

HELPING STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THE  
WAR IN IRAQ AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

# WMD TEACHERS' GUIDE

TEACHING WITH THE FILM  
WMD (WEAPONS OF MASS DECEPTION)

**DIRECTED BY DANNY SCHECHTER**

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December 1, 2004

**FOR MORE ON THE MOVIE, VISIT: [WWW.WMDTHEFILM.COM](http://WWW.WMDTHEFILM.COM)**

WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception:  
Inside the Media War You Never Saw  
Directed by Danny Schechter  
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This guide is intended to provide secondary teachers and college faculty with lessons and approaches for using Danny Schechter's film, *Weapons of Mass Deception (WMD)*, in the classroom. These lessons structure class viewing and discussion to facilitate critical analysis of some of the issues raised in the film and critical decoding of the construction of this documentary.

All media have biases and this film is no exception. To develop fully literate citizens, contemporary educators must train students to ask critical questions about all media constructions, including those we use in our classrooms.

The teachers' guide has been constructed by Project Look Sharp, whose mission is to integrate media literacy and critical thinking throughout the K-12 curriculum. For more information about Project Look Sharp and media literacy integration go to our web site: [[www.ithaca.edu/looksharp](http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp)].

Few educators have the opportunity to show a full ninety-eight-minute documentary in class. The following lessons use short clips from the DVD to teach some of the core content covered in the documentary and train students in critical decoding skills. Each of the lessons follows a similar format, beginning with *Background Information* intended to be communicated to the students before playing the DVD clip, and followed by a prompt for the teacher to *play the segment*. *Questions* and *Suggested Answers* follow and include evidence from the segment to substantiate that answer.

A range of answers is acceptable for most of the questions, although it is important that students give evidence from the documentary to explain and support their conclusions. *Further Questions* are typically more open-ended and can lead to broader concepts and discussions not specific to the information in that document. To prepare your class for discussion, you may also want to show the first four minutes and twenty seconds of the film *Apocalypse Now*, by Francis Ford Coppola, a film that *WMD* references visually, aurally, and textually.

## Lesson #1: Authorship and Purpose

### Background Information:

All media constructions, be they TV news programs, web sites, video games or documentary films, are created by people and sponsored (paid for) by individuals or organizations (often corporations, foundations, or governments). Each media construction is produced for a particular purpose, typically education, persuasion, profit and/or expression. And the producers have a particular point of view, a bias that influences what and how they create. When you use a media construction, it is important to know who produced and sponsored it and why. As you watch the introduction to the documentary film *WMD*, think about who created and who sponsored this film and for what purpose. Think also about how the film is put together. A number of the beginning scenes refer to Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*. This film is set during the Vietnam War, but *Apocalypse Now* refers back to another work: the Joseph Conrad novel *Heart of Darkness*. Often media constructions are self-referential.

### **Play Introductory Segment (length: 6.5 minutes)**

Question: Who made and sponsored this film? How do you know?

Suggested Answer: The film was produced by something called Globalvision and directed by Danny Schechter, the narrator. It seems like his personal film. We don't know who paid for the film's production.

Evidence: The title credit says "A Globalvision Production Directed by Danny Schechter." Schechter's narrative and the title "a personal film" suggest that the film will reflect his personal perspective on media and the war in Iraq.

Question: What are some references in the opening scenes of this film to the film *Apocalypse Now*?

Suggested Answer:

- Use of the Doors' Song "The End."
- Narrators are both shown sleeping fitfully, then opening their eyes.
- Ceiling fans.
- Helicopters and scenes of fire and bombings.
- Use of the heading: "Read my Apoca-lips."
- Schechter's statement: "You don't have to go to the jungle anymore to find the horror."

NOTE: Danny Schechter is a journalist turned media critic. He has produced and directed several television shows and documentaries as well as written for many reputable newspapers, magazines, and journals. He received his Bachelor's Degree from Cornell University, Master's Degree from the London School of Economics, and an Honorary Ph.D. from Fitchburg College. He is the author of such books as *The More You Watch the Less You Know*, *Media Wars: News After 9-11*, and *Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception*. He is also the executive editor of Mediachannel.org; the world's largest on-line media issues network.

Question: How would you find out who paid for the film's production?

Suggested Answer: Funding sources are usually listed in the opening credits as well as closing credits (under "produced by").

NOTE: Many different individuals funded this film. To find the complete list, view the credits at the end of the film.

Question: What do you suspect is the purpose of this film: entertainment, education, persuasion, profit, or personal expression? What led you to that conclusion?

Suggested answers and evidence: (We can't really tell from the first segment, but there are some clues.)

- ❑ Expression: The introduction's focus on Danny Schechter, the director, makes it seem like a personal expression of his views. The fact that the beginning resembles another film points to its creative means of expression.
- ❑ Persuasion: The film clearly has a point of view given that Schechter makes strong statements such as, "I feel like I'm living through my own media apocalypse – under fire on the polluted river of TV news." Even the title, *Weapons of Mass Deception*, a pun on weapons of mass destruction, indicates Schechter's view that media coverage of the war was deceptive.
- ❑ Education: There is lots of information in the film; therefore, it seems to be trying to teach viewers about the media and the war.
- ❑ Entertainment: In referring to a major film and to a well-known novel, Schechter raises the issue of merging boundaries between creative film, art, and documentary film. *WMD* is fast-paced and action-packed, simulating the news coverage it also critiques. The information, however, makes it seem like it is focused on sending a message more than entertaining the audience.
- ❑ Profit: Schechter says he tried to raise donations and foundation grants to fund the film but was unsuccessful. He then invested his own money before seeking other investors with a limited partnership. Schechter is seeking to recoup the investment made in making the film.

Question: Based on this opening segment what do you think will be the main thesis of the film? What is your evidence?

TEACHER NOTE: Different answers will work as long as students can give evidence from the segment to back up their ideas.

Suggested Answer: The media uncritically and superficially covered the war in Iraq, supporting the Bush administration's positions rather than challenging the war. This not only illustrates poor journalism, but also may lead to a further breakdown in news reporting.

Lesson #2: Historical Context  
Background Information:

The government and the military learned important lessons from media coverage of the war in Vietnam in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, which they applied to the Persian Gulf War in 1991. What were those lessons and how did media coverage of Vietnam differ from media coverage of the Gulf War? What role did the attacks of September 11, 2001 have on media coverage? Think about those questions as we watch the next segment of the DVD, “The Past is Never Past.”

**Play Chapter 2 (6:36) “The Past is Never the Past” (length: 7:26)**

Question: According to the film, how was media coverage of the Gulf War of 1991 different from media coverage of the Vietnam War?

Suggested Answer: The media was critical of the War in Vietnam but more patriotic, pro-government and pro-war in 1991.

Evidence: Journalists were denied access to most of the 1991 Gulf War. The Pentagon hired media consultants for the Gulf War. The Pentagon held training exercises for members of the armed services on how to deal with journalists, including lessons on how to “brush them off.”

Question: List four things Schechter says did not get sufficient media coverage during and after the Gulf War of 1991.

Suggested Answer:

- ❑ Saddam Hussein’s historic ties to the U.S. government.
- ❑ Gulf War Syndrome that affected U.S. Veterans.
- ❑ The devastating effects of United Nations sanctions on innocent people in Iraq.
- ❑ The U.S. and British no-fly zones.

Question: According to Schechter, what impact did September 11 have on media coverage?

Suggested Answer: The media became very patriotic and supported the government line.

Evidence: Schechter quotes: “In post 9/11 America, a ‘patriotic correctness’ swept through the news business...many news networks said they didn’t want to get ahead of public opinion...” Dan Rather states: “I am willing to give the President and the military the benefit of the doubt.”

Further Questions: Should the news media always support the government during wartime? Is it appropriate or even patriotic for the media to be critical of the government, particularly during wartime?

NOTE: For lessons and multi-media materials contrasting media coverage of the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the War in Afghanistan see the curriculum kit *Media Construction of War: A Critical Reading of History* ([www.ithaca.edu/looksharp](http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp)).

### Lesson #3: Media and Dissent

#### Background Information:

Media has been called the fourth branch of government because of its historic role in questioning our nation's leaders and their policies. Although there was unprecedented protest against the impending war in Iraq before the U.S. invasion in March of 2003, many peace activists criticized media coverage of the protests. Identify those criticisms in this section titled "Muzzling Debate, Marginalizing Dissent."

#### **Play Chapter 4 (20:18): "Muzzling Debate, Marginalizing Dissent" (Length: 4:9)**

Question: Identify some of the criticisms of media coverage of the anti-war movement presented in the film.

#### Suggested Answers:

- ❑ The anti-war movement was often seen but rarely heard.
- ❑ Media was "Underreporting or poorly displaying...coverage of big demonstrations here and abroad" (Michael Getler, *Washington Post* Ombudsman).
- ❑ "The analysis [of why protests were occurring] never got into the mainstream media" (Leslie Cagan, Anti-War Organizer).
- ❑ Media refused to delve into the significance of the movement.

#### Further Questions:

Why do most U.S. leaders consider dissent to be patriotic?

Some politicians suggested that protests against the war should have stopped once our troops began fighting. Do you agree or disagree?

What is meant by the title for this section, "Muzzling Debate, Marginalizing Dissent"?

### Lesson #4: - Embedding the Media

#### Background Information:

During the Gulf War of 1991 the U.S. Military was successful in controlling journalists' access to the war zone. Media coverage of the Gulf War was much more reflective of government views than during the Vietnam War. But by 2003 it became evident that the U.S. Military was going to have a much more difficult time limiting access to the upcoming war in Iraq. Since the end of the Gulf War new Arab media outlets like al Jazeera had been established. New technologies made it easier to instantaneously beam war reports around the world. The U.S. Military needed a new strategy for influencing media coverage of the war in Iraq. In late 2002 the military announced that it would "embed" reporters within its forces as they invaded Iraq. The military claimed that embedding reporters would ensure that the truth about the war would be told without distortions. Danny Schechter and others claim that the embedding of media distorted coverage. As you watch the next segment, identify the ways in which embedding reporters with the troops influenced coverage.

#### **Play Chapter 6 (31:11): "Pentagon Media Management" (Length: 10:31)**

Question: According to the film, what impact did embedding media with U.S. forces have on media coverage of the war?

Suggested Answers:

- ❑ Embedded reporters gave a “limited and misleading picture” of the war.
- ❑ Iraq was defined as the problem and U.S. military intervention as the only solution.
- ❑ One of the basic ethical rules of journalism, to never accept anything of “material” value from a source, seems to have been broken, since the soldiers were responsible for the basic safety of the journalists.
- ❑ The units that did the most damage were the units covered the least.

### Lesson #5: “Militainment”

Background Information:

Journalism is defined as “direct presentation of facts or description of events without interpretation.” Entertainment is defined as “something diverting or engaging, usually light and often comic.”

#### **Play Chapter 7 (41:43): “News Business as Show Business” (Length: 7:7)**

Question: Describe Schechter’s critique of war coverage as “militainment.”

Suggested Answer: He thinks that very little of the war reports were actual journalism in pursuit of important truths about the war. Instead, many media outlets entertained viewers with high-tech graphics, and “glitzy round the clock fast-paced coverage that was often misleading, inaccurate and rarely corrected....”

Question: What, according to the film, is the difference between the U.S. and British media coverage of the war?

Suggested Answer: British journalist Gary Younge suggested that the U.S. media lacked journalistic distance through using the pronoun “we” in its coverage, as if it was the U.S. media that was at war with Iraq. John Kampfner said that U.S. coverage had a “presumption that politicians are right and honest and truthful.” Another British journalist said that reporters who used non-governmental sources opened themselves up to accusations of bias. U.S. media coverage was presented as uncritical and entertainment-oriented.

Question: What techniques did the film use during this segment to make its point that news coverage of the war had become more entertainment than journalism?

Suggested Answer: Repeating shots of bombs exploding; satirical music about television journalism; folk music (“It’s Operation Iraqi Liberation/Tellme what does that spell?/Operation Iraqi Liberation: O.I.L.”), and video game shots to emphasize militainment.

Further Questions:

It is often said about news coverage that “if it bleeds it leads.” What does this mean?

Should news be devoid of entertainment? Why or why not?

### Lesson 6: An Ironic Critique

**Play a segment from chapter 10 (1:11:11 to 1:12:17): “Post-War War” (Length: 7:7)Begin with: “We don’t do body counts” and end with “number of WMDs found: 0.”**

Question: What point is Schechter trying to make in this short vignette, and what techniques does he use to make it?

Suggested Answer: By listing the statistics about the human and material costs of war under shots of a memorial service, the film strongly suggests that the costs of the war were too high, particularly when the final text states that no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, the original reason for war. The slow tempo of the national anthem, the formal and dignified military dress of the troops, and the President’s somber demeanor all provide an ironic contrast to the following information: “Cost of the television coverage: \$35,000,000,000,” “Profits made on war coverage: unknown,” and “Number of WMD’s found, 0.”

Further Questions:

Was it appropriate for Schechter to use footage from a memorial service for this purpose? Why or why not?

### Lesson 7: Targeting Journalists?

Background Information:

In this next segment the filmmaker suggests that the U.S. Military intentionally targeted reporters. Be prepared to describe both the film’s specific accusation and its evidence.

**Play Chapter 12 (1:22:33): “Journalists Targeted?” (Length: 5:9)**

Question: What accusation does the film make against the U.S. Military in this segment?

Suggested Answer: Non-embedded reporters were not only mistakenly hit by friendly fire but also targeted intentionally.

Question: What evidence does the film use to back up this accusation?

Suggested Answers:

- ❑ Interviews with reporters, quotes from experts, footage of tank firing on Palestine Hotel with no provocation.
- ❑ “The BBC’s Kate Adie reported she was told by the Pentagon that independent journalists could be targeted” (Schechter).
- ❑ The Arab Media Center in Baghdad was bombed after their coordinates were given to the Pentagon.

Question: What techniques does the film use to make its point?



Suggested Answer: Shots zooming in on headlines such as ‘Journalist Dead’ in between shots of bombs exploding, bodies being taken away, and gruesome footage of wounded individuals.

Further Questions:

Is the use of bloody imagery and emotional content appropriate or essential in a documentary film about war? Is it appropriate in news journalism? How should the constructions of news broadcasts and documentary films be defined?

### Lesson 8: Media Consolidation

Background Information:

Twenty-five years ago more than 50 companies controlled the bulk of the world's media outlets. Today that number is six (Vivendi Universal, AOL Time Warner, Disney, News Corp, Viacom, and Bertelsmann). These huge mega-corporations have taken over smaller media companies and used their vast holdings to “cross promote” their products. For instance, *Time Magazine* ran a cover story on twisters the same week that Warner Brothers released its film *Twisters*. The magazine and the film were owned by the same parent company, Time/Warner. Could war coverage on NBC be influenced by its parent company, General Electric, the world’s largest arms manufacturer? Critics of consolidation feel that it has led to a trivialization of news coverage, as corporate profits have been valued above journalism. Many Americans on both the right and left are afraid that media consolidation will give too much control over what we think to an ever-shrinking number of huge corporations. As you watch this next segment, identify the critiques that Danny Schechter makes of media consolidation.

### **Play Chapter 13 (1:27:44): “Government Power and Corporate Control” (Length: 8:15)**

Question: What criticisms does the film level against media consolidation and what is your evidence?

Answer:

- There has been “a merger of news biz and show biz” (Schechter).
- The U.S. media marketed a war and the people bought it.
- “...American media is designed to sell things. It’s a commercial media; it’s a propaganda system...” (Sheldon Rampton).
- Media organizations went along with the administration because the administration pushed deregulation laws through Congress, and a consequence of this was more money for the media companies.
- There was no controversy and virtually no coverage in the media about the FCC’s new rules governing media conglomerates.

Further Questions:

How would you research opposing perspectives on media consolidation?

## Lesson 9: Evaluating Truth

### Background Information:

One definition of a documentary is “a work, such as a film or television program, presenting political, social, or historical subject matter in a factual and informative manner and often consisting of actual news films or interviews accompanied by narration” (Dictionary.com). Recently, documentary films have been gaining importance with the emergence of Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine*, which won an Oscar, and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which is the top-grossing documentary ever at the box office. It seems that ordinary citizens are starting to sit up and take notice of independent films about politics in a way they never had before. This could be in response to media consolidation and the watering down of important controversial issues in the mainstream media.

### **Play Chapter 14 (1:36:00): “Lessons Learned and What To Do” (Length: 5:8)**

QUESTION: List the main themes of the film *WMD* that are reviewed in this last segment of the film.

Answer:

- Mainstream media reflect the views of those in power.
- The media promoted the war in Iraq, downplayed the brutality, and presented government views uncritically.
- The media should be held accountable for their failure to adequately cover the war.
- True democracy requires citizens to be skeptical and critical of media coverage.

Question: What are the cinematic techniques that Schechter uses in this final section?

Answer: The documentary again refers to *Apocalypse Now* through its use of music, shot of a ceiling fan, and footage of the Vietnam War. It is a fast-paced collage of media images from war while Schechter narrates, interspersed with clips of interviews with journalists and media critics.

Question: How does one judge the credibility of information and find out the truth, particularly during a war?

Suggested Answer:

- Examine the bias and credibility of all media sources.
- Look for alternative sources on the same subject.
- Evaluate one’s own bias and point of view.
- Keep open to new information.

Further Questions:

What is meant by the saying, “truth is the first casualty of war”?  
Which of Schechter’s positions do you agree with and why?

Which of Schechter's positions do you disagree with and why?  
Is this film propaganda?  
Are all media constructions biased?  
How do we become educated users of media?

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**Project Look Sharp**, the author of this teacher's guide, is an initiative to promote and support the integration of media literacy into classroom curricula at all grade levels and instructional areas. Project Look Sharp is based at Ithaca College, works in collaboration with local school districts, New York State BOCES, the Alliance for a Media Literate America, and other national media literacy organizations.

### What is Media Literacy?

Project Look Sharp sees media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, critically evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of forms. Similar to traditional literacy and information literacy, media literacy involves critical thinking analytical skills, and the ability to express oneself in different ways. Being media literate also involves using media wisely and filtering information from different sources effectively.

PROJECT LOOK SHARP has created curriculum kits integrating critical thinking and media literacy into core subject areas including:

#### **Media Construction of War: A Critical Reading of History**

This kit, consisting of a teacher's guide, student handouts, CD-ROM, and video, provides teachers with the materials needed to engage students in a dynamic, interactive, and constructivist process of reading and interpreting history. Students will develop critical thinking skills while learning core historical information about the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the War in Afghanistan.

*"By asking provocative questions it...fosters independent thinking, which, after all, should be the chief objective of a good education."*

-Howard Zinn, Historian, social activist, and author



#### **Media Construction of Presidential Campaigns: A Document-Based History Kit**

This kit enables teachers to use the collective analysis of over 140 historic media documents to teach about the history of presidential elections, the power of communication technology, and the evolution of our democracy.

*"A brilliant teaching tool that empowers students to understand how our electoral system actually works in the era of big media. Very professional and engaging, this is media literacy at its very best, and should be mandatory in classrooms across the nation."*

-Robert W. McChesney, media critic, author, and research professor at University of Illinois

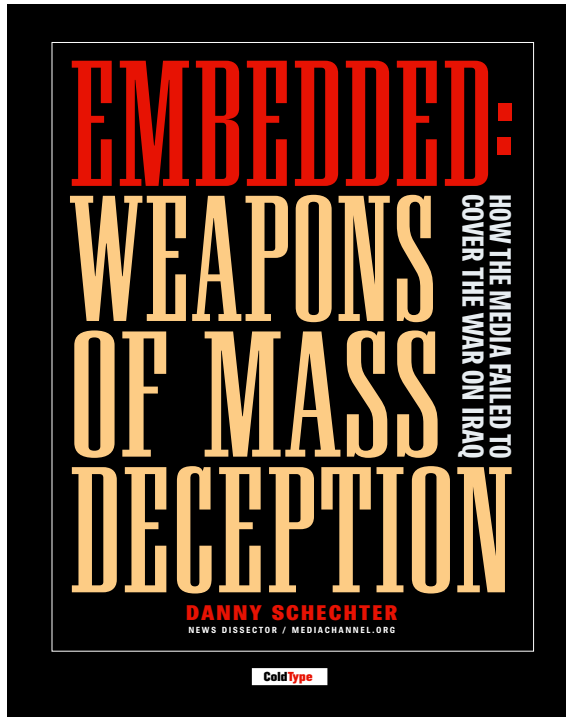


Look Sharp's third kit, **Media Construction of the Middle East**, is due out in spring, 2005

In addition to the curriculum kits, PROJECT LOOK SHARP also hosts an annual conference in October and a five day Annual Media Literacy Institute over the summer where participants receive training in the theory and practice of media literacy, learn applications for digital technology, and work individually with a Look Sharp “coach” to develop and implement a media literacy project. In addition, Project Look Sharp is available for workshops as well as consulting services.

To get more information on these kits, media literacy integration, and other Project Look Sharp services, you can log on to [www.ithaca.edu/looksharp](http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp) or write or call Project Look Sharp at:  
Project Look Sharp / 1119 Williams Hall / Ithaca College / Ithaca, NY / 14850 / (607) 274-3417

"The coverage is the war...The newsmen and the media men around the world are actually the fighters..." – *Marshall McLuhan*



# THE FIRST FULL-LENGTH BOOK ON THE WAR ON IRAQ

By Danny Schechter, News Dissector

**T**here were two wars going on in Iraq - one fought by armies with soldiers, bombs and fearsome military force. The other was fought alongside it with cameras, satellites, armies of journalists and propaganda techniques. One war was rationalized as an

effort to find and disarm WMDs - Weapons of Mass Destruction; the other was carried out by even more powerful WMD's, Weapons of Mass Deception.

The TV networks in America called their non-stop coverage their finest hour but critics like veteran journalist Danny Schechter, a former ABC and CNN producer, charge media complicity in promoting and cheerleading for a war in which some reporting was sanitized, staged and suppressed. Schechter, author of *Media Wars: News at a Time of Terror*, *The More You Watch The Less You Know* and *News Dissector*, fuses an insider's knowledge with an outsider's perspective. Throughout the war, he was "self-embedded" at [Mediachannel.org](http://mediachannel.org), the world's largest on-line media issues network, writing a 3000 word daily news "dissection."

"It is important for readers to assess these arguments before our memories fade and the Bush Administration changes the subject," says Schechter. "We rushed this book into print online so it can contribute to the continuing debate about the war and its impact. Until now, only the government is being scrutinized. It's urgent that we also confront media coverage."

**Read a preview at <http://www.coldtype.net/danbook.html>**

The book is being sold for \$15.95 to benefit [Mediachannel.org](http://mediachannel.org), a global online affiliate network for a democratic media with 1080 affiliates. Readers can pay for the book and make additional contributions via PayPal on [Mediachannel.org](http://mediachannel.org). E-mails requesting the book to [dissector@mediachannel.org](mailto:dissector@mediachannel.org).

Checks to [Mediachannel.org](http://mediachannel.org)/The Global Center 575 8th Avenue, New York NY 10018. Help us get the word out.