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English 112B

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Appearance vs. Reality in Media

**Rationale**:

 We are living in a time where endless information is at the end of our fingertips.  The only problem is that not all the information is vetted or proven true. Not only are many things on the internet outright false, there are a lot of things on the internet that manipulate the reader to interpret its information in a misleading way.  It’s important for people to learn at a young age how to properly discern the facts in a story, especially in the “fake news” world that we live in today. With social media allowing people to spread their thoughts in a matter of seconds to their entire online community, it’s easy for misinformation to spread like wildfire.  Teaching students to always be cautious with both learning from the internet and spreading information on the internet will reduce the amount of reactionary politics which is damaging our country today.

 The internet itself is an extremely useful tool for anyone to collect information.

The problem lies in how there is no tutorial or guide on how to vet good information from bad information.  False information comes up so often that many teachers and professors outright deny any of their students from citing wikipedia.org as a source of information due to how easy it is for its information to be altered.  When the internet was new, it was normal to be skeptical of any information discovered through the internet, as it was already crazy enough for the internet to even have information on whatever topic you were looking for.  That changes with these new generations of young adults who do not know what it’s like to not have the internet. They take the ease of information for granted, and when the internet was right for them so often, they no longer stop and consider if the internet is ever wrong.  Not only that, but with the massive amount of information that they can access at any point and any time, news companies across the web are fighting for people’s attention and clicks. This leads to people only clicking on or paying attention to the headlines of the articles that they see.  This means that there’s less of a focus on the details of the story, and that media outlets are using any means possible to make their headlines interesting enough to be clicked. This leads to fear mongering or exaggerating of the facts in order to appeal to the person’s two second glance as they scroll through their news feed.  Often times, people don’t even read past the headlines anymore. I’ve had countless scenarios where someone was sharing a story with me and came to a conclusion based off the headline, even though the actual content of the article comes to a completely different conclusion. While this is partially at fault of the media outlet for making a headline that allows people to jump to conclusions, the misunderstanding would still be completely avoided had the person either not jump to conclusions based on the headline alone, or actually read the article.

 This unit will train students to not take everything they see in the media at face value through stories that have elements of manipulating characters through spinning of information.  The canonical choice of work will be *Animal Farm*, as the pigs do a great job at showing how information can be used to oppress an entire group of beings without them even realizing it.  Students will focus on how the pigs effectively placate the farm and then consider if they think these tactics could work on them or if they’ve already seen these tactics in use either on the internet or the television.  Given the focus being on the media and how students interact with media on a daily basis, there are countless activities and assignments that can be given to students to further reflect on how the media can persuade their thoughts and opinions without directly saying so.  Ultimately, this unit will teach students how to restrain themselves from participating in reactionary politics and being manipulated by media outlets.

**Part 1:**

 In order to ease students into the unit, they will be shown comics and articles and then asked what they think of it.  The questions will be along the lines of “What do you think of the character shown in the comic” or “Why do you think the artist drew the comic in this way?”  This activity is inspired by my time in high school where my eleventh grade English teacher made us reflect on the language used when media reports on minorities.  I would like to connect this with some of the political comics I’ve found that criticize how media outlets show small snippets of the information that they find in order to paint an “interesting” story.  The students can also be assigned homework to reflect on how media reports today. They will be asked to find a news report and to reflect on the language used in the report on how they choose to describe people.  An example being when criminals are reported as mentally unstable versus “thugs” or “hoodlums”. I would consider doing this homework assignment every week so that students can remain conscious of the media’s ability to spin information.  We can then spend time in class talking about our homework assignments and discuss if the students are finding it difficult to find articles that passively paint people in certain ways.

After spending time on these activities we will then transition into our first book of the unit, *Life in a Fishbowl*.  I’d rather save *Animal Farm* for later so that we can finish the semester with the canonical work and have a stronger idea of what to focus on before we go into it.  I’d like to start with *Life in a Fishbowl* as it tackles reality TV show and how it does not properly portray reality.  This would be a great book to start with since I’m sure many of the students will be familiar with the concept of reality TV shows, and will be able to connect to it better.  The book will be partially read in class and out of class, as I have experienced teachers who try to read all of the book in class having a hard time finding time to discuss the book in class too.  To make sure the students are keeping up with the reading, I will ask them to write a reflection on either what they liked about the assigned chapter or anything interesting they noticed about how the Stone family is portrayed on reality TV.  I am considering pop quizzes as I know that some students could just write their reflection about one page of the reading and not read the entire chapter, and will likely do pop quizzes if the class exhibits signs of not reading the book. I hope that I can engage them and they are reading the book though as the discussions and reflections are generally more enjoyable and fruitful in my experience.  Upon finishing *Life in a Fishbowl*, I’d like the students to write a paper on what they learned from the book, as in why the media spins information in the way that they do, how they do it, and why we should be keen to it.  The book places a large majority of its focus on this topic so I have no worries in them being able to write a paper on this topic.

 **Part 2:**

 After going through *Life in a Fishbowl*, I would then like to transition into *Animal Farm*.  As we go into *Animal Farm*, I will introduce the students into the idea of tyrannical media with cartoons and history.  There are cartoons such as the one below


which can be used to teach students how even these cartoons are used to manipulate people into thinking a certain way.  While not exactly subtle, it still spread misinformation and dangerous mindsets as it implied that the Irish and Chinese were literally immigrating to America with the goal to usurp the American majority and take over.  This type of fear mongering was an attempt to create a divide and push their racist agenda in order to convince the people that immigration is bad. This is relevant as we go into *Animal Farm* as it shows how media can be used to influence the masses and let the people ease into their government rules without much backlash even if the reasoning is ridiculous.

 Once we’re finally into the reading of *Animal Farm*, the reading and activities will be similar to that of *Life in a Fishbowl*, except there will be a stronger focus on the actual actions that the characters do in the book.  Students will be asked to point out exactly what the pigs do and their possible reasoning for why they would do these things.  The class will also be asked to focus on how the pigs maintain their power. An example being when Napoleon begins his “great purge”, allowing the killing of anyone who opposes his leadership.  As they begin to identify more of these ways that government can manipulate people, they will then be asked to reflect on government and media working together to report on the state of the country.  Would it be ethical for the government and media to work together? Why or why not? Is the media allowed to report on sensitive information of the government? Why or why not? These activities can be done either in class or as assigned homework, and will work to further the students ability to understand the book and why we are reading the book.  As a class activity, the students will be split into groups and tasked to create a government that sounds appealing to the masses, but is actually disproportionately beneficial to the government alone. What I mean by this is that I want them to be able to reel in the masses while really having a system in place where only they are the benefactors. They will be given a week to work on their presentation 3-5 minute pitch for their government, and will then have to answer any questions from their student audience about their government.  After each class presents their government, a vote will be had on who’s government seems the best and then the winning group will reveal how they plan on becoming the main beneficiaries. This activity will likely be done once we finish the book in order to solidify to the students the key points of the book.

 **Part 3**:

 In the last part of the unit, we will read through *The Great Gatsby*.  I chose *The Great Gatsby* as I love its focus on the idea of the “American Dream” but would like for students to consider what really makes up the “American Dream”.  I also consider the book to be a very fun read for students, as when I read it in my high school class, all my classmates were very engrossed in the book too.  While reading the book with the class, I will ask them to consider what they think the “success” or “happiness” is. When these discussions happen in class I will expect them to pull examples from the book of how this scene shows “success” or “happiness”, and then ask them why this scene in particular stood out to them.  I expect them to answer that the scenes are “reminiscent of cool rich people scenes in the TV shows or movies I watch”, in which I can tie back to them how media has manipulated them into thinking pursuing a life of wealth rather than pursuing a life of happiness. They would then be asked to contextualize why they define “success” or “happiness” in the way that they do and need to reflect and realize how often they define “success” due to what they see on either TV or the internet.

 The goal of this activity involving *The Great Gatsby* is for the class to realize that we have already been heavily manipulated by the media into our day to day activities.  Without even realizing it, we consider success and happiness to be tied to wealth, but we are at the same time willing to acknowledge that happiness and success do not necessarily need wealth.  And yet we still chase towards wealth anyways, as we believe it can help us with attaining happiness and success. Having the students reflect on this will allow them to more keenly consider what they see in media, as they will realize that everything on social media or news outlets is forcibly exaggerated in order to appeal to our emotions.  The students will be asked to write a paper on what they think the general consensus of “wealth” and “happiness” is using films and other mediums of media to support their definition. The goal of this paper is to help move the students beyond the idea that media is just trying to get your attention, but that they are already manipulating us into having thoughts and mindsets that we might not have had without them.

 While this paper and the *Animal Farm* presentation would be what I weigh the most in the class grade, I would like the final assignment to be a smaller, funnier activity if time permits.  To make the students have a memorable experience with the unit, I’d like them to try to write an article that depicts me as an evil, terrible teacher using only facts that they know about me. This will hopefully motivate the students with fun as it’s not often that students get to blatantly make fun of their teacher.  This would only be done with the goal to keep the unit memorable and will also test what they have learned in how information can be spun to meet a certain image.

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Political Cartoon