



JOURNALISM AND RESPONSIBILITY

This lesson examines the recent controversy in the media surrounding charges of government propaganda and irresponsible newsgathering by journalists. Students will also examine media ownership and censorship. Through research, dialogue, role-playing, and viewing an episode from public television's [IN THE LIFE](#) series, students will define for themselves what journalism is and how controls on the broadcast, print and online media can shape the stories that are reported. As a culminating activity students will research journalistic guidelines or media control and write a position paper stating their views.

PREPARATION

Grade Level: Grades 9-12

Time Allotment:

Three 45 minute class periods.

Subject Matter: Civics, English -- Media Literacy, journalistic practices, and language arts.

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Analyze how the media covers news stories.
- Discuss and debate various viewpoints surrounding current media controversies.
- Identify what censorship is and when censorship occurs.

Standards:

Civics Standard 11

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/standardDetails.asp?subjectID=14&standardID=11>

Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs, and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society

Benchmark: Knows beliefs that are common to American political culture (e.g., belief in equality of opportunity; mistrust of power, as well as high expectations of what elected officials and government should do; the need to admit to faults or shortcomings in the society; the belief that social, economic, or political problems can be alleviated through collective effort)

Civics Standard 13

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/standardDetails.asp?subjectID=14&standardID=13>

Understands the character of American political and social conflict and factors that tend to prevent or lower its intensity

Benchmark: Knows why people may agree on values or principles in the abstract but disagree

when they are applied to specific issues such as the right to life and capital punishment.

Civics Standard 19

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/standardDetails.asp?subjectID=14&standardID=19>

Understands what is meant by "the public agenda," how it is set, and how it is influenced by public opinion and the media

Benchmarks: Understands how political institutions and political parties shape the public agenda; Understands why issues important to some groups and the nation do not become part of the public agenda; Understands the concept of public opinion, and knows alternative views of the proper role of public opinion in a democracy; Understands how public opinion is measured, used in public debate, and how it can be influenced by the government and the media; Understands the influence that public opinion has on public policy and the behavior of public officials; Understands the ways in which television, radio, the press, newsletters, and emerging means of communication influence American politics; and understands the extent to which various traditional forms of political persuasion have been replaced by electronic media; Knows how to use criteria such as logical validity, factual accuracy, emotional appeal, distorted evidence, and appeals to bias or prejudice in order to evaluate various forms of historical and contemporary political communication (e.g., Lincoln's "House Divided," Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?," Chief Joseph's "I Shall Fight No More Forever," Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream," campaign advertisements, political cartoons)

Language Arts Standard 4

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/Benchmark.asp?SubjectID=7&StandardID=4>

Gathers and uses information for research purposes.

Benchmarks: Uses appropriate research methodology; Uses a variety of print and electronic sources to gather information for research topics; Synthesizes information from multiple research studies to draw conclusions that go beyond those found in any of the individual studies; Writes research papers.

Computer Resources:

- Modem: 56.6 Kbps or faster.
- Browser: Netscape Navigator 4.0 or above or Internet Explorer 4.0 or above. Macintosh computer: System 8.1 or above and at least 32 MB of RAM.
- Personal computer (Pentium II 350 MHz or Celeron 600 MHz) running Windows® 95 or higher and at least 32 MB of RAM
- [RealPlayer](#)
- Adobe Acrobat Reader 4.0 or higher. Download the free Adobe Acrobat reader here: <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>.

Materials:

Teachers will need the following supplies:

- Board and/or chart paper
- Large, felt-tipped pens
- Ideally, a screen on which to project the Web-based video clips
- Handouts of Web resources if computers are not available in the classroom.
- Copies of the STUDENT ORGANIZER
- Hard copies of all handouts (optional)
- Video of [IN THE LIFE](#) "Setting the Record Straight," Episode #1409.

Students will need the following supplies:

- Computers with the capacities indicated above
- Notebook or journal
- Pens/pencils

Web Resources:

Before teaching this lesson, bookmark all of the Web sites used in the lesson on each computer in your classroom, create a word-processing document with all of the Web sites listed as hyperlinks, upload all links to an online bookmarking utility such as www.portaportal.com, or make paper handouts of necessary Web pages so that students can access the information on these sites. Make sure that your computer has necessary media players, like RealPlayer, to show streaming clips (if applicable).

Preview all of the sites and videos before presenting them to your class.

- Journalism.org -- "What to Expect from the Press"
<http://www.journalism.org/resources/guidelines/rights.asp>
This Web site offers guidelines for what journalists should offer and what concerned citizens should expect from the press. This compilation of common professional principles are a result of over five years of research.
- In the Life
<http://www.inthelifetv.org>
Web site of IN THE LIFE, the national television newsmagazine series that reports on gay and lesbian issues and culture.
- Department of Education
<http://www.ed.gov/fund/grant/about/grantmaking/pt504.html>
This Web site provides an explanation of the Department of Education's grant making procedures and responsibilities.
- Seattle Post-Intelligencer -- "Who gets to pick what we watch? Tune in"
http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/tv/223063_tv06.html
This article explains the different sides of who is for and against media control and concludes that the public needs to become involved in the debate
- American Family Association
<http://www.afa.net/>

An organization is primarily focused on the influence of television and other media in our society and represents and stands for traditional family values.

- Parents Television Council

<http://www.parentstv.org/>

The PTC is a nonpartisan group that works with elected and appointed government officials to enforce broadcast decency standards.

- TV Watch

<http://www.televisionwatch.org>

This organization believes that parents should decide and manage their children's television viewing and offers support and education to do so. They do not believe that more regulation is the solution.

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STEPS

--Lesson 1 (Defining Media)--

Goal: To have the students critically analyze how the media covers news stories.

Introductory Activities

1. Begin a class discussion about journalism and what students feel is the roles and responsibilities of journalist. You can use the following questions to help you structure the class discussion:
 - What is a journalist?
 - Is a journalist allowed to express an opinion, or should journalists just report the facts? Are there instances when a journalist can express opinion, for example in an editorial?
 - What are a journalist's responsibilities? Do they have a responsibility to the public?
 - What qualifications do you need to be a journalist?
 - What is a legitimate news source?
 - When is a little bias too much bias?
 - Whose responsibility is it to set journalistic guidelines? The public? The government? Journalist organizations?
 - Who are the stakeholders in the interplay between journalism and society?
2. Ask the students if they know who Jeff Gannon/James Guckert is. If some students know who he is ask them for a list of words to describe what they know about Jeff Gannon. Write these words on the board. Keep this list at a later date as you will revisit them at the end of the lesson. If the students do not know who Jeff Gannon/James Guckert is explain that they will learn about him through a video news segment later in the lesson. You may also want to explain that he was a White House reporter from 2003 to 2005 and that Jeff Gannon was a pseudonym for his real name, James Guckert. It was uncovered that he worked for a news organization that was backed by a conservative group and this caused controversy over how he was able to obtain a press pass using an assumed name. For a detailed background on Jeff Gannon/James Guckert go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeff_Gannon.

Learning Activities Part I

1. Show the students the following segment from IN THE LIFE's "Setting the Record Straight." Begin the segment when host Janeane Garofalo says, "The art of spin has been described as ..." End the video when a man says, "It's important for people in government, as well as the media, to do what's right, not just what's arguably legal."
2. Ask the students if they have heard about "Video News Releases" (VNRs). A VNR is a short film clip that is usually produced by a public relations firm and distributed to television stations and networks. For a detailed overview and explanation visit <http://www.worldandi.com/public/1994/september/ci11.cfm>. Based on the perspectives presented in the IN THE LIFE episode, how do the students feel about VNRs? Do they think

there are other viewpoints about the use of VNRs that were left out? What are some of those other viewpoints?

3. At the end of the IN THE LIFE segment, David Walker from the U.S. Government Accountability Office comments: "It's important that if you are using tax payer money to try and influence them -- they have a right to know. The law represents the minimum standard of acceptable behavior -- it's important for people in government as well as the media to do what's right, to do what's right -- not just what's arguably legal." Ask the students to explain why they agree or disagree with this position.
4. Begin the video again where you left off: music will start to play, a newspaper is on the screen and a man says, "The second sort of strategy is to pay..." End the segment when you hear "So that's the biggest fear that I have and the scariest part of all this is that there may not be sufficient outrage out there to make them stop."
5. Break the students into groups of four or five and ask them to discuss the following questions:
 - Did you know about the instances where journalists were paid to cover issues? Does this seem appropriate? Why or why not?
 - What are the important issues in the Jeff Gannon/James Guckert case?
 - What do you think the Media Matters representative meant when he said: "A lot of people were wanting to change the discussion from Jeff Gannon's lack of credentials as a journalist, his employer's obvious partisan affiliations to his other activities."
 - Using the Jeff Gannon case as an example, do you think that the media sometimes focuses on sexuality and as a result shifts the focus of the entire story?
6. Hand out the "[What to Expect from the Press](#)" document from Journalism.org and ask each group to read the guidelines listed. Ask students whether they would add to or change any of the guidelines and to explain the reasoning behind their answers. Write the changes on chart paper and tape the results on the wall.

Learning Activities Part II

1. Hand out the STUDENT ORGANIZER. Explain that each group will act as a newspaper publisher/journalist and must decide how they will present the Jeff Gannon story to their readers.
2. Have students work on the assignment individually in class, and, if necessary, complete what they can for homework.
3. Then, have the groups get together and use their individual research to determine together which facts will be covered in their newspaper's Jeff Gannon story. They should also come up with a name for the article.
4. Have each group present to the class what they would cover in their articles. The students should be prepared to comment on their choices.

5. Finally, if you created a list in the introductory activity about Jeff Gannon, return to the list and have them note what they have learned since then. Ask them if they would add to or delete from the original list they created. What influenced the changes they made to the list? Write down the changes on chart paper.

Lesson 2: Who Controls the Media?

Goal: To have students analyze who and what should control commercial and public media.

Introductory Activities:

1. Begin the IN THE LIFE "Setting the Record Straight" tape at the beginning of the episode when Janeane Garofalo says, "Gays and Lesbians have often been portrayed as a dangerous influence on America's children." End segment when a woman says, "Ya know and somewhere down the line when they grow up I hope that's what they pick out of this -- more than anything -- they'll stand up for themselves when they need to." As they watch the video, ask each student to write down if they see instances of censorship, or the demand to censor.
2. Ask the students to share their thoughts and reactions to the story. This can be a hard topic for students but ask them, regardless of how they personally feel about homosexuality, how they feel about the Department of Education asking public television stations to alter their programming decisions.

Learning Activities

1. At one point in the segment the narrator says: "In an effort to create fair and balanced reporting, mainstream media often pit LGBT people against opponents like Lafferty, making the debate about homosexuality rather than the broader issue, in this case, alleged censorship." Ask the students if they agree or disagree with this statement and to explain their answers.
2. Ask the students to define censorship and write their answers on the board. Be prepared to write an official definition of censorship on the board.
3. Ask the students if they think the "Postcards from Buster" case is an instance of attempted censorship. Why or why not? Ask students to identify specific points made in the video segment that influenced their thoughts on this case. Ask them if they think this particular news segment is in any way biased? Why or why not?
4. Explain that in this particular case, approximately 40% of "Postcards from Buster" is funded by the Department of Education. Now ask the students if their opinion about the occurrence of censorship in this situation has changed. Explain that this particular Department of Education grant requires that programs "appeal to all of America's children by providing them with content and characters with which they can identify. Diversity will be incorporated into the fabric of the series to help children understand and respect differences and learn to live in a multicultural society. The series will avoid stereotypical images of all kinds and show modern multi-ethnic/lingual/cultural families and children." Ask them if this influences

their viewpoint. If you want to provide your students with background on the grant-making procedures of the Department of Education go to this Web site <http://www.ed.gov/fund/grant/about/grantmaking/pt504.html>.

5. Divide the students into pairs. Explain to them that at another point in the video someone commented on whether we (the public) should be disturbed that in some cases commercial and public television networks air or do not air certain broadcasts because of the public policy set by the party (Republican or Democrat) in power . For example, if a television network decides not to air a program supporting an issue a current administration is against, should we (the public) be disturbed by this? Have one student from each pair take the side that the public should be concerned. Ask the other student to take the side that the public shouldn't be concerned. Ask the students to conduct research (in class or as homework) and to take notes to support their position. You can give your students the resources in the bookmarked Web sites section of the lesson plan or you can encourage them to conduct research on their own.
6. After the students have completed their research and taken notes on their positions, explain that each student will get 3-4 minutes to state their side. After 3-4 minutes remind the students that it's time to switch and let their partners present. Explain that the person listening should take notes and listen closely because afterwards you will ask for a few volunteers to share their thoughts.
7. When each pair has had a chance to present their positions ask a few students to share what they learned. An interesting twist when asking the students to report is to ask each pair to switch positions so that students have to explain, without judgment or criticism, the argument their partner made in support of his/her position. After each member of the pair has presented their partner's position, ask the students to consider whether their partners fairly and accurately represented their views.

Culminating Activity/Assessment:

1. Each student will write a position paper on the issues discussed in class. Explain that they will use the questions in Part II of the STUDENT ORGANIZER to guide their position paper.
2. Assign a date for the papers to be handed in and at that time conduct a class discussion asking the students to share their positions, and what led them to their conclusions.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

- Have students research blogging and the news. Is this new journalism tool influencing mainstream media or vice versa?
- Visit [PBS TeacherSource Media Literacy Resources](#) for activities and a quiz to help your students learn more about Media Literacy.

- Ask your students to visit the [PBS Don't buy it -- Get Media Smart!](#) Web site for games and activities to help them analyze media.

Part II -- Position Paper

Directions: Write a 1-2 page position paper on one of the below topics. This is an opportunity for you to express your view on this position using a combination of research and personal opinion. Use the questions as a guide in writing your position paper. Include a bibliography of the sources you used in researching your position.

Position on Journalism

- What is a journalist?
- Is a journalist allowed to express an opinion, or should journalists just report the facts? Are there instances when a journalist can express opinion, for example in an editorial?
- What are a journalist's responsibilities? Do they have a responsibility to the public?
- What qualifications do you need to be a journalist?
- What is a legitimate news source?
- When is a little bias too much bias?
- Whose responsibility is it to set journalistic guidelines? The public? The government? Journalist organizations?
- Who are the stakeholders in the interplay between journalism and society?

Position on Media Control

- Should there be controls on commercial and/or public television. If so, who should decide what is broadcast?
- Should there be any government control on media? If so, should there be limits on the control?
- What is the difference between legitimate media control and censorship?
- Do your answers to the questions above reveal your own cultural/political beliefs?