

2 Language and mass communication

Chapter 3 The media



Key terms

Public opinion is the collection of opinions and beliefs held by the adult population of a nation.

Media literacy is the skill of analysing various texts in relation to the media in which they are published.

Objectives

By the end of this chapter you will be able to

- identify sensationalism, bias and newsworthiness
- understand how the Internet facilitates communication
- plan and write a part 2 written task 1.

In Part 1 you explored communication as a bottom-up process, looking at how ordinary people interact on a daily basis, socially and professionally, through personal letters and classified ads. In Part 2 you will be looking at language as a top-down process, focusing on how ideas and messages are disseminated to 'the masses' through various distribution channels. You will discover how **public opinion** is shaped through language.

Public opinion is like the pulse of a nation. It is the general consensus on issues such as who should be elected, which brands are trendy and how children should be educated. In this chapter you will be asking yourself how public opinion is managed through channels of mass communication, also known as the media. Understanding how language in the media is used as a tool to shape public opinion is part of **media literacy**.

The word *media* refers to the physical carriers of information, such as radios, televisions, T-shirts or posters. We frequently make an interesting 'mistake' when referring to the media. Have you ever heard someone say, 'The media *thinks* this' or 'The media *does* that'? Strictly speaking, this is grammatically incorrect, as the word *media* is the plural form of *medium*. It can be argued, therefore, that it should take the plural verbs *think* or *do*. However, *media* has come to be seen as a collective noun and it is therefore now acceptable in standard English to treat it as a singular noun, taking a singular verb.

When people refer to the media, especially to the concept of it as a single entity, they mean broadcasting networks (such as the BBC), publishing houses and syndications (such as *The Times*), or even well-known and influential television shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. As we develop a sense of media literacy, we should make a distinction between, on the one hand, the *devices* that carry the messages and, on the other, the *people* – i.e. networks, stations and syndications – responsible for bringing us them.

The Canadian philosopher and writer Marshall McLuhan once said, 'The medium is the message.' He was referring to how an actual medium or device, such as a radio, television or computer, can determine the nature of the message that it carries. Think of mass communication as a spectrum: at one end is the



Figure 3.1 The storyline of the film *Wag the Dog* suggests that the media have the power to shape public opinion (see page 70).

Key terms



Manufactured consent is a term coined by the political scientist and linguist Noam Chomsky. It describes the phenomenon that a small ruling elite can shape public opinion in their favour by controlling the media.

Bias is the skewed presentation of a story from a particular ideological position.

notion of the media consisting of corporate business people who sit around boardroom tables deciding what the public will watch, read or listen to; at the other end is the view of the media being something increasingly controlled by ordinary people who have access to distribution channels such as websites, podcasts and radio frequencies.

In this chapter you will develop media literacy skills by exploring both ends of this spectrum. In Unit 3.1 you will be focusing on journalism and the linguistic devices used by networks, stations and syndications in their attempts to consciously shape public opinion. In Unit 3.2 you will explore how a very powerful medium, the Internet, is changing the way in which we interact and disseminate messages. At the end of the chapter you will have the chance to look at a sample written task which demonstrates a student's understanding of many of the ideas discussed in this chapter.

Unit 3.1 Journalism

Having access to millions of viewers and listeners gives the media considerable power. Producers of television and radio programmes have a great responsibility, since their media can be highly influential on public opinion. In this unit you are going to explore several concepts, such as bias, newsworthiness and sensationalism, to help you understand the responsibility that news networks have.

Bias

Television producers, journalists and columnists have the ability to 'manufacture consent'. This term, coined by the political scientist and linguist Noam Chomsky, is used to refer to the media's ability to create the impression that everyone agrees with a particular ideological position. The concept of manufactured consent can be understood in the context of the war in Iraq, which started in early 2003. Critics, such as Robert Greenwald, have argued that some American news networks actively helped shape opinion of Iraq in the USA in the build-up to the war. In Greenwald's documentary, *Outfoxed*, he claims that in late 2002 and early 2003 viewers of one particular network, Fox News, had a different view of the world from viewers of other American news networks. For example, 67% of Fox viewers felt there was a link between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, compared to only 16% of people who watched and listened to the Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR). How do we account for this difference of opinion between the consumers of these different media? The figures suggest **bias** on the part of the Fox News network.

Activity 3.1

Defining *bias* can be challenging. As a class, create a spider diagram of all the synonyms that you associate with the word *bias*. Then discuss the diagram and the issues raised. This should help you to understand this abstract concept.

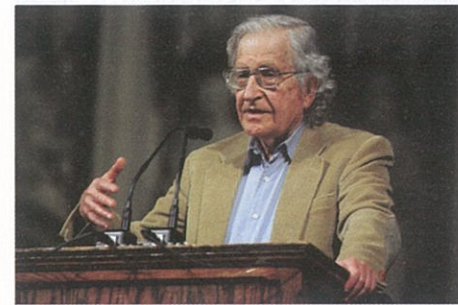


Figure 3.2 Noam Chomsky (1928–), often revered as one of the founders of modern linguistics, has published many books on the role of the media in shaping public opinion, including *Manufacturing Consent*.

Further resources



Robert Greenwald's documentary *Outfoxed* presents an interesting look behind the scenes at Fox News in the early 2000s. He argues that this news network was managed from the top down through the use of allegedly biased internal memos and unbalanced panels of guests on television programmes.