

Course: Incorporating Sustainability Issues into Courses on Political Communication

David Whiteman (whiteman@sc.edu)

I am writing to provide the final report for my project on “Incorporating Sustainability Issues into Courses on Political Communication” (grant #13570-K111). This project was supported by a grant of \$1,750 for new course development from the Sustainable Universities Initiative of the School of the Environment.

I used the grant for travel to two conferences: “Summit 2000: Children, Youth, and the Media Beyond the Millennium,” an international conference of media educators in Toronto, Canada; and “Changing Media/Mediating Change,” a conference sponsored by the National Association for Media Arts and Culture.

Our society is increasingly saturated with images and messages from the mass media, and it is crucial for universities to take seriously the need to educate students about film and the mass media. The grant resulted in significant changes for two political communication courses: “Politics and the Mass Media” (GINT 362) and “Film, Politics, and Social Change” (GINT 357). In each course, a new module (provided below) allows me to incorporate issues of sustainability into the subject matter of the course.

For “Politics and the Mass Media” (GINT 362), I made two changes. First, I revised the basic framework of the course to place issues of advertising and consumption at the center. The revised course now includes “ecological values” as part of the basic framework of competing values that frame the course (the others being corporate values, governmental values, journalistic values, and democratic values). Second, I added a module on “Media, Consumption, and Sustainability.” The new module allows me to explicitly treat the strategies media industries and advertisers use to promote consumption and the way in which programming is linked to consumption. Both of these changes better reflect the reality that the dominant impulse of mass media is to spur consumption.

For “Film, Politics, and Social Change” (GINT 357), I added a module on activist environmental film to my treatment of documentary film. Issues related to sustainability are increasingly present in the work of independent filmmakers, and through attending the two conferences I was able to identify two environmental films to add to my course. “Blue Vinyl,” directed by Judith Helfand, explores the vinyl industrial and the pollution and health problems related to the production, use, and disposal of vinyl. It has been the centerpiece of a national environmental campaign for sustainable building materials.

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“Store Wars,” by Micha Peled, looks at the response of one small Virginia community to a proposal to build a Wal-Mart store. The film has been used by environmental activist across the country attempting to highlight the negative impacts of such development.

Since completing work on the grant, I have taught the revised version of these courses three times: “Politics and the Mass Media” in the spring of 2001, with an enrollment of 88 students; and “Film, Politics, and Social Change” twice, in the fall of 2001, with 37 students, and again in the fall of 2002, with 90 students.

I am very interested in disseminating the results of this project to other schools and within the profession. After I teach the new “Politics and the Mass Media” course again next spring, I plan to write an article for a teaching journal in political science, to draw attention to a consumption-centered approach. I have also been giving workshops on activist documentary films (as part of another grant I have), and I have been using the examples from my “Film, Politics, and Social Change” course.

Thank you very much for supporting this important kind of curriculum development.

MODULES DEVELOPED FROM SUI GRANT FOR COURSE DEVELOPMENT:

**“INCORPORATING SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES INTO
COURSES ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION”**

MEDIA, CONSUMPTION, AND SUSTAINABILITY (from GINT 362)

- A. Ecological Values: Sustainability
Read Jacobson & Mazur, “The Littlest Consumers,” 21-38, “Blurring the Distinctions,” pp57-72, & “The Impact of Commercialism,” 187-208
Watch Moyers, “Consuming Images”
- B. Advertising and the Creation of Consumerism
Read Ewen, “Assembling a New World of Facts,” pp 51-59, & “Consumption and Social Change,” pp 81-102 (P); Beck, “Pulling the Plug,” pp 1-2

ACTIVIST DOCUMENTARY FILM (from GINT 357)

- A. Government Involvement in Film
View: “Night Mail,” Harry Watt & Basil Wright, 1936, 53m
Read: Ganos; Bromley
View: “Cinema Verite: Defining the Moment,” Peter Wintonick, 193m
Read: Nichols
- B. Activist Environmental Film
View: “Blue Vinyl,” Judith Helfand, 2001, 91m
Read: Bernstein; www.bluevinyl.org
View: “Store Wars”
Read: Fifield; Miller/Spencer/Peled;
www.pbs.org/storewars/film.html
- C. Film and Issue Networks
View: selections from “It’s Elementary,” “Not in Our Town,” “Sacrifice,” and the MediaRights.org fest
Read: Aufderheide; Deussing/Fausset/Ferber/Tynes
View: “The Uprising of ‘34,” George Stoney & Judith Helfand

Love. Read: Lamb/Beacham/Helfand; Whiteman (www.ejumpcut.org),