LESSON – LAST MEN IN ALEPPO
SYRIA’S WHITE HELMETS: AN INFORMATION AND NEWS LITERACY LEARNING CASE STUDY

OVERVIEW

Syria has always been at the heart of the post-World War II struggle for the Middle East. Prior to the start of the Arab Spring in 2011, however, it was viewed as one of the more stable countries in the region, with a strong, autocratic and youthful leader, President Bashar Al-Assad. That mask of stability has slipped and today, after seven years of violent conflict that has left hundreds of thousands of Syrians dead, the country is at the nexus of every tension in the region: Iran versus Saudi Arabia, the United States versus Russia and even Islamist extremism’s resistance to secularism. Add the historical legacy of colonialism, as well as complex political systems that encompass tribal allegiances, monarchies, dictatorships and nascent democracies, and the complexity and horror of the ongoing war in Syria demands an examination of the ways in which policies play out in the real world.

Among current policy considerations for the countries bordering Syria, and increasingly nations farther afield, including the United States, are the ethics and efficacy of responding to atrocities committed in other countries and the challenge of absorbing millions of refugees. At the same time, nations are confronting the challenge of getting accurate information in an era of actual and imagined “fake news.”

This lesson combines these global and media studies concerns by using clips from Last Men in Aleppo to deepen students’ media analysis skills. It asks students to grapple with multiple types of news and information sources, including an examination of the ways in which documentary films can humanize statistics, policy statements and news reports.

Video clips provided with this lesson are from: Last Men in Aleppo, which documents the experiences of White Helmet rescue workers, men who choose to stay in Syria and remain civilians, even when trapped under bombardment and siege.

The lesson can be done as a stand alone or in conjunction with lessons for The War Show (twenty-something group of friends who become Arab Spring protesters/citizen journalists; the choice to risk standing up for justice) Dalya’s Other Country (Syrian refugees; the choice to leave; featuring a mother and her high-school aged daughter who settle in the United States)

It is also an excellent complement to the lesson for POV’s 2015 feature Return to Homs which tells the story of armed resistance by the Free Syrian Army. Using all the films will give students a more diverse and comprehensive picture of Syria and the issues raised by the current situation.
POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our Community Network.

OBJECTIVES
In this lesson, students will:
- Learn about the history and current status of the war in Syria
- Reflect on the human cost of war
- Consider the strengths and weaknesses of different types of news or information sources and understand why checking diverse sources is important

GRADE LEVELS: 9-12, college

SUBJECT AREAS
Current Events
English/Language Arts
Global Studies
Information Literacy
Media Literacy/News Literacy
Political Science
Social Studies

MATERIALS
- Internet access
- Film clips and equipment to show them
- Printed handouts of assigned news stories (if not reading on a tablet or computer screen)

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
two class periods

FILM CLIPS
NOTE: Several clips contain scenes that are graphic and disturbing. Please prepare students accordingly.

Trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5XiOHt8mk4&index=4&list=PL-l6g0KL2UVB-pEolhbHCxOVKSPUW7KsL (2:31 min.)
Provides an overview of the film; gives context for the clips.

Clip 1: “Rescue” (3:10 min.)
The clip begins at 5:13 with a shot of Mahmoud driving to a rescue scene. It ends at 8:23 with a shot of Mahmoud sitting and recovering after the rescue.
We see Mahmoud dig out three children from underneath bombed-out rubble. Two young boys are alive. A baby is dead.

Clip 2: “Visit From a Hero” (4:07 min.)
The clip begins at 13:36 with Mahmoud greeting one of the boys he saved and ends at 17:43 when he describes the visit as “difficult.”
We see the impact of bombing on the psyche of young victims as the boys rescued by Mahmoud desperately cling to him.

Clip 3: “Ceasefire at the Playground” (3:19 min.)
The clip begins at 52:30 with Khaled asking his daughter if she wants to go to the playground. It ends at 55:49 with Khaled in the car with his children. A rare outing for area children is disrupted when aircraft are spotted.

Clip 4: “Exhaustion” (4:29 min.)
The clip begins at 1:11:09 with a shot of a small crowd gathered and a stretcher indicating that someone has been hurt. It ends at 1:15:38 with a shot of Khaled sleeping. We see the devastation of the bombing and the daily struggles of the White Helmets to cope.

Clip 5: “The End of This Story” (3:30 min.)
The clip begins at 1:18:56 with a shot of explosions at night. It ends at 1:22:26 with a slate explaining the fate of the White Helmet members featured in the film. We see burial preparations for a rescue worker who was killed. It is Khaled. We also learn that Mahmoud left Aleppo, but returned and then ended up in Idlib. And we learn that 13.5 million Syrians, including 5.8 million children, are in urgent need of aid.

ACTIVITY

Step 1: Introduction
Begin the lesson by asking students to quickly jot down their answers to this question: “If you had to find credible information about the current situation in Syria before class ended, where would you look?” After 15 seconds or so, invite students to share their answers. What types of sources did they list? Why do they believe those sources would be credible (and what is the basis for that belief)?

Step 2: Analysis Tool
Choose an analysis framework that suits the experience level of your students and review it with them:
• F.A.I.R.: Fair, Accurate, Inclusive (of essential context or perspectives) and Reasonable
• CRAAP Test: Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy and Purpose
• CARS: Credibility, Accuracy, Reasonableness and Support
• I’M VAIN: Independent versus self-interested; Multiple versus lone or sole source; Verifies rather than asserts; Authoritative/Informed versus uninformed sources; Named rather than unnamed sources

Step 3: Practice
To practice using the chosen framework and also learn about Syria, have students independently read:

“Why Is There a War in Syria?” (BBC, Apr. 7, 2017) [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229] - This is a general background piece in the form of a Q&A.

Then, as a class or in small groups, ask students to use the chosen analysis framework to examine the piece. Have students focus on identifying the specific evidence they use to reach conclusions about each aspect of the framework.

Step 4: Screen the Film Clips
To help students see how much a second, divergent source can add to the picture, introduce the film. Show the film trailer so students have context for the clips they’ll see.

Then show the clips, pausing very briefly after each one for students to reflect on and process what they’ve seen.

After all clips have been shown, have students look again at the BBC backgrounder piece* and respond to the following:

1. List key facts or assertions in the article that the film clips affirm.
2. List key facts or assertions in the article that the film clips contradict.
3. What insight does seeing/hearing an individual human story add? What do you know or understand now that you didn’t after only reading the article?

* Less advanced students might work in groups with each small group re-examining only one segment of the backgrounder and then sharing its analysis with the class.

**Step 5: Discussion**
Review responses to the three items and discuss what types of information (both factual and emotional) a documentary can convey that a typical news story does not. Help students see what they miss if they look only at headlines or brief summaries.

**OPTIONAL Step 6: Practice**
Assign students to analyze a second information source, using the news analysis framework and also considering how a documentary adds to what an information source says. Select a source that is different in form from both the BBC overview and the documentary film. Use your own source, “The Fall of Aleppo to Bashar Al-Assad’s Soldiers Seems Imminent” (a print story from The Economist), or “Return to Aleppo: We Are in Hell” (a 2014 TV news story).

**Step 7: Wrap-Up**
Have students do a short free write: “What I learned today (or from this lesson) about Syria is… and that matters because…”

As time allows, invite students who are willing to share what they wrote with the class to do so. Discuss the connections to current policy debates over intervention, including use of military force, in Syria.

**EXTENSIONS/ADAPTATIONS**
Repeat the lesson with The War Show and/or Dalya’s Other Country. Also consider following up with the lesson from Return to Homs (http://www.pbs.org/pov/returntohoms/lesson-plan/)

Imagine that you are one of the young people featured in one of the films. It’s seventy years in the future and you are now a great-grandparent. Your descendants are looking back on the destruction of Syria and asking what you did and why. Write a letter to them that explains your choice to stay/leave, how you saw the situation, what was most important to you.

Hold a pro/con debate: Bashar Al-Assad should be arrested and tried for war crimes, including crimes against humanity.
Choose a public policy issue related to Syria (e.g., the United States should send ground troops to protect Syrian civilians, or the United States should accept more Syrian refugees) and ask students to research it and write policy briefs reflecting their own conclusions. Have students share their briefs with their members of Congress and/or the president.

Read a novel or poem by a Syrian author. Compare stories told in print to those told in documentaries like the ones in the lesson. Check: https://arablit.org/for-teachers/syrian-writers/ or https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/syria/articles/10-syrian-writers-you-should-know/ for suggested books.

RESOURCES

POV

*Dalya’s Other Country*: http://www.pbs.org/pov/dalyasothercountry
*The War Show*: http://www.pbs.org/thewarshow
*Last Men in Aleppo*: http://www.pbs.org/pov/lastmeninaleppo
*Return to Homs*: http://www.pbs.org/pov/returntohoms
*4.1 Miles*: http://www.pbs.org/pov/4point1miles
*From Damascus to Chicago*: http://pbs.org/pov/fromdamascustochicago

The sites include general discussion guides, as well as additional activity ideas and resources.

This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

Fake News

Factcheck.org: "How to Spot Fake News"
A project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, this website aims to help readers identify propaganda and untruths.

*NPR: "Fake or Real?: How to Self-Check the News and Get the Facts"
http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/12/05/503581220/fake-or-real-how-to-self-check-the-news-and-get-the-facts
Wynne Davis provides guidance for readers trying to discern reliably sourced news from propaganda.

Project Look Sharp
www.projectlooksharp.org
This media literacy initiative offers lesson plans and materials for teaching media literacy.

*School Library Journal: "The Smell Test: Educators Can Counter Fake News with Information Literacy. Here’s How*

In this article, Linda Jacobson explains how educators can counteract propaganda by teaching information literacy.

_School Library Journal: "Truth, Truthiness, Triangulation: A News Literacy Toolkit for a 'Post-Truth' World"

Joyce Valenza provides tools for reading reporting and analyzing its truthfulness.

Syria

_The Guardian_: “Arab Spring: An Interactive Timeline of Middle East Protests”
This timeline of the events of the Arab Spring uprisings and government responses includes events in Syria.

Institute for War and Peace Reporting: “Syria Stories”
https://syriastories.net/
This website offers reports and blog posts from Syrian citizen-journalists, with a focus on women’s stories.

This website provides reports about the Syrian conflict from the United Nations on an ongoing basis.

U.S. Department of State: Syria
www.state.gov/p/nea/ci/sy/
This official U.S. government website offers an overview of U.S.-Syrian relations, including a set of links to additional information on Syria.

STANDARDS

_Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects_
(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

**RH.11-12.3**
Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

**RH.11-12.5**
Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.
RH.11-12.6
Evaluate authors’ differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors’ claims, reasoning and evidence.

RH.11-12.7
Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

RH.11-12.8
Evaluate an author’s premises, claims and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

SL.11-12.1
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.11-12.2
Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

SL.11-12.4
Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.

SL.11-12.6
Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

W.9-10.2d
Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic

W.11-12.2d
Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary and techniques such as metaphor, simile and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.

Content Knowledge: [http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/] a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process. Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.
Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.
Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Faith Rogow, Ph.D., is the co-author of *The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World* (Corwin, 2012) and was president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. She has written discussion guides and lesson plans for more than 250 independent films.