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:
   http://wihist.org/1u7qew0
2. Residents respond to “Rights Workers Embitter Delta” (excerpts).
   http://wihist.org/1yrhrq7
   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/
http://wihist.org/1u7qew0

Document 2: Residents respond to “Rights Workers Embitter Delta.”
http://wihist.org/1yrhrsg7
A Freedom Summer volunteer encouraged local Black residents to reply:

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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 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

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?
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 imbeded in a complex national structure, many of the specifics of which are oftentimes 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 into 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", "Negro", "leader", "politics" and a thousand others, infinitely more subtle and complex. Our lives are pointed out for us in 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

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?”