Fed Up: A Dramatistic Analysis

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In January 2014, the film “Fed Up” premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and was released to movie theatres across the United States in May. The 95 minute presentation describes the role of sugar in the American obesity epidemic. Having run its course in theatres, the film is now planned to make its way into American classrooms as a media literacy skill development lesson intended for grade 5-12 students. The media discussion package describes the English Language Arts common core state standards as, “evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.”[(1)] After viewing the movie, students are then encouraged to “use evidence from the movie” to start a “healthy eating campaign” at their school.[(5)] A media literacy project that meets criteria for English language common core standards may be easy to qualify as education; however, because grade 5-12 students would likely not expect to be media targets in a classroom, education makes a very clever disguise for propaganda.

Leonard Doob (1909 – 2000) defines propaganda and education as values. “Education tries to pass along knowledge and skills deemed by society to be valuable. Propaganda is impelled by doubtful values to control people’s attitudes and behaviours. The aim of propaganda is to persuade its subject that there is only one valid point of view and to eliminate all other options. Propaganda is not education; it strives for the closed mind rather than the open mind. It is not concerned about the development of mature individuals. Its aim is immediate action. The propagandist merely wishes you to think as he does. The educator is more modest, he is so delighted if you think at all that he is willing to let you do so in your own way.” [(2)]

Doob said the communication process could be examined by asking “who – says what – in which channel - to whom – with what effect.”[(3)] The process is similar to Burke’s dramatistic pentad, a tool used to analyse the communicator’s use of persuasion by using elements of the human drama – act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. The classroom discussion guide for Fed Up states the purpose of showing Fed Up to students in a classroom is to “challenge students to think critically about food culture in the United States.”[(5)] Think critically is a wedge that balances the scale of persuasion. Jowett and O’Donnell define persuasion as “recognition that any change that occurs within audience perceptions, cognitions, or behaviours will be voluntary change.”[(4)] On one end, a voluntary change of attitude based on objective consideration of the evidence would be consistent with persuasion as education; the students’ acceptance of the persuasion fulfills a need that both speaker and audience perceive as mutually beneficial. On the opposite end, a deliberate attempt to align the attitudes of the students with the beliefs and values presented in the movie would be consistent with persuasion as propaganda, and of doubtful value to young students in a classroom.

The Cast of Characters

The film's expert panel consists of twenty individuals comprised of fourteen white males who make a combined total of 119 talking head testimonials, and six females, four of whom are white, who make a combined total of 18 talking head testimonials. The two black female experts among this authoritative panel include an MD and head of one of America's largest philanthropic organizations, and an associate professor of marketing whose research focuses on obesity prevention among ethnic minorities. The black MD expert appears on camera twice, both times to offer an anecdotal observation, and the marketing professor appears on camera once. The expert testimony from this authoritative panel is dominated by three white males; a professor of pediatrics, a director of functional medicine, and a university dean of public policy. These three men make a combined total of 54 authoritative talking head appearances. Each man is dressed in suit and tie and is seated in an office environment; each speaks to the audience in a confident tone using easy to understand language. The rest of the male experts are primarily opinion leaders; authors, politicians, journalists, a physician and a former surgeon general. The white female experts hold titles relevant to nutrition, natural health science, law, and marketing.

Fed Up's expert panel is highly critical of the food industry's attempts to make more low fat and lower calorie food options available to consumers because "they dumped in the sugar" to compensate for the lack of taste that resulted from reducing the fat content. One of the physician experts states, "Sugar is poison." Several experts express concern about the food industry's "infiltration of the school system," described by one as "deplorable." Several scenes show school cafeterias serving French fries, pizza, and fast food options. "When we release our children into the care of schools," says one expert, "We shouldn't expect them to eat unsafe food that will make them sick." The dean of public policy believes industry doesn't care about the food sold in schools, "The schools have become dependent on the money and it's a bargain with the devil."

The talking head expert dialogue is supported with still shots of headlines from often unidentified websites, archived television footage, animated graphics, images of grocery store aisles, convenience stores, school cafeterias, and other places to purchase or consume food.

Perception of Childhood Obesity in America

The film's first three and a half minutes is a condensed summary of the points discussed throughout the movie. This sequence begins with an aerial view over the large skyscrapers of a big city, then to the uniformly shaped white homes of a suburban neighbourhood. At street level, the footage shows a neighbourhood with its tree-lined streets and neatly manicured lawns, bordered by well maintained white fences. A white child rides a bike along the quiet street, and from shoe level white children cross the street dressed for school. Interspersed between these serene images are close-ups of reporters delivering news with urgency, images of bacon sizzling in a pan, hypodermic needles, shockwaves overlapping and expanding across the continents on a static map of the world, an elderly white man with a prosthetic leg, a blurred fat child's face that obscures any identifiable features, and a cloud of white smoke surrounding a McDonalds sign. The audio is brief clips of various news reports; the dialogue includes, "a new report coming out overnight from The American Medical Association," "emerging epidemic," "worse than previously estimated," "a threat to

national security," and "a terror from within." The audio chatter changes focus to the "dramatic increase in the number of overweight children", the "trillion dollar" burden on health care, "it's worse than smoking", and "this year for the first time in the history of the world, more people will die from the effects associated with obesity than from starvation." The footage features children trying to fit into pants that are too small, fat white children struggling with simple exercise, food being placed into mouths of white faces, and white children on a school bus. Throughout this sequence, ominous music plays in the background, evoking a sense of impending doom.

The experts strongly object to the food industry's pervasive marketing in schools because these media messages shape the way children think about food. A politician is shown addressing congress, saying, "We have a responsibility to protect America's children from sophisticated, aggressive, relentless marketing...," arguing that advertising aimed at children is unfair. While discussing the aggressive marketing directed at children in schools and on television, the dean adds, "We're paying a very dear price for letting the food industry act at will in recruiting our children as loyal customers." One of the female experts says, "The fact that parents have a role to play does not change the fact that targeting young children is simply immoral."

Narratives as Strategic Identification

Narratives, or storytelling, may be a particularly useful persuasive strategy when addressing values and beliefs that influence behaviour. Green argued that the individual experiences "an integrative melding" of attention, imagery, and emotion, and are more likely to identify with or develop strong emotions for the characters of the narrative, making their perspective have greater influence on the beliefs of the audience.[6] The stories of four teenagers are shared from both their own and their parents' perspective through interviews and video footage of the teens going about their day.

The film introduces Brady, a 15 year old white male. Brady says, "One person told me that fat people were just made to be fat and I don't think that's true." He says he has grown up eating fattening foods, like his parents have done. His mother talks about some girls who told him to run so they could "watch his fat shake." Brady wants to lose weight so he can do more things, like play baseball. As Brady walks alone on a path, his mother narrates, "I really think he wants to lose weight, I just think he doesn't know how to do it." Brady says, "I look at it as I'm failing, and [everybody else sees] just another fat kid." At the grocery store, Brady notes the cheez-its, cookies and pudding in the buggy. He says he drinks diet soda all the time and asks if diet soda is good for you. While Brady is making a "healthy lunch", graphics indicate how many grams of sugar are in each item. He believes it's hard to lose weight because having cookies and ice cream in the house is just like an alcoholic being near a bottle of gin. "When you're close to it you want it, and it's the same way with food." He claims "all the fattening and greasy foods are clogging up our schools," and claims "three-fourths of our students" choose nachos for lunch." Brady says it's hard for teenagers to try to be healthy because he sees his friends eating fattening foods and they're skinny, "and I hold on to that, and that's how I don't lose weight." Brady's mom says, "People make time for what they want to, it's a matter of priority," and explains how she needs to choose between helping Brady and giving him chocolate.

Maggie is an active 12 year old white female. “I’m a statistic,” she says, “I don’t really know what it means. It has something to do with my weight.” Maggie swims four times a week, walks her dog, and eats healthfully. Her mother says, “It has to do a lot with her self esteem.” On the advice of their physician, Maggie’s mother tried to enlist the help of a nutritionist and Weight Watchers, but Maggie was too young. Maggie’s mom looks for healthier choices such as food with reduced fat and more fiber, foods made with whole grains, and that “cereal’s a good go to for pretty much any meal replacement.” Maggie doesn’t understand why her weight has “mostly stayed the same.” In another scene, Maggie is crying, “Sometimes it’s hard to see chocolate and I just want to eat it... Just make me thinner.” She is filmed ordering a cheeseburger from the school cafeteria, and explains the daily special is a rotation of menu choices from fast food establishments.

Wesley is a 13 year old black male. His mom asks him what he had for lunch, saying, “Let’s hear the truth,” as she questions his response about having both milk and juice. Wesley says, “I’m a pretty heavy dude. That’s why I try to do some exercising and eat some healthy food every day.” His mom explains how they “started eating different fruits and vegetables, we limit our starches, we limit our breads, we keep healthier snacks.” She buys lean versions of Wesley’s favourite foods, but slips sometimes because, “It costs more to eat healthier.” Wesley and his mother are shown in a doctor’s office with a white male physician. The physician addresses Wesley’s mother, and does not make eye contact with Wesley or speak to him directly, “I’m happy to hear that you think things are going well, but it’s a bit concerning because when I look at Wesley he doesn’t look any thinner.” In an interview from home, Wesley says, “I’m eating less than I used to and I exercise more and I don’t really know why I’m gaining more weight.” Back in the doctor’s office, the physician continues his examination, speaking only to Wesley’s mother, “Have you noticed that his skin here is starting to get a little bit dark and a little bit thick? It’s part of what we call metabolic syndrome.” Wesley’s shoulders are hunched forward, his head lowered, his gaze directed to the floor.

Joe is a 14 year old Hispanic male. Most of his onscreen appearances show him reclining in a lazy boy chair or sitting on the sofa. “I’ve tried a lot things but none of them really work. I will lose some weight and then gain it back.” His father says everyone in the family has always been heavy. In Spanish, Joe’s mom explains, “For the Hispanic family, big is beautiful and it’s healthy.” Joe’s father says, “I know you’re going to say I’m putting him in harm’s way by giving him all the food that he wants. I know he sneaks cookies and cakes... You don’t have no control over it. I wish I did, but you don’t.” Joe’s physician explains the risks of a weight loss surgical procedure. Joe’s father says, “I guess I’m still kinda against it. Things could go wrong and then I wouldn’t have my Joe.”

Analysis

Motivating students to challenge their thinking requires their cooperation. According to Burke, the goal of rhetoric is “strategic identification as a means of inducing cooperation in others.”[7] Burke’s view of identification allows the individual to feel a sense of belonging to a larger group. Maslow stressed that only when we are anchored within our community do we develop self-esteem, the need to assure ourselves of our own worth as individuals. The need for self-esteem can be met through gaining respect or recognition from others.[8] Erikson described the psychosocial development of school age children; elementary school age children develop a sense of competence with peer relationships and

academic demands, followed by adolescence and the need to develop a sense of personal identity.[9]

Collectively, the narratives are problematic in the sense that they demonstrate the undesirable qualities of being overweight more than they attempt to create strategic identification with a specific audience. Brady and Maggie express disapproval toward the options available to them through the school cafeteria, although neither makes suggestions for the options they would like to see. The absence of requests for healthier options makes it appear that the teens really do not know what healthier options might be. The parents of Maggie and Wesley, and Brady himself discuss their perceptions of healthier choices insofar that these healthy foods are used to demonstrate their 'unhealthy-ness'. The emphasis on nutrition education reflects assumptions that Americans lack sufficient knowledge of the personal behaviors that lead to weight gain while ignoring the societal and environmental factors that contribute to obesity such as discrimination and poverty.[10] Wesley's mother's claim that "it's expensive to eat healthier" is dismissed, muting the economic disadvantages that are a reality for many Americans. Rather than respect the standpoint of Americans who live in poverty, the film positions "those people" as undesirable outsiders who are gullible to industry brainwashing tactics.

The narrative of Maggie focuses on her emotional struggle with how much she weighs and the effect this has on her self-esteem. The beneficial effect of physical activity on her overall physical health is completely overlooked. The film conveys the attitude that exercise is intended to produce thinness, as opposed to overall health benefits. One female expert says, "We certainly don't want to discourage people from exercising or underplay the importance of physical activity to health, but we are not going to exercise ourselves out of this obesity problem." One of the more prominent male experts argues that Michelle Obama's 'Let's Move' campaign had nothing to do with physical activity, "In the beginning, the name Let's Move was not meant to evoke exercise, it was meant to evoke action on the issue." In one scene, Maggie is shown to be distraught, and pleads, "Just make me thinner." The narrative equates the state of Maggie's health to the shape of her body, and implies that her weight is the result of the food she eats. Implying that obesity is a matter of personal responsibility reinforces negative stereotypes toward obese persons.[10] Young girls who identify with Maggie's emotional distress are likely to already feel unattractive and have lower self-esteem than their thinner counterparts.[11]

Wesley's narrative is indicative of the prevalent stigma toward overweight and obese individuals that exists in American society. Wesley is objectified by the physician, who effectively dehumanizes him in front of his mother. His body language communicates shame and embarrassment. Narratives which have included similar imagery "conveyed a strong, consistent message that the characters feel ashamed and indeed are deserving of such shame for their 'poor' behaviours and their subsequent weight gain."[12]. Discursive strategies throughout the movie tend to favour an ethnocentric attitude; images of white individuals are more frequently used in reference to 'America' or 'our children' while images of non-white individuals are more frequently used in reference to undesirable behaviours perceived to be related to obesity. "Many of the negative psychosocial consequences of weight bias occur above and beyond the influence of high body weight, and this appears to be the case for negative health consequences as well. Therefore, the health consequences common among obese children

may partly result from the effects of discrimination."[13]

The cultural attitudes of Joe's family are overshadowed by the risks associated with weight loss surgery, one of which is death. A politician narrates, "It's the people who are least able to know what's good for them...," "the people society has to provide health care for..." Joe's narrative describes the consequences of obesity as an economic burden on affluent members of society, and the threat that obesity poses to America's future through the fear expressed by Joe's father.

Early adolescence appears to be the reconciliation between the person one has come to be and the person society expects one to become. By experimenting with different behaviours and activities, most youth eventually achieve a sense of identity regarding how they see themselves and where their lives are headed.[9] Given the importance of peer relationships and the inherent need to feel a sense of belonging to a larger group, the school age years would appear an advantageous time to influence positive attitudes about body image with education. Alternatively, using children's insecurities about fitting in with their peer groups to further stereotypes about obesity is likely to result in negative consequences. Weight stigma and weight based teasing increases the likelihood of youth who perceive themselves as overweight or obese engaging in unhealthy eating behaviours and lower levels of physical activity, both of which contribute to weight gain.[10]

Education or Indoctrination

Jowett and O'Donnell define propaganda as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist."[14] Fed Up employs a number of propaganda techniques, including but not limited to:

Name-calling is a strategy used to make opponents appear stupid, immoral or undesirable. When members of the expert panel appear on screen, the camera angle places the center viewpoint on the speaker's nose. The close ups of the teens and their parents center the viewpoint on the chin, drawing attention to the fat around their neck. The experts are all of thin stature with the exception of one male researcher who makes a significant number of talking head appearances; the camera angle frames his face to draw attention away from the fat under his chin.

Bandwagon creates the illusion that the group already has lots of support and the values of group members make the group morally superior. Because the bandwagon effect is driven by a need to belong, the strategy may employ ways to demonstrate why it is undesirable to be rejected by the group. As discussed earlier, the narratives of the teens demonstrate the social consequences of being overweight, portraying obese individuals as lazy, unintelligent, gullible, undesirable, and socially isolated. Politically, obesity is discussed as a financial burden on society and a threat to America's future, as stated in the opening sequence as "a terror from within."

Testimonial is the use of public personalities who have trusted brands or a respected position. Fed Up's expert panel is dominated by white males, many of whom are authors of books that express attitudes consistent with the puritan philosophies of naturopathic approaches to health and promote dietary ideology as a prevention or cure for disease. The experts and opinion leaders speak in easy to understand language consistent with 'plain folk'. Plain folk makes public personalities

(politicians, doctors, scientists...) appear like ordinary people who are less likely to be dishonest.

Transfer is associating a concept or person with symbols or individuals that carry admiration and respect (e.g. the President and the U.S. flag), or how the speaker either aspires to be like or is better than what the admired symbol or individual represents. The expert panel recognizes the beneficence of Michelle Obama's 'Let's Move' campaign, "I think Michelle Obama has been a wonderful force in the nation's attempt to address childhood obesity," while expressing criticism of the food industry's alliance with the initiative, "All the food manufacturers drew her into a very long, complicated, intricate discussion about processed food. But whatever they do to processed foods will be used to sell us more processed foods."

Glittering Generality is the use of intangible nouns that embody ideals and values to trigger powerful emotions; some examples include healthy, America, food environment, poison, toxin, threat, and terror from within.

Card-stacking is the presentation of a biased argument by exaggerating one side and burying or discrediting the evidence for the opposition.[15] Fed Up makes abundant use of sensational headlines from often unidentified websites, and simulations of printed documents (text on an unidentified paper with specific words highlighted). The media discussion package recommends a list of blogs and newspaper articles for further reading. Jacques Ellul (1912 – 1994), argued that education makes the individual susceptible to propaganda. In Asia, one of the most effective propaganda methods was teaching people how to read. "The prestige of the intellectual — 'marked with God's finger' — allowed political assertions to appear as Truth, while the prestige of the printed word one learned to decipher confirmed the validity of what the teachers said."[16]

Studies of children's ability to recognize when they are being exposed to propaganda are limited. A doctoral thesis by Smith observed that only after students were taught a unit on the seven forms of propaganda were they able to identify the techniques of Name Calling, Bandwagon, Testimonial and Plain Folk. The techniques of Transfer and Glittering Generality remained difficult to understand. Card Stacking was the most difficult propaganda technique to comprehend among 11-13 year olds.[17]

The ultimate motivation of all rhetoric is to purge ourselves of 'guilt', Burke's term to describe anxiety, embarrassment, shame, disgust, and other 'noxious feelings' intrinsic to the human condition. The speaker seeks to purge this guilt through rhetorical acts of redemption. Rarely does a speaker admit he is the source of his own guilt; more frequently, the speaker will choose to purge guilt through 'victimage' – the designation of an external enemy. In doing so, the speaker creates identification with the audience by 'lashing out' at the entity that the audience fears. Burke believed that analysis of any rhetorical act would expose signs of victimage, and what he referred to 'god terms' and 'devil terms'.[18]

The discourse is obvious about designating the food industry as the source of all ills; one of the experts describes the food industry as a "bargain with the devil". The former surgeon general ponders, "As we look to the workforce of the future, where will the soldiers and sailors and first responders, cops, firemen - where will they come from when we have a generation of children who will be physically unfit and saddled with a lot of disease that's all preventable?" Burke's dramatistic pentad

positions the discourse within the context of the human drama. The food industry (the agent); is poisoning Americans with sugar (act); the food industry is driving the obesity epidemic (scene); through its pervasive marketing in school cafeterias and on television (agency); to undermine America's national security (purpose). Propaganda attempts to persuade its target that there is only one point of view; limiting inclusive group acceptance criteria to friend or foe excludes those Americans who recognize the film's use of propaganda techniques. Persuasive discourse is not limited to advancing the interests of the speaker, but tries to determine if the action serves a common good. Acceptance not only benefits those who agree with the speaker's claims, but also those who are affected by them.[19]

Identifying the 'god term' was more challenging. Throughout the film there was ample concern for the well-being of children and the health of Americans, but neither was situated within the discourse in opposition to the evil represented by the food industry. Salvation was hiding in the movie's conclusion, beginning with an emotional scene with Brady's mother, "My mom always said people make time for what they want to. It's a matter of priority being willing to put forth the effort and the time it takes to change." As the music brightens, the director of functional medicine explains, "It's not an easy transition to real food, but it starts locally, as local as our fork. And everybody has a choice three times a day what they put on that thing." Another physician chimes in, "Does it look like it comes from nature or is it a product with a long list of artificial ingredients? That's the distinction between real and fake foods even a five year old could get."

According to Fed Up, the solution to obesity is to develop a keen paranoia about artificial ingredients and sugar. Buried within the rhetoric's grave concern for children and the threat to national security from America's own obese citizens is a more plausible human drama. A media literacy project (act); intended for students in American classrooms (scene); the propagandist behind the movie, Fed Up (agent); perpetuates stereotypical attitudes about obesity (agency); to convince children that a 'real food' diet will make them morally and intellectually superior to other Americans (purpose). The experts who make the most talking head appearances have all written books about weight loss, food addiction, and morally superior food. An increased interest in 'real food' would also likely result in an increased amount of book sales for these authors.

Conclusion

"'Identification' is a word for the autonomous activity's place in this wider context, a place with which the agent may be unconcerned. The shepherd... acts for the good of the sheep, to protect them from discomfiture and harm. But he may be "identified" with a project that is raising the sheep for market."[7] The audience is invited to "take the Fed Up challenge" and "get off sugar" for ten days. Foods to avoid include grains, bread, pasta, granola bars, cereal, yogurt, butter, salad dressing, spaghetti sauce, peanut butter, orange juice, and ketchup. Discourse about avoiding certain foods creates the illusion of personal autonomy; however, the paternalist discourse in the film's conclusion effectively restricts personal autonomy without identifying any potential risks.

Fed Up's discursive strategies are not consistent with the perception of mutual benefit that Jowett and O'Donnell define as persuasion; nor does it pass along the knowledge and skills that Doob argued are

education. Rather, the movie deliberately and systematically leads the audience to a single choice – a restrictive 'real food' diet. Deliberately targeting school-age children with a marketing scheme intended to persuade students that avoiding food they enjoy will make them morally superior Americans violates the propagandist's own moral code, "and does not change the fact that targeting young children is simply immoral." Additionally, promoting stigmatizing and ethnocentric attitudes to impressionable school-age children raises concerns about the propagandist's moral compass. As Doob stated, "Propaganda is not education." Perpetuating negative stereotypes to elementary and secondary school students is of doubtful value to anyone.

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