

Inventing Common Sense

Goals

Students examine a 1964 *New York Times* article quoting white Mississippi residents on race relations, compare Black residents' responses, and dissect an argument about the power of the media. Then they analyze their own media consumption.

Central Questions

In the segregated South, teachers, politicians, newspapers, magazines, television, and radio all taught Black people that they were not as good as white people. How did they do it? What were the consequences? Who is telling us what's important in life? How should we respond?

Background Information

In 1960, almost half of Mississippi's residents were African American. State law kept them apart from whites in neighborhoods, schools, and jobs. Leaders made sure that Black people had the lowest wages, poorest houses, and harshest lives. And most people accepted this as normal, or at least inevitable.

From the governor's office to the pulpit, in the classroom and the media, virtually every authority figure in Mississippi insisted that Black people were dangerous and inferior to whites and had to be kept in submission. After decades of this indoctrination, most whites believed segregation was necessary. Many Blacks had internalized the constant message that they were second-class citizens, limiting their hopes and dreams. White-supremacist propaganda was accepted as common sense. Overt racism that would outrage us today was considered normal.

In Philadelphia, Mississippi, one white minister said, "A minority has taken over the guidance of thought patterns of our town. It has controlled what was said and what was not said." Another resident admitted, "I can understand now how Nazi Germany could grow, with the good people of Germany knowing more of the atrocities than they would admit—and looking away, always looking away. . . . We have been coerced and intimidated."

Changing Jim Crow laws and braving Klan terror attacks were not enough to secure basic human rights. Mississippi residents, white and Black, had to question everything they'd been taught and forge new ideas about people and society. To change the world, they had to change their minds.

Documents Used in This Lesson:

1. "Rights Workers Embitter Delta." *New York Times*, July 19, 1964 (excerpts).
<http://wihist.org/1u7qew0>
2. Residents respond to "Rights Workers Embitter Delta" (excerpts).
<http://wihist.org/1yrhrg7>
3. Cobb, Charles E. "Some Notes on Education" (excerpts).
<http://wihist.org/1yrhvfQ>

For analysis of students' own media consumption, you might also incorporate some of the tools at Ithaca College's "Project Look Sharp."

<http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp/>

<p>RIGHTS WORKERS EMBITTER DELTA</p> <p>Cleveland, Miss., Defends Negro Status There</p> <p>By DAVID HALBERSTAM Special to The New York Times</p> <p>CLEVELAND, Miss., July 15 —“We have 1 per cent Chinese in this county and we have no Chinese problem. If we had 65 per cent Chinese we might have a Chinese problem.”</p> <p>The speaker was W. B. Alexander Jr., a lawyer and State Senator in this Mississippi Delta city. Cleveland is the county seat of Bolivar County. And in the county—which is typical of the cotton-growing area of Mississippi—two-thirds of the population is neither Chinese nor white, but Negro.</p> <p>In Cleveland the land is flat and rich. Cotton is the prime crop and accounts for 75 per cent of the county’s economy. “Cotton,” in the words of Sheriff Charles W. Capps Jr., a planter himself with 2,000 acres, “pays our debts.”</p>	<p>The Negro, added Senator Alexander, is “much, much lower than the white man morally.” In fact, Mr. Alexander added, “the colored race is a tremendous burden on this state financially and we are bearing it without complaint.”</p> <p>“I believe,” Mr. Moore said, “in the right to discriminate by a private person.”</p> <p>As such, virtually all white men in Cleveland oppose the bill, and changes in civil rights are seen as primarily produced by forces outside the South.</p> <p>“I realize it may sound foolish, but 95 per cent of our blacks are happy. We understand our way of life and we understand each other,” said Sheriff Capps.</p> <p>The local leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is characterized as an agitator by Mr. Langford. “He’ out for personal gain and the local people know it,” Mr. Langford said.</p>	<p>Yet, there is concern over some of the changes in the Negro.</p> <p>“The young Nigras, I am told, are becoming a little more militant. That could create a problem. They are not as respectful, a little more reluctant to say Yessir or No, ma’am,” said Mr. Moore.</p> <p>For this reason there is little sympathy to the white and Negro youths who have entered Bolivar County as part of the summer project.</p> <p>“To me their motives are unspeakable,” said Sheriff Capps.</p> <p>“But I told them I’m going to keep them alive no matter what. We’re going to do everything we can to keep the Federal marshals out of Mississippi. Why, just yesterday one of those young people told me that that was their plan—to have the marshals come in to Mississippi.</p> <p>“They are dirty, they are unclean, they do not dress. The niggers know high-class whites, and no responsible colored people are fooling with them. And yet they come in trying to change this wonderful community of ours,” Sheriff Capps said.</p>
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A Freedom Summer volunteer encouraged local Black residents to reply:

In response to your article that was dated July 15, 1964, I want to say that as a negro of Mississippi, I am not happy. The only ones that are happy or think they are happy are the ones that don't know any better, and I don't think I am the only negro that will say this. Some are scared because of the economic situation, meaning that they might lose their jobs, which is only half enough to support their family. The question is, would Sheriff Capps, Governor Paul Johnson or Senator Eastland like to live in my house and send their children to our schools? If so I am sure you would hear a different story.

We're glad that the white people are coming down from the north and that they are thinking of our welfare. Sure we are inferior. The White folks over us every way. They think we ain't nobody. If we had better schools, better books things would be different. If we had better jobs and more money we'd be better off and we'd be more intelligent. We could afford to send our children to school.

Questions

Document 1: “Rights Workers Embitter Delta.” *New York Times*, July 19, 1964 (excerpts).

With a partner, agree on answers to these questions. We’ll discuss them afterward.

1. Look at the statements by white community leaders in the *New York Times* article. What messages did African Americans get from their political leaders and the other white people quoted? Express their attitude toward their African American neighbors in a single, short sentence of your own.
2. What sorts of people could get their words into the *New York Times*? Who is quoted in that article? What are their jobs and positions? Whose voices are not heard in that article?
3. List three differences between the writing style of Black residents of Bolivar County and the writing style in the first document? Why are they so different?
4. The Black residents who wrote replies did not send them to the *New York Times*. They didn’t even sign their names on the copies posted on the local bulletin board. Why not?

- 2 -

Charlie Cobb

SOME NOTES ON EDUCATION

... by Charlie Cobb

What we have discovered over the last few years of our activities in the South, is that oppression and restriction is not limited to the bullets of local racists shotgun blasts, or assaults at county courthouses, or the expulsion of sharecroppers from plantations, but that it (oppression and restriction) is imbedded in a complex national structure, many of the specifics of which are oft times difficult to discern, but which govern every facet of our lives. What is relevant to our lives is constantly defined for us; we are taught it in every waking hour; it is pounded in us via radio, T.V., newspapers, etc., most of which are the tools of our oppressors. Definitions are articulated to us through the use of terms such as, "qualified", "responsible", "security", "patriotism", "our way of life", "the American way of life", "Nigger", "leader", "politics", and a thousand others, infinitely more subtle and complex. Our lives are pointed out for us in a millions irrelevant directions, and what we are finding we have to deal with if we're talking about change (whether in Mississippi or New York) is, Who points out and determines the direction of our lives; how do they do it and get away with it?

Questions

Document 3: Cobb, Charles E. “Some Notes on Education” (excerpts).

With a partner, agree on answers to these questions. We’ll discuss them afterward.

1. What’s the author’s main point in this paragraph? Restate it in your own words.
2. The author says that the things we consider most important—the things we just take for granted—are defined by others. Who was defining those things for kids in Mississippi in 1964? Who does the author say “pounded it into us”?
3. Who puts ideas and information into your mind? Who decides what music gets on the radio, what shows get on television, or what messages get put on billboards and commercials? Who decides what you get to think about, and defines what’s normal today? How much money do you suppose they make, compared to a teacher or a worker at McDonalds?
4. In Mississippi in 1964, vicious racism was often considered common sense. List two messages repeated by the media that you consume. What are two things they say are so normal that everyone today thinks they’re common sense? How do they encourage you to behave? Who benefits if you do those things?
5. List two things people consider normal today that people 50 years from now might consider weird. Imagine your grandchildren saying, “How could they have thought that?” or “How could they have done that?”