancer and how to reduce the risks of getting cancer. You submitted your article for publication to a popular women's magazine. Two months later, you receive the following letter:

Dear Author:

Congratulations! The article you wrote is excellent and we would like to publish it as a cover story with the title, "Cut Your Cancer Risk by 50 Per Cent." There's just one problem. Before we can publish the article, you need to delete any mention of smoking. As you know, the connections between smoking and cancer are still controversial. The rest of the article, however, is excellent. You should continue to emphasize other lifestyle changes that can reduce the risk of cancer: proper diet, using sunscreen, exercise, and so on.

Thank you for submitting your article to our magazine. We look forward to your revised article without the mention of smoking.

Sincerely,
The Editor

What Would You Do?

You worked hard on the article and this is your first big break. You know that lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death among women, and that 85 to 90 per cent of all lung cancer is caused by smoking. You feel strongly that women are being deceived by cigarette ads into thinking that smoking is stylish, sexy, and a way to control weight. On the other hand, getting published is important to your career.

- What can you do? What should you do?
- Write a letter to the magazine editor responding to her letter of acceptance.