1. THE GREAT DEPRESSION, THE NEW DEAL AND THE MEDIA

Subject: American History
Grade level: 11

• Introduction
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Introduction

Rationale or Purpose
This lesson will help students understand how different social sectors, including business and government, used media in an attempt to garner public support for their policy preferences during the Great Depression and New Deal. By the end of this lesson, students will understand how different interests in the 1930s employed visual media, including billboards and photographs, to convey their point of view. Teachers can undertake the activities included in this lesson plan separately or in combination.

Background
The following activities make use of photographs taken by photographers who were employed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Farm Securities Administration (FSA). Created in 1937, the FSA was a New Deal agency designed to help farmers resettle their land and recover economically from the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. The FSA employed photographers who traveled the country documenting the impact of the Great Depression, farm mechanization and the Dust Bowl on American society. These photographers included Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Carl Mydans, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn and others. Many of these photographers were themselves drawn from the ranks of the unemployed. The government's hiring of photographers and other artists in the 1930s constituted the first major federal sponsorships of the arts. FSA photographs were exhibited widely in newspapers, magazines, museums and books. These photographs were intended to persuade politicians and the public of the need to implement New Deal policies. Additional FSA photographs are available at the Library of Congress Web site on "America From the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945" (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html).

Materials
• "Analyzing Photography" handout
• Blackboard and chalk
• Internet access
• Paper
• Pens or pencils
• Printed copies of the photographs for students who lack classroom Internet access
• Transparent tape

TEKS Objectives
• US.20 A The student is expected to describe how the characteristics and issues of various eras in U.S. history have been reflected in works of art, music, and literature, such as the paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, rock and roll, and John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath.
• US.24 C The student is expected to explain and apply different methods that historians use to interpret the past, including the use of primary and secondary sources, points of view, frames of reference, and historical context.
• **Activity 1 - Photography as public relations: government-sponsored photography during the Great Depression (Estimated class time: 40 minutes)**

Students will examine several FSA photographs documenting conditions during the Great Depression in order to assess the ways these images might have persuaded the American public and elected officials of the need for New Deal legislation.

**Step 1**
Assign students course reading on the Great Depression and the New Deal before completing this activity. You may also ask students to complete a Web search to find and bring in articles about the FSA.

**Step 2**
Ask the class what visual images, if any, they associate with the Great Depression. Ask students to identify the sources of these images. List these images and sources on the blackboard.

**Step 3**
Discuss the documentary photography of the FSA, and its role in garnering support for New Deal policies. You may use the background information at the beginning of this lesson plan, or ask students to describe the FSA's purpose and activities using the information they obtained from their Web search.

**Step 4**
Divide the class into teams. Have each team look at one of the following photographs online or in hard copy:

1. **“Shack”** - Actual title "WPA (Works Progress/Work Projects Administration) worker and his wife sitting in front of their shack home on the Arkansas River near Webbers Falls, Oklahoma. This man said that last year he thought maybe he would be a little better off when he got the WPA work and had a small amount of cash coming in, but that he was worse off now. ‘Last year I had a cow and some chickens and I had to sell my cow and eat my chickens. I get worse off every year’" (Russell Lee, 1939)

2. **“Destitute Peapickers in California: a 32-year-old mother of seven children”** (Dorothea Lange, 1936)

3. **“Sign Birmingham Alabama”** (Arthur Rothstein, 1936)
**Activity 2 - Photography as document and comment on history (Estimated class time: 40 minutes)**

Students will examine FSA photographs that juxtapose billboard advertisements with external economic and social conditions of the era in order to learn how visual media can simultaneously document and comment on an historical moment.

**Step 1**
Assign students course reading on the Great Depression and the New Deal before completing this activity. You may also ask students to complete a Web search to find and bring in articles about the FSA.

**Step 2**
Drawing on the textbook, discuss what students know about the debates and disagreements between different social sectors over the causes of the Great Depression and the appropriate response of government. Discuss the documentary photography of the FSA and its role in garnering support for New Deal policies. You may use the background information at the beginning of this lesson plan, or ask students to describe the FSA's purpose and activities using the information they obtained from their Web search.

**Step 3**
Divide the class into teams. Have each team look at one of the following photographs online or in hard copy:

1. “Highway signboards, southern Alabama” (Marion Post Wolcott, 1939)
Step 4
On a sheet of paper, each team should answer the questions on the "Analyzing Photography" handout. Students should draw on what they know about the Great Depression and the New Deal from their readings to help them answer these questions.

Step 5
Have each team present their findings to the class.

Step 6
As a class, discuss the strategies these photographs use to document and comment on social conditions. Debate whether, and in what ways, these photographs are objective or subjective portrayals of social conditions.

Assessment: Group presentations and "Analyzing Photography" handout

Extension 1 - Photographs as representatives of history (Estimated class time: 25 minutes)

Students will choose one of several FSA photographs that document conditions during the Great Depression as representative of the era. At the end of this extension, students will understand how images both capture and leave out important dimensions of history.

Step 1
Assign students course reading on the Great Depression and the New Deal before completing this activity.

Step 2
Ask students to imagine that they are the editor of a book on 1930s America and must choose one image to represent the Great Depression on their book's cover. Display the following images online or in hard copy for the entire class:
1 - "Advertisement for current movie in town. Westley, California. The child is a flood refugee of March 1939 from southeast Missouri" (Dorothea Lange, 1939)

2 - "Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Lyman, Polish tobacco farmers near Windsor Locks, Connecticut" (Jack Delano, 1940)

3 - "Cotton pickers, 6:30 a.m., Alexander plantation, Pulaski County, Arkansas" (Ben Shahn, 1935)

4 - "Children playing a singing game during afternoon play period at homestead school. West Virginia" (Arthur Rothstein, 1941)

5 - "Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma," (Also known as "Fleeing a Dust Storm," Arthur Rothstein, 1936)

Step 3
Using their knowledge of the Great Depression, ask students to indicate which photograph they would choose to represent the Great Depression (they can only choose one). Ask students to write a one paragraph statement justifying their choice and addressing why they consider the photograph symbolic of the era.
**Step 4**
As a group, ask how many students chose each of the various images to represent the Great Depression and why? What attributes make each of these images more or less suitable representatives of this era? List students’ answers on the board and compare their choices and criteria for selection.

**Assessment:** Written statement justifying their choice of photograph

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**Extension 2 - Production activity (Estimated class time: 30 minutes)**

This production activity will help students recognize the importance of point of view, frame of reference, and context in creating photographic meaning. Students will alter or reframe existing images in order to create a new image with new meaning.

**Step 1**
For homework, ask students to examine images from a magazine, newspaper, or the Internet that have social or economic implications. Students should choose one image (or part of an image) and alter its meaning by pasting new objects or subjects onto the image, adding a new caption, or reframing that image within a larger image taken from another context. Their alteration should create a new comparison, contrast or tension with the original image. For example, students can paste an image of a homeless person within an advertisement for a luxury home for sale, or offer a new surrounding for an advertising image that transforms its meaning. Students should attach their altered image to a piece of heavy cardboard for display and write one paragraph on the new meanings or messages created by their alteration.

**Step 2**
Students should bring their display to class and give a short presentation on how the original meaning of their image changed when the context was altered. Display the images and their accompanying paragraphs on the classroom wall.

**Assessment:** Presentation and display
Analyzing Photography

Name: Date:

Course:

Subject:
What is the subject of this photograph? Is it a person, place, event, object or idea?
Was the subject posed, arranged, or caught unawares for the camera?
Does the subject symbolize something more than itself?

Frame:
How is the subject framed? How is the subject isolated from his/her/its surroundings?
What camera angle and shot distance are used? What does the framing suggest the
viewer should focus on? Does the framing create new meaning between objects or people
in the image? Does the framing create any comparisons, contrasts or tensions within the
image? What effect does the photographer's point of view have on the picture's meaning?
If there are people in the photographs, what are they doing? How are they dressed? How
do they look? Do they convey any emotion or feeling?

Light:
Lighting can contribute to the mood and dramatic effect of an image, as well as make it
visible in the first place. How does the photograph make use of light? Did the
photographer use natural, available, or artificial light? Is the image well or poorly lit?
Does the photographer's use of light or shadow create or add meaning in the image?
Does lighting help achieve the overall effect in the photograph? Why might the
photographer have used light or shadow in a particular way?

Depth of Field:
Depth of field refers to the distance or range at which objects appear in sharp focus in
the frame. When depth of field is small, only some elements of the frame are in focus
(foreground, middle ground or background). When depth of field is large, all elements in
the frame will be in focus. How does the photographer use depth of field? What is in focus
in the frame? What is out of focus? What details are emphasized through focus?

Context:
What year was the photograph taken?
Who took the photograph?
What was the context or intended use of the photograph?
Has the photograph been altered for presentation? Has anything been added or removed
from the image? Does the image have a caption? Is it part of a sequence or collage?

Optional Further Readings


Publications.

The Teaching Educators about Media (TEAM) Project, housed in UT's Radio-TV-Film Department, designed
these lesson plans and resources. Project Director: Laura Stein, Ph.D. http://utopia.utexas.edu/explore/team/