

Political Messages: Getting Students Thinking Critically about Creators' Purpose



By Jacquelyn Whiting

On an early morning run I listened to the first episode of the Michelle Obama podcast, and she remarked that the government doesn't come with a marketing budget. Here's the excerpt:

First Lady Michelle Obama: "I always joke, and I've always said one of the challenges of being president...Like you don't have a marketing budget, you know?"

President Barack Obama: "Yeah."

First Lady Michelle Obama: "There's really no structure to market government, right?"

President Barack Obama: "Right."

First Lady Michelle Obama: "The average young person knows far more about the cereal they're eating and the car they are driving than they do about what government actually does for them because they don't have marketing budgets. There isn't a jingle..."

In a [recent essay](#), NoodleTools co-founder Debbie Abilock notes, "While they appear to be neutral, government sources always reflect the current administration's priorities. [...] Archives are 'spaces of power.' The selection process — what is included or excluded — inevitably distorts and silences some stories." So even if the government had a marketing wing, would it just become a partisan echo chamber?

All of this got me thinking about a unit I designed several years ago for my American government classes in response to hearing a news story about big advertising agencies being challenged by *Harper's Magazine* to re-brand the American Government. This was back in 2011. NPR's Robert Seigel [interviewed](#) Thomas Frank from *Harper's*, and here is how Frank explained their premise: "One of the criticisms of Washington that you hear all the time is that if only the federal government was run more like a business, then it wouldn't be so awful and so dreadful. Well, we thought about it. One of the things that the federal government would do if it was run by, like a business, is it would advertise. It wouldn't let its brand get run down in the way that — I mean, the federal government is uniquely unpopular."

So, my students also took up this challenge. We examined what branding looks like on the consumer end using the "Get a Mac" ads ([those "I'm a Mac—I'm a PC" ads with John Hodgman and Justin Long](#)). Then we considered why and how rebranding happened with the ["Born of Fire/Imported from Detroit" Chrysler campaign](#) about Detroit, Michigan, and featuring Eminem and Clint Eastwood. We used these questions to unpack the media we were watching:



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- Who is the audience?
- What behavior is the ad trying to prompt? (What do they want the viewer to do?)
- What attitude are they trying to change or create? (What do they want the viewer to believe?)
- What do they want the viewer to repeat to other people? (What's the tag line?)
- What is the overall message?

At the same time, we paid close attention to the spokespeople, their setting and attire, and the soundtrack. Finally, the students made their own Super Bowl ads re-branding the government, and we posted them to our class YouTube account hoping they would go viral.

Media literacy consultant Frank W. Baker also [explored advertising with his students](#) with special attention to political ads. As he says, "Many of us are exposed to commercials, but not many of us, our students included, are media literate enough to understand the production process or how advertising influences us. [...] We've all seen the campaign ads on television, and now on the Web. Teachers have more opportunity than ever to engage students in understanding the techniques of persuasion as well as techniques of production."

Immersed as we are in another epic political season coupled with a pandemic and widespread social justice activism, I frequently remind myself that **media is content created for a purpose**. As the willing or unwitting consumer of that media, I also remind myself to hit the pause button and check my emotions when engaging in reports and posts about provocative issues and events. And, with the politicization of the pandemic, the irony is not lost on me that we use the term viral to describe the popularity of social media content.

I hear echoes of the Cambridge Analytica scandal in discussions of the role of social media platforms in monitoring and mediating the content of posts on their platforms. The Netflix documentary [The Great Hack](#) recounts the chilling battle between those reporting from within the bounds of journalistic ethics and those casting aside such ethics in favor of acquiring money and power. Which prompts the questions: Who is creating the political messages you are encountering? How do they craft messages? What do they want you to do or say or believe or buy? And why? Finally, and maybe most importantly, how do they reach you through conscious and targeted marketing campaigns?

For insight into how media influencers organize and operate, I recommend Andrew Marantz's book *Antisocial: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation* (Penguin Books, 2020). In his consideration of meme culture and extremist influencers' use of social media, Marantz comments: "Many decisions about the spread of information were now made algorithmically. The algorithms were not designed to gauge whether an idea was true or false, prosocial or antisocial; they were designed to measure whether a meme was causing a spike of activating emotion in a large number of people" (p. 118). Ultimately, a goal of content creators is engagement. Any action—a like, dislike, share, or comment—is engagement and these all start with an emotional response.



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In his article "[Growing Up in a Misinformed World: Preparing to Engage with 21st-Century News by Reading Historic Newspapers](#)," Tom Bober describes guiding elementary students through a multi-step process which helped the students to see patterns in the language used in different sources. As they surveyed the groupings of words they identified and sorted, Tom prompted the students: "You have two groups here for your words, a group of things that you can visualize, you can see, and a group of words that are emotional words, words that make you feel something. Let's push that a little further. [...] With your first list, what do you see in your mind when you look at these words? With your second list, what do you feel?"

The emotional responses provoked by the memes Marantz describes and the experiences of Bober's students explain the appeal of the Mac-PC ads to both die-hard Mac lovers and PC users. It is why we root for Detroit to make a comeback when we watch the Eminem or Clint Eastwood rebranding ads even if we don't like the spokespeople and have never been to the city. It's hard to imagine a nonpartisan wing of the federal government able to craft and deliver a message about what the government is doing and why it matters without it being drowned out or irreparably maligned by those who hijacked, to use Marantz's word, the democratic Internet.

And so it falls to us as educators to help ourselves and our students to inoculate ourselves against the tantalizing influence of fringe extremists, to check our emotions and serve as an antidote to the viral spread of media toxicity, because, there doesn't seem to be a disinformation vaccine in our near future.

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