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## Exploring Message Meaning: A Qualitative Media Literacy Study of College Freshmen

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### Abstract

Critical media literacy demands understanding of the deeper meanings of media messages. Using a grounded theory approach, this study analyzed responses by first-year college students not currently enrolled in formal media literacy education to three types of video messages: an advertisement, a public relations message, and a news report. Students did not exhibit nuanced understandings of message purpose or sender in any of the three types of messages, and had particular difficulty distinguishing public relations and news messages. These results suggest a media literacy curriculum addressing distinctions between media formats, with emphasis on analysis of message intent and point of view, is needed.

*Keywords:* critical media literacy, news literacy, college students, television messages, message analysis

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Young people today swim in a sea of media content, and the field of media literacy aims to help them stay afloat. Scholars continue to struggle to define the field and establish standards for what it means to be media literate (Christ 2004; Hobbs and Jensen 2009; Potter 2010), but modern conceptions of media literacy continue to center on critical thinking (Silverblatt 2008), analysis and evaluation (Aufderheide and Firestone 1993; Hobbs 2010), and conscious processing (Potter 2004). As the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) notes, media literacy education “requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create” (NAMLE 2007, 4).

Media literacy scholars have conducted numerous studies that attempt to operationalize these concepts, measure levels of literacy, and assess educational effectiveness through the use of narrowly tailored scales and surveys (Arke and Primack 2009; Ashley et al. 2010; Hobbs and Frost 2003; Vraga et al. 2009). Fewer scholars have taken purely qualitative approaches to gauging the effectiveness of educational interventions (Van Bauwel 2008), and even fewer have focused simply on baseline levels of literacy without educational intervention. Furthermore, few studies seem to focus on the need to differentiate between

different media message types (ads, news, public relations messages).

In our study, first-year undergraduate students from a variety of campus learning communities were asked open-ended questions about three media message types—advertising, public relations, and news—so that we could compare students’ sensitivity to and skepticism of one type of media message with that of another. We studied this group because scholars have called for more evidence of literacy levels among college students (Christ 2004, 2006; Mihailidis 2008) and because we wanted to examine the skills students possess following K-12 education, which increasingly features some kind of media education (Hobbs 2005; Silverblatt et al. 2002). Understanding these young people’s relationships to different media messages is key to understanding what media literacy education needs to offer them in order to improve critical media literacy and, ultimately, to help create more thoughtful, engaged citizens.

### Literature Review

#### *Media Literacy Education over Time*

Hobbs and Jensen (2009) suggest that media literacy is an extension of the practice of rhetoric that can be traced to the ancient Greeks, who stressed the

development of critical thinking skills in teaching the art of politics. The modern origins of media literacy can be found in the rise of film in the early twentieth century, when educators sought to use motion pictures to teach visual literacy but felt the need to resist “the slick promotional propaganda used by film companies promoting their wares” (Hobbs and Jensen 2009, 2). The early movement failed, as film, a medium for entertainment and commercial interests, generally was not a good fit for standard curriculum. In the second half of the century, though, a shift occurred as teachers started to encourage students to be critical movie-watchers, and media literacy became a “cognitive defense” against sensationalism and propaganda (Hobbs and Jensen 2009, 3).

In the 1970s and 1980s, another shift prompted educators to view entertainment not as an evil that students must learn to critique, but as a potential aid to education. During this time, Len Masterman (1985) urged educators to avoid letting filmmaking lessons with a focus on tools and techniques get in the way of the need to challenge power relationships. He refers to a “technicist trap” that undermines the heart of media literacy: “questions about authors and audiences, messages and meanings, and representations and realities” (Hobbs and Jensen 2009, 3). The problem Masterman posed is still at play, as scholars and educators deliberate about the proper function of media literacy education.

For example, some scholars and educators focus on “information literacy,” with attention to technical and research skills, ranging from video and photo editing and using online search engines to verify information (Hobbs 2008) to identifying keywords and developing hypotheses (Association of College and Research Libraries 2000). This approach could be considered part of the media literacy umbrella or it could constitute a separate domain. A different approach known as “critical literacy” includes a focus on social and political contexts and can be understood to include differences between American and other media systems, economic imperatives, media ownership and control issues, and the techniques used by media marketers (Hobbs 2008; Potter 2004; Lewis 2009; McLaughlin 1994). Broadly, the different disciplinary approaches range from a tendency to reinforce dominant paradigms of the US media system while others seek to question and change it (Hobbs 1998, 2008). Many media literacy scholars favor the latter approach as a means for improving citizenship, encouraging social change, and promoting

the public interest (Culver and Jacobson 2012, Lewis and Jhally 1998, Masterman 1997, Rheingold 2008).

### *Critical Thinking and Analysis of Media Messages*

Perhaps as a part of the effort to encourage the critical approach to media literacy, scholars increasingly have included the concept of “critical thinking” in their rhetoric. Within the growing body of media literacy scholarship in the past three decades, critical thinking is the most frequently mentioned skill among the scholars’ varied positions (Hobbs 2010; NAMLE 2007). Although there is no clear consensus on how to teach or assess critical thinking, scholars use the term to imply that the core of media literacy can be found in consumers’ ability to analyze the deeper meanings of messages. For example, Arke and Primack (2009) found that a five-domain definition of media literacy based on materials from the National Association of Media Literacy Education was closely linked to a common measure of critical thinking. Their study showed a positive correlation between college students’ media literacy scores and their scores on the California Critical Thinking Skills Test.

The term “critical thinking” sometimes implies a skill not dependent on acquired knowledge, but even so, critical thought cannot exist in a vacuum. As Potter (2010) suggests, if an individual does not possess knowledge of media systems and structures, the information necessary to evaluate the sources of media messages is not present. Thus, many scholars argue for a media literacy of both acquired knowledge about media structure and function, and the critical thinking skills of analysis and evaluation that apply this knowledge (Martens 2010; Duran et al. 2008). Duran et al. argue that a holistic media literacy course would also include contextual knowledge of the political economy of the media, consequences of media consumption, and even alternative media movements that challenge the mainstream in the name of democracy. This includes concerns related to media ownership, sourcing, and the history of journalism.

Similarly, Potter’s Cognitive Model of Media Literacy (2004) requires more “conscious processing of information” and “preparation for exposures” than earlier conceptualizations of media literacy (68). Potter’s model identifies media industries, media content, and media effects among the basic knowledge structures that facilitate information processing and meaning construction. Equipped with Potter’s knowledge structures, “people are much more aware

during the information-processing tasks and are, therefore, more able to make better decisions about seeking out information, working with that information, and constructing meaning from it that will be useful to serve their own goals” (69). Although Potter is not necessarily promoting civic engagement or social constructionism, the knowledge structures he highlights are useful means to these ends.

### *Qualitative Analysis in Related Studies*

Though many scholars have attempted to quantify media literacy through assessments and evaluations (Hobbs and Frost 2003; Arke and Primack 2009; Ashley et al. 2010), qualitative approaches are common and have proven useful for understanding students’ baseline literacy levels and to assess the effectiveness of literacy interventions. Duran et al. (2008) measured the effectiveness of their holistic media literacy course with both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Students watched a televised advertisement and wrote critical evaluations, which were then subjected to content analysis. The researchers found that the experimental group of students, who took the media literacy course, was more likely to notice production features and to cite a need for disclaimers regarding the product, whereas the control group was more likely to point out storyline. Van Bauwel (2008) followed a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine the role of audiovisual material in language construction and to gain an appreciation for how children construct meaning from media. In this study, attempting to make learning authentic and meaningful through an art educational product stimulated motivation to look critically at different media.

The Hobbs and Frost (2003) study also measured the difference in specific skills and abilities between students who took a media literacy class and those who did not. High school students who had taken a media/communication course for a year ended up being more media literate than those who had not, and abilities that improved included identifying key points of a news message such as purpose, target audience, point of view, construction techniques, and omitted information.

What is lacking in studies like these, however, is a specific focus on different media message formats (e.g., ads versus publicity messages versus news) and the need to differentiate between them, an essential skill in a converged media world full of increasingly sophisticated tactics for blurring the lines. The course used by Hobbs and Frost (2003) did involve multiple media formats,

including both news and advertisements, but the multi-part evaluation that provided the study’s results does not focus on students’ abilities to differentiate between them. Media literacy expands the concept of literacy to extend to all forms of media (NAMLE 2007), and it is this notion that motivates our study through the question(s): How do first-year college students interpret and evaluate three different types of media messages (an ad, a publicity message, and a news report)? Specifically, what baseline levels of literacy – assessed via responses to open-ended questions derived from modern conceptual understandings of media literacy – do college students exhibit, and how successful are they at evaluating the meaning and purpose of different types of media messages?

### **Method**

The theoretical basis for our approach comes from Strauss and Corbin’s *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990) and is rooted in grounded theory. Our overall aim was to explore how students understand three kinds of media messages and how those understandings compared (or did not compare) with the kinds of distinctions and evaluations media literacy educators consider important foundations of literacy.

We purposefully studied first-year college students not currently enrolled in formal media literacy education to locate contextual gaps in their baseline knowledge and understanding. Because these students had no specific college-level training in media literacy, our study was an analysis of what critical thinking skills they already possessed. We chose grounded theory to explore the students’ critical literacy, so that options would be limitless for what students perceive to be—for example, a message’s sender. We wanted the range of responses to be as broad as possible, and a qualitative method, including content analysis and the coding process, was conducive to this goal.

### *Procedures*

Data were collected from first-year college students who belonged to seven different learning communities, called Freshmen Interest Groups, at a large Midwestern university (N=99). Students in these groups are placed together based on their majors or other interests. In our study, students belonged to groups focusing on five areas: Accounting, Engineering, Discovering Science, Social Justice, and Civic Engagement. We purposefully avoided groups devoted to journalism or communication so that our sample would focus on

students not likely to have been exposed to specific media literacy education in college. This helps us to gauge baseline levels of typical first-year students. One researcher visited each group during its standard weekly meeting time and conducted a presentation. All of the sessions occurred in September and October, when most first-year students were just beginning to be exposed to college-level critical thinking lessons in their classes. We obtained IRB approval to conduct the study, and students were informed of their rights and signed a consent form at the beginning of the session. All student responses were anonymous. It was made clear that the activity was optional and not graded. Students were not required to turn in their written responses. Students were told that the videos would be discussed in a media literacy presentation that followed the collection of data. No other incentive was offered.

In each session, students watched a video and then answered open-ended questions on a printed handout; this process was repeated three times. The first video was a 30-second advertisement for Old Spice—one of the series of ads featuring “Old Spice Guy” Isaiah Mustafa. The second video was a public relations video produced by BP to show the company’s efforts to save animals following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Students watched the first two minutes of the video—which included interviews with a wildlife manager and a representative of BP—but the company is not explicitly identified as the sender of the message. The third video was a news broadcast from NBC Nightly News reporting on government errors in data gathering related to the oil spill in the Gulf. Web links to the videos can be found in Appendix A.

These three videos were selected to stimulate discussion about the different types of messages. There are a number of potential ways to approach this exercise. We could have chosen a BP advertisement to make all three messages relate to the oil spill, or we could have selected messages related to drastically different topics to avoid confounding effects. The messages could have avoided political issues to eliminate unwanted effects due to emotions and preferences. Ultimately, we chose these messages because they were distinctly different, relatively topical, and could be easily understood and discussed by students. The Old Spice ad made for an entertaining and engaging start to the exercise, which doubled as a media literacy training session following the collection of data. The BP publicity video was chosen for its mix of topicality and ambiguity; we wanted to see how students approached a message with

an intentionally unclear sender and purpose. The NBC report, on the other hand, was clearly labeled, readily identifiable and had a less ambiguous purpose; it provided a clear contrast to the BP video. The discussion that followed the collection of data was based on the Center for Media Literacy’s Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions (Thoman and Jolls 2008) and was conducted after the qualitative responses had been collected.

The open-ended questions were taken from Arke and Primack’s (2009) conceptual model of media literacy, which used a framework built on definitions by Aufderheide and Firestone (1993) and the National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE 2007). This model also builds on the general taxonomy of learning developed by Bloom, Hastings, and Madaus (1971). The model consists of five domains: recall, purpose, viewpoint, technique and evaluation.

### *Coding*

We coded the responses to five questions:

1. In a sentence or two, summarize the message of the video.
2. What is the purpose of this message?
3. Who is the sender of the message?
4. What points of view may be missing from the message?
5. What attitudes or feelings are you left with afterwards?

Data from the ninety-nine questionnaires were analyzed on a question-by-question basis by two researchers to establish categories of answers for each. Rather than quantitatively scoring participant responses as Arke and Primack (2009) did, we conducted an iterative process of open coding following a grounded theory approach. This task embodied grounded theory’s open coding phase, which is comprised of two procedures: the asking of questions and the making of comparisons (Strauss and Corbin 1990). In order to label phenomena, researchers asked, “What broad concept is the student implying with this answer?” After answer categories were developed, the process of making comparisons was used whenever answers appeared to either fit into multiple categories or imply new ideas. The researchers opted toward using more categories, rather than restricting the number, so that they could be grouped in the later step of selective coding. Through selection coding, we then grouped the responses into meaningful categories, which we described as “orientations” to certain modes of

thinking. The orientations were meant to highlight the different types of meanings students constructed when responding to our questions. Three outside scholars also reviewed the categories and their labels to help establish consensus.

### Findings

Tables 1 through 3 show the breakdown of categories and the different “orientations” we identified in the students’ responses. Each of these tables and categories are described in detail below. Note that the numbers can be viewed as raw data and as percentages, as our sample size was ninety-nine.

#### *Video 1: Old Spice Television Commercial*

Table 1 describes responses to questions about the Old Spice commercial.

*Message Summary.* Question 1a asked students to summarize the message of the Old Spice commercial. The largest set of subjects (thirty-three) was categorized as the “Outcome Orientation,” which consisted of

answers referring to what will happen to someone who uses Old Spice products. Sample responses included: “If you use Old Spice, you will smell like a good-looking person,” and, “If you smell like Old Spice, your lady will be more attracted to you.” The “Masculine Orientation” category focused on “manliness” and included twenty responses. Participants said: “Real men use Old Spice,” and, “Old Spice is what a man should smell like.” “Brand Orientation” was the third most populous category with nineteen responses, which noted that the message of the video was centered on sales. Examples included: “Trying to sell Old Spice body wash,” and, “Was a promotion for Old Spice.” These students were able to assess the origin of the message as an advertisement and correctly summarize the underlying message. Finally, others (sixteen) fell under the “Your Man Orientation” that centered on advertising the product to the partners of the male individuals using the soap. Responses included: “If your man uses Old Spice, he will give you whatever you want,” and, “Your man can smell like a man if he uses Old Spice.”

**Table 1.** Advertisement: Old Spice Commercial

| Question   | Orientation                   | Number of students in each orientation |
|--|-------------------------------|--|
| 1a. “In a sentence or two, summarize the message of this video.” | Your Man Orientation          | 16                                     |
|  | Brand Orientation             | 19                                     |
|  | Outcome Orientation           | 33                                     |
|  | Masculine Orientation         | 20                                     |
| 1b. “What is the purpose of this message?”                       | Sales Orientation             | 84                                     |
|  | Intended Message Orientation  | 5                                      |
| 1c. “Who is the sender of the message?”                          | Brand Orientation             | 49                                     |
|  | Actor Orientation             | 29                                     |
|  | Combined Orientation          | 10                                     |
| 1d. “What points of view may be missing from the message?”       | Female Orientation            | 25                                     |
|  | Disliking Product Orientation | 36                                     |
|  | Fact Orientation              | 9                                      |
|  | Complete Orientation          | 2                                      |
| 1e. “What attitudes or feelings are you left with afterwards?”   | Entertainment Orientation     | 35                                     |
|  | Consumer Orientation          | 26                                     |
|  | Curiosity Orientation         | 4                                      |
|  | Normative Orientation         | 7                                      |
|  | Negative Orientation          | 7                                      |

*Purpose.* Question 1b shows responses to the question of the ad's purpose. Students caught onto the advertising pitch, as almost all of them (eighty-four) fell into the "Sales Orientation" category saying, "Get you to buy Old Spice," and, "To buy Old Spice." Most of these answers were very direct, and participants often said close to exactly the same thing. Those who did not note the advertising element were placed into "Intended Message Orientation" (five) because they saw the purpose as something that mirrored the message. Examples included: "You need to smell good or you won't be attractive," and, "Old Spice makes you a sexy man." These responses failed to separate purpose from message.

*Sender.* Question 1c asked about the sender of the message. The "Brand Orientation" category (forty-nine) referred to the Old Spice Company as a corporation using answers such as "Old Spice," and, "Body wash company." Other participants (twenty-nine) fell under the "Actor Orientation" group, which focused on the actor who appeared in the commercial. Students indicated that the sender was "[t]he guy in the video," and, "[a] black very attractive man." These indicate that they believe the actor is indeed sending this message because he is the one speaking on the screen. Some students ended up straddling both answers. We placed them in our "Combined Orientation" category (ten), in which the answers showed both of the previous responses. Students said things like "The man and Old Spice," and, "The company who [sic] made the commercial and the actor." These students believed the sender could include multiple parties in the message creation process.

*Missing Points of View.* Question 1d asked, "What points of view may be missing from the message?" The largest group of responses (thirty-six) fell into the category we called "Disliking Product Orientation" because they indicated that "Old Spice may be no good," or, "Not everyone likes the smell of Old Spice, and body soap doesn't change who someone is." The second largest category (twenty-five) was the "Female Orientation," which regarded women as the missing viewpoint in this ad. Some students merely wrote "Women" as their answer, while others expanded: "The women's real point of view on the body wash; it's just what the man thinks the women would want." A few outliers fell into the category of "Fact Orientation" (nine) and suggested that viewers would want actual facts about the product. Participants wrote, "Information about the product," and, "What the product actually

benefits." Finally, a couple (two) believed that there were not any missing points of view and they fell into the "Complete Orientation" category.

*Attitudes or Feelings.* Question 1e asked, "What attitudes or feelings are you left with afterwards?" The top category (thirty-five) was "Entertainment Orientation," in which responses focused on humor, happiness, and entertainment. Some examples included: "Clever and funny," and, "I was entertained." Responses that were focused on the advertising aspect of the product fell into the "Consumer Orientation" category (twenty-six). Examples included: "I have to go out and buy this," and, "Old Spice smells good." These answers generally avoided actual attitudes or feelings, but rather leaned more toward the message the advertisers were trying to send. The final three categories had small numbers compared to the previous two, but they were important to note. Some participants (seven) felt that the commercial was telling them how to be a man, placing them in the "Normative Orientation." Students wrote, "That using Old Spice makes you more of a man," and, "That if you want these things in a man, you need to buy your spouse Old Spice. Or if you are a guy, you need to buy this to be like the man in the video." These differ from the "Consumer Orientation" category responses because they set standards for men as opposed to just telling them to buy the product. There were some answers (seven) that were placed in the "Negative Orientation" category because they had feelings they described as "Annoyed," or, "That was weird." Finally, some participants (four) wanted more and fell under the "Curiosity Orientation" category with responses like "Want to know what he smells like," and simply, "Curiosity."

Overall, students correctly identified the primary purpose of the Old Spice message but lacked a nuanced understanding of the sender, alternative points of view and even the message itself. Later in the session, many students indicated that they had seen the ad before, which could have contributed to these preconceived understandings.

### *Video 2: BP Promotional Video*

Table 2 shows categories of responses to the BP promotional video.

*Message Summary.* Most participants (seventy-three) indicated that the message of the video had to do with saving, helping, and then releasing the pelicans after the oil spill. The category, labeled as "Rescue/Release Orientation," included the following responses:

“Some birds in Louisiana were negatively affected by an oil spill. They were rescued, cleaned up, cared for, and eventually released back into the wild,” and, “That birds were saved from the oil spill.” Some individuals (eight) fell under the category “PR Orientation,” in which responses included: “BP cares about pelicans and is taking responsibility for clean up after the spill,” and, “BP is trying to show that they are making progress getting oil-covered animals back into the wild.” While these mention the animals, respondents in this category believe the main message is about BP and correctly identified the sender of the message. In the “Negligible Impact Orientation” category, a few skeptical students (three) wrote that “Pelicans can survive in the wild,” and, “Not all areas were necessarily affected by the oil spill. There are many places where wildlife can still flourish.” Some participants (eight) felt that the message was focused on the impact this spill had on the animals directly. They were placed in the “Impact Orientation” category because their answers focused

**Table 2.** PR Message: BP Pelican Release Video

| Question   | Orientation                          | Number of students in each orientation |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| 2a. “In a sentence or two, summarize the message of this video.” | Rescue/Release Orientation           | 73                                     |
|  | PR Orientation                       | 8                                      |
|  | Negligible Impact Orientation        | 3                                      |
|  | Impact Orientation                   | 8                                      |
|  | Wildlife Orientation                 | 4                                      |
| 2b. “What is the purpose of this message?”                       | Information/Education Orientation    | 73                                     |
|  | PR Orientation                       | 8                                      |
|  | Action Orientation                   | 9                                      |
|  | Progress Orientation                 | 5                                      |
| 2c. “Who is the sender of the message?”                          | Environmental Specialist Orientation | 42                                     |
|  | Individuals Orientation              | 23                                     |
|  | Government Orientation               | 9                                      |
|  | Corporation Orientation              | 19                                     |
|  | News Orientation                     | 3                                      |
| 2d. “What points of view may be missing from the message?”       | Opposition Orientation               | 15                                     |
|  | Animal Orientation                   | 10                                     |
|  | Corporation Orientation              | 10                                     |
|  | Community Orientation                | 11                                     |
|  | Complete Orientation                 | 2                                      |
|  | Government Orientation               | 2                                      |
|  | Questioning Orientation              | 14                                     |
|  | Science Orientation                  | 2                                      |
| 2e. “What attitudes or feelings are you left with afterwards?”   | Positive/Happy Orientation           | 49                                     |
|  | Negative/Sad Orientation             | 14                                     |
|  | Indifferent Orientation              | 14                                     |
|  | Action Orientation                   | 7                                      |
|  | Informed Orientation                 | 5                                      |
|  | Curiosity Orientation                | 2                                      |

on the birds only. Examples included: "Talk about how oil spill affected brown pelicans," and, "The point was to show hardships pelicans had to go through." Finally, there is "Wildlife Orientation" that contains responses (four) that center on the birds depicted in the video rather than the intended publicity message. Responses included: "To protect your wildlife and respect it," and, "The message was to help out wildlife."

*Purpose.* Question 2b asked about purpose. The vast majority of responses (seventy-three) fell into the "Information/Education Orientation," which focused on a fact-based design intended to improve the knowledge of the viewer. Students wrote: "To make the viewer more knowledgeable about what happens to pelicans when they are oiled," and, "Educate viewers about the success of a conservation effort." Some participants (eight) believed that this was a pitch for BP and were categorized as the "PR Orientation." These students wrote: "To show the good things BP is doing in response to the oil spill," and, "Clean up BP's image after the spill." The "Action Orientation" category (nine) refers to responses indicating that the video wanted viewers to get involved or take action in some way. Examples included: "One should aid in the rehabilitation of birds affected by the oil spill," and, "Save the pelicans." Finally, the "Progress Orientation" (five) focused on the answers that had to do with hope and the reassurance that things are improving. Participants responded: "To try and convince people that things are getting better," and, "To instill hope in the people and to show progress."

*Sender.* Question 2c asked about the sender of the message. Many responses (forty-two) fell into the "Environmental Specialist Orientation," which included any environmental or wildlife experts and workers. Responses included: "Professionals in the area of pelicans," and, "Wildlife organizations." The second highest number of participants (twenty-three) was in the "Individuals Orientation" category, which consisted of those who thought the sender was a specific rescuer or someone speaking in the video. These students said, "The people who saved and took care of the birds," and, "Two different specialists via interviews." In addition, some students (nine) thought that the government was sending this message and belonged to the "Government Orientation" category. These students explained the sender as "State government" and "Wildlife Conservation of Louisiana." Only nineteen students correctly identified BP as the sender or the message. This "Corporation Orientation" consisted of responses such

as: "BP higher ups," and, "The two speakers who were associated with BP." Finally, a few students (three) assumed the sender to be a news outlet. The "News Orientation" category included responses such as "News Channel," and, "The sender is probably the news." It is somewhat surprising that more students did not fall into this category, as the video makes use of the common techniques of the broadcast news feature story.

*Missing Points of View.* Question 2d asked students to identify missing points of view. This question received the widest variety of responses, suggesting that students were collectively able to consider many possible alternative viewpoints. But individually, most students produced responses that fit into a single category. The "Opposition Orientation" category included fifteen responses focused on a general opposing viewpoint without specifically indicating what that may be. For instance, students said, "Those opposing the group," and, "Those who think saving the pelicans is a bad idea. Those opposed to releasing them in this particular spot." A fair number of participants (ten) indicated that the birds' view was not being shown. These responses were grouped into the "Animal Orientation" category. Students in this category simply said, "The birds," or, "The pelicans' point of view." An equal number of participants (ten) fell under the "Corporation Orientation." Responses included: "The Oil Company," or, "The people who spilled the oil." In reality, this is the point of view that is actually represented in the message. The community's point of view was missing according to some students (eleven), who were placed in the "Community Orientation" section. Responses included: "People in the community surrounding birds," and, "Points of view from citizens that live in the area." Quite a few students (fourteen) wanted more information and fell into the "Questioning Orientation." Students wrote: "The facts about how many birds were affected or helped," and, "If the pelicans will have long-term effects." Two students thought that there were no viewpoints missing (the "Complete Orientation" category). Two other students indicated that they wanted more scientific research, placing them in "Science Orientation." Their answers included: "Scientists," and, "Any scientific messages of what is best for the birds and how the ecosystem is going to be affected after the birds relocated." Finally, two students called for "The government's" perspective and were placed in the "Government Orientation."

*Attitudes or Feelings.* Question 2e asked about attitudes and feelings. Half of students (forty-nine) fell



into the “Positive/Happy Orientation” category with answers that are often associated with positive feelings. For instance, students said: “Happiness for birds (optimism for future),” and, “They helped the pelicans of the Gulf in a great way.” Most people expressed feelings of relief or joy at seeing the birds being saved. Another group of participants (fourteen) expressed more remorse for the animals and fell into the “Negative Orientation” category with answers such as: “Feeling sorry for the birds,” and, “Awe, poor pelican population of Louisiana.” An equal number of students (fourteen) were placed in the “Indifferent Orientation” category. Responses included: “I don’t care about this very much,” and, “I thought it was kind of boring and it didn’t have much of an impact on me.” A handful of other participants (seven) answered that they felt motivated or encouraged to do something about this problem and were placed in the “Action Orientation” category. Their answers included: “I want to help the wildlife; kind of sad,” and, “A desire to help the animals and work with them.” A few students (five) felt that they were equipped with sufficient knowledge at this point regarding the problem. This “Informed Orientation” category of responses included: “The pelicans survived,” and, “That the birds needed help and then they got it.” These answers focused on a summary. Finally, two students in the “Curiosity Orientation” category wondered what else they could learn. They responded: “I am interested to find out more about these pelicans,” and, “I wonder what’s going to happen with the pelicans.”

The BP publicity video seemed to produce a great deal more confusion and conflict among students than the Old Spice commercial. Most students were not able to correctly identify the sender or the purpose of the message. Even the message itself proved difficult for students to identify beyond the most obvious, superficial understanding.

### *Video 3: NBC News Report*

Table 3 refers to responses related to the NBC news video about the Gulf oil spill.

*Message Summary.* Question 3a asked students to summarize the message. Most students said the message was that the government had done something wrong; we placed them (seventy-three) in the “Government Inadequacy Orientation” category. Sample responses included: “This video is saying the government is at fault for misleading the public about how much oil was released during BP’s oil spill,” and, “Obama

administration screwed up oil spill situation.” Other students (eighteen) interpreted the message in a more general way and were placed in the “Summary Orientation” category. Responses included: “It describes what happened during the BP oil spill and how it affects the USA,” and, “A summary of the oil Gulf disasters.” Finally, two participants that fell into the “Critical/Incorrect Orientation.” They wrote: “That the Gulf spill was caused by the Obama administration,” and, “BP blows.”

*Purpose.* Question 3b asked about the purpose of the message. Half of students (forty-nine) said that the purpose was to show how the government was at fault. For this “Government Inadequacy Orientation” category, sample responses included: “The oil spill is worse than the government wants us to believe,” and, “Blame Obama.” Another category labeled as “Information Orientation” had a large number of answers (thirty-five), such as: “To report the condition of the spill,” and, “To provide information to the American public.” A few students (four) seemed to see the purpose as focused on showing both sides of the story. These answers fell in the “Balance Orientation” category: “The purpose of this message is to alert you to both sides,” and, “To explain exactly what the real story of the oil spill is vs. the government’s story.” Three students fell into a “Conflict Orientation” category with answers such as: “To present biased information that may or may not be true about the Obama administration’s attitude and relief efforts towards the BP spill,” and, “For someone to whine that perhaps the Obama administration didn’t have an exact figure of how much oil was there, even though the public knew it was A LOT, apparently we needed to know exactly how much.” Finally, a single student (“Promote NBC Orientation”) suggested that even news pieces have a promotional aim and wrote: “To promote its fact finding task, so that NBC can be thought of as investigative journalists.”

*Sender.* Question 3c about the sender of the message saw a large number of students (fifty-seven) fall into the “News Outlet Orientation” category. Students wrote: “NBC,” or, “NBC Nightly News.” In addition, there were a fair number of students (thirteen) who were more general with their answers and fell into the “General Media Orientation” category. These students said things like “Media” or “News” to describe the sender. A group of students (twelve) took the sender to be the actual person working on the story. This “Reporter Orientation” category included answers such as: “News anchors,” and, “The reporter.” Finally, a handful of participants (eight) believed the sender was one

or more of the sources who appeared in the news story. This “Source Orientation” category included such responses as “Government Panel,” and, “Scientists and researchers.”

*Missing Points of View.* Responses to Question 3d about missing points of view highlighted a desire for balance. A majority of students (sixty-four) said that they wanted to hear the government’s voice in this news clip. In this “Government Orientation,” students indicated generally “The White House,” or more specifically, “Obama’s personal statement/final word.” The “Source Orientation” category included fourteen responses, such as: “Those of BP, others involved in gathering data,” and, “BP’s, Obama’s, other reports.” Four students in the “Community Orientation” category

wanted to hear from other stakeholders in this issue. These participants’ responses included: “The unbiased opinions of everyone else,” and, “How much information did they choose among how much context in which scientists opinions were squelched.”

*Attitudes or Feelings.* Question 3e highlighted attitudes or feelings after watching the video. Half of students (forty-nine) fell into the “Critical/Negative Orientation” category, which deals mainly with the views of the government. These individuals said, “Questioning the legitimacy of the government,” and, “Negative opinion of the U.S. government.” Other students (seventeen) fell into the “Angry/Sad Orientation” category, with responses such as: “Disgust, shock, pity,” and, “Anger, disappointment.” A group of students (ten)

**Table 3.** News Message: NBC News Oil Spill Video

| Question   | Orientation                       | Number of students in each orientation |
|--|-----------------------------------|--|
| 3a. “In a sentence or two, summarize the message of this video.” | Government Inadequacy Orientation | 73                                     |
|  | Summary Orientation               | 18                                     |
|  | Critical/Incorrect Orientation    | 2                                      |
| 3b. “What is the purpose of this message?”                       | Government Inadequacy Orientation | 49                                     |
|  | Information Orientation           | 35                                     |
|  | Balance Orientation               | 4                                      |
|  | Conflict Orientation              | 3                                      |
|  | Confusion Orientation             | 1                                      |
|  | Promote NBC Orientation           | 1                                      |
| 3c. “Who is the sender of the message?”                          | News Outlet Orientation           | 57                                     |
|  | General Media Orientation         | 13                                     |
|  | Source Orientation                | 8                                      |
|  | Reporter Orientation              | 12                                     |
| 3d. “What points of view may be missing from the message?”       | Government Orientation            | 64                                     |
|  | Community Orientation             | 4                                      |
|  | Source Orientation                | 14                                     |
|  | Conservative Media Orientation    | 1                                      |
| 3e. “What attitudes or feelings are you left with afterwards?”   | Critical/Negative Orientation     | 49                                     |
|  | Angry/Sad Orientation             | 17                                     |
|  | Confused Orientation              | 10                                     |
|  | Informed Orientation              | 3                                      |
|  | Indifferent Orientation           | 5                                      |
|  | Bias Orientation                  | 5                                      |

indicated their sense of confusion after seeing this video. In this “Confusion Orientation,” responses included: “Confused; want to know what really happened and want it cleaned out,” and, “Confused, I want more information on the topic.” Three students felt “informed,” and five students expressed their “indifference.” Finally, five students created a “Bias Orientation” category and wrote: “News is biased,” or, “I feel like they need to get all sides before they start bashing someone. It seemed like they didn’t have all the facts.”

The NBC News report was easy to identify, but only a few students went beyond the obvious and identified sources and reporters among the senders of the message. None of the respondents mentioned NBC’s corporate owners. As with the BP publicity video, students identified a range of purposes and missing points of view that collectively reflects a reasonable degree of literacy. But individually, students had a limited view of the message, its purpose and its meaning.

In general, we found that undergraduate students from a variety of campus learning communities were poorly versed in analyzing and understanding a variety of media messages. Students had an especially difficult time articulating the purpose, message and sender of the BP publicity video and the NBC news report. In most cases, student responses focused on the most superficial components of media messages and did not reflect a deep understanding of the purpose of media messages or an ability to critically analyze them. Our findings suggest that these students see the world of media messages as simple and straightforward and to be taken at face value. Students seemed confident that these messages had clear primary meanings and senders that could be easily identified. Students almost never expressed uncertainty, raised questions, left items blank, or said they did not know. They seemed more interested in providing a single “correct” answer than in acknowledging the complicated reality of these corporate and commercial media messages.

### Conclusion

Our study follows previous research in the field of media literacy that aims to identify gaps in students’ knowledge and skills related to media message evaluation and analysis. But rather than attempting to illustrate the effectiveness of media literacy education based on scholars’ or educators’ prescribed treatments, we simply sought to gather baseline qualitative data that would offer insights into how students see the world of media messages and how they construct meaning from it. Our

hope is that these insights will help educators and scholars better craft and tailor media education programs and curricula. In general, we conclude that literacy programs should aim to complicate students’ media realities by providing information and asking questions that facilitate critical thought rather than merely seeking clear answers. More specifically, educators should explore and identify different types of media messages and help students highlight the multiplicity of senders, purposes, and meanings behind each.

In our study, most students were able to identify the purpose of the advertisement, but had a harder time with videos created for public relations purposes or by a news organization. With the ad, students interpreted the message in a variety of ways and often thought the actor was the primary sender of the message. Student responses did not reflect an understanding of the role the actor played in the overall delivery of the message. While this is an unfortunate conclusion for media literacy educators, it may be what advertisers want. Overall, the ad was the video that most often left students with feelings of entertainment or amusement.

With regard to the PR video, most students indicated a summary message that had to do with rescuing and releasing the pelicans. For the most part, students indicated that they understood this video as a news story; they identified the purpose as education or information. They did not understand that BP was actually behind the video. This sheds light on the controversial use of video news releases and other types of videos that public relations companies produce, in that students are unable to recognize promotional material. Most students incorrectly thought that environmental specialists produced the BP video.

Students were quick to state that the message and purpose of the news story had to do with showing the inadequacy or mistakes of the government. They understood that a news outlet produced this message but did not indicate any deeper understanding of media ownership or control issues. Students responses to this video also were contradictory because they were abrupt to blame the news outlet for showing the government in a negative light, yet the majority of students was left with feelings that were critical of the government or otherwise negative.

Students were able to identify a variety of missing points of view in all three videos, which could relate to the proliferation of talk about bias, fairness, and balance in today’s media culture. This could be a boon to critical thinking and a starting point for media educa-

tors. At the same time, this could also speak to a preference for conflict and the taking of “sides” in media messages as opposed to a preference for nuanced information and rational debate about complex issues. Educators should work to tease out this problem as a way to challenge the intended meanings of media messages.

Future research in this area could employ in-depth interviews or focus groups with participants to gain a richer understanding of their interpretations of media messages. In our study, for example, some participants indicated more than one answer for questions and others did not expand on their responses. In addition, responses indicated students understood more about advertising tactics than they did about news and public relations. Perhaps in-depth interviews could uncover more about participants’ educational backgrounds and experiences that might explain their advertising savvy relative to other kinds of messages.

Hobbs and Jensen (2009) wrote, “To be truly literate means being able to use the dominant symbol systems of the culture for personal, aesthetic, cultural, social, and political goals” (4-5). The findings presented here suggest that young people may not possess the interpretive skills necessary to use media for such goal attainment. Education efforts should continue to aim at helping students see beyond the surface of media messages and to understand the contexts in which those messages are created, especially as the number and variety of messages and message senders continues to grow. In this context, students also need self-awareness of how they as individuals and also as members of various communities make sense of mediated messages.

**Appendix A: Videos**

## 1. Old Spice commercial

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owGykVbfgUE>

## 2. BP publicity video (first two minutes)

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npA\\_\\_q1L-K6U&feature=player\\_embedded#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npA__q1L-K6U&feature=player_embedded#!)

## 3. NBC news report

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032619/vp/38807618#39546095>

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