

## **The Internet and Democracy Lesson**

### **For the Miller Center National Discussion and Debate Series**

**Author:** Greg Timmons

**Teacher Note:** This lesson relies on access to news media segments featured on You Tube. If you do not have access to this website, you can find these news stories on the websites of the news agencies. The activities in this lesson are built sequentially, but can also be presented as stand-alone lessons.

**Subjects(s):** Civics, Historical Understanding, Media Literacy, Language Arts

**Time:** Opening activity: 20 minutes  
Main Activity Part 1: 1-2 class periods  
Main Activity Part 2: 1-2 class periods

**Grade Level:** 9-12

#### **Lesson Objectives (“The student will...”)**

- conduct a self-assessment on their political information gathering practices and understanding of possible bias from the sources of this information
- compare and contrast newscasts from two periods in American history and assess the advantages and disadvantages of a greater access to political information.
- compare and contrast newscasts from different ideological perspectives and assess the potential problems from limiting one’s source of political information.

#### **Lesson Overview:**

In the past quarter century, the way Americans obtain their political information has changed dramatically. What were once only a few sources (four major television networks’ evening news broadcasts and newspapers) is now a myriad of anytime, anywhere—all the time, everywhere delivery systems from cable news to talk radio to blogs. The Internet, cable and satellite communication and the different ways to receive, share, and produce political information have changed the way we think about and process political information. Questions that arise are, “Are Americans better informed? Do they hold or at least recognize the validity of other opinions and perspectives? Is democracy better served by these new sources and delivery systems of political information?”

In this lesson students will participate in a variety of activities to explore these questions. They will conduct a self-assessment survey on their political information gathering practices and understanding before and after the lesson to assess their learning. They will also compare and contrast newscasts from two periods in American history and newscasts from different ideological perspectives and then write separate essays that address central questions surrounding these issues.

**Materials:**

- Internet Access
- Student handouts:
  - Student Handout 1: News Gathering Survey
  - Student Handout 2: Comparing Newscasts of Past and Present
  - Student Handout 3: Comparing Ideological Slant in the News

**Procedures:****Opening Activity**

Before class begins, prepare copies of the survey handout, “News Gathering Survey.”

When class convenes, pass out the survey band remind students that their responses are anonymous. Give students five minutes to complete the survey then return them to you; tally up the results on the front board for each survey item and hold a discussion on the following questions:

- In how many questions did you feel you had a solid understanding on the topic being asked? Which ones?
- Do you feel the Internet is a good place to obtain valuable political information you can use? Why or why not?
- Do you feel the news source you predominantly use has a political slant? If so, which way? Is that why you view it?
- Do you actively seek out other perspectives on a political news story or just trust the one you normally use? Explain your answer.
- Do you participate in “comments” sections of news stories featured in online news sources expressing your views to news stories you view? If so, why? If not, why not?

Keep the results of the survey for the assessment section of the lesson.

**Main Activity****Part 1: Comparing Newscasts of the Past and Present**

In this activity, students will compare and contrast two news stories, one from the Vietnam War era and the other on the Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.

1. Tell students in this activity they will be comparing newscasts on two American wars, one in the past and one in the present. Make sure students have access to the Internet either through personal computers or an overhead projection you can show to the entire class.
2. Divide students into small study/discussion groups.
3. Distribute the handout, “Comparing Newscasts of Past and Present” to all students. Pay close attention to the “Background” section by having students read the section aloud or read it to them. Then review the directions.
4. Provide students time to review the newscasts (this can also be done as homework) and discuss the questions on their handout. Emphasize to students that both the images and

the narration are important to track and understand. Then allow students time to complete the assessment assignment (this can be done as homework.)

## **Part 2: Comparing Ideological Slant in the News**

In this activity, students will look at three newscasts examining of the Arizona immigration law of 2010. Two of the newscasts have a clear ideological slant, but let students discover this for themselves. Students will discuss the similarities, differences and biases they observe in the different newscasts' coverage of the Arizona law. Students will then assess the impact of ideological bias in news reporting on how people's interpretation of the news.

1. Tell students in this activity, they will be comparing three different newscasts to see if any of them have an ideological slant and if so, what might be the impact of this. Make sure students have access to the Internet either through personal computer or an overhead projection you can show to the entire class.
2. Divide students into small study/discussion groups.
5. Distribute the handout, "Comparing Ideological Slant in the News" to all students. Pay close attention to the "Background" section by having students read the section aloud or read it to them. Then review the directions.
3. Provide students time to review the newscasts (this can also be done as homework) and discuss the questions on their handout. Emphasize to students that the images, the narration, and the interview content are important to track and understand. Then allow students time to complete the assessment assignment (this can be done as homework.)

## **Assessment**

- Assess students on the depth of conversation and responses during their discussion sessions.
- Review the survey results from the opening activity. Conduct another survey to compare the class's responses before the lesson and after. Have students do a self-assessment of what they've learned by reviewing the survey and comparing earlier answers with ones they have now.
- Assess students' essays for adherence to the assignment requirements and thoughtful commentary.

## **Extension Activities**

- For a more humorous side of news coverage, check out *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* at <http://www.thedailyshow.com> or *The Steven Colbert Report* at <http://www.colbetnation.com>. Individual news stories on various subjects can be found through the sites' search engines. Students can conduct a similar analysis of news coverage as they did in Activity 3, "Comparing Ideological Slant."
- Have student review various campaign websites and identify how the campaign uses the Internet to inform supporters of the candidate's views on the issues, recruit volunteers and donors, and provide useful information on the candidate's activities and developments in the campaign. They can compare and contrast two or more campaign

sites' effectiveness in these areas and participate in a campaign they want to support through these virtual means.

- Most news producers have websites that invite readers to make comments on various stories. Have students participate in one of these comment sites from a news source that is either inline or opposed to their own ideological position. Have them engage in a civil conversation with other members on any issue of interest being discussed. Students can also do the same on a political blog. Have them participate for a week and then summarize their experience on an Internet posting on the school's website or other appropriate method of communicating.
  - Have students present to the class one of the PBS News Hour Extra lessons on the Internet and journalism:
    - "The Whole World is Watching"  
[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/middle\\_east/iran\\_citizen\\_journalism.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/middle_east/iran_citizen_journalism.html)
    - NewsHour Extra: Arts/Media Archive  
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/arts/archive.html>
- Have students participate in these PBS NewsHour Extra features:
- Student Voices <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/speakout/>
  - NewsHour Student Reporting Labs  
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/speakout/srlabs/climatechange1.html>

## **Correlation to National Standards**

### **McREL**

#### **Civics**

- Standard 1: Understands ideas about civic life, politics, and government
- Standard 9: Understands the importance of Americans sharing and supporting certain values, beliefs, and principles of American constitutional democracy.
- Standard 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
- Standard 13: Understands the character of American political and social conflict and factors that tend to prevent or lower its intensity
- Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life
- Standard 19: Understands what is meant by "the public agenda," how it is set, and how it is influenced by public opinion and the media

#### **Historical Understanding**

- Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective

#### **Language Arts**

##### **Writing**

- Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
- Standard 3: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in writing compositions

##### **Reading**

- Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes
- Standard 7: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts

### Viewing

- Standard 9: uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

### Media

- **Standard 10:** Understands the characteristics and components of the media

### Resources

#### Online

- **FactCheck.org** <http://www.factcheck.org/>
- **Media Matters** <http://mediamatters.org>
- **Media Research Center** <http://www.mrc.org/public/default.aspx>
- **Accuracy in Media** <http://www.aim.org>
- **Politico.com** <http://www.politico.com/>
- **CQPolitics.com** <http://innovation.cq.com>
- **Real Clear Politics** <http://www.realclearpolitics.com>
- **Pew Internet** <http://www.pewinternet.org/>

#### Books:

- Matthew Hindman. *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. Princeton University Press. 2009
- Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Capella *Echo Chamber*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2010
- Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner. “New Media and Internet Activism: from the “Battle of Seattle” to Blogging,” *New Media and Society*, 2004
- Robert McChesney and John Nichols. *The Death and Life of American Journalism*. Nation Books. 2010.
- Joe Trippi. *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet, and the Overthrow of Everything*. Harper Collins. 2004.

#### Author Bio

Greg Timmons has been a social studies teacher for over 30 years. He has written numerous lessons for NewsHour Extra. He is also a freelance curriculum writer, and education consultant for various PBS programs including FRONTLINE, the NewsHour’s *the.News*, *NewsHour Extra*, WNET and WETA specials, and the Ken Burns’ series *The War* and *The National Parks: America’s Greatest Idea*. He resides in Washington state and Montana.

## Student Handout 1: News gathering Survey

**Directions:** Respond to the statements below by marking Agree, Disagree, or No Opinion.

- Without an independent press to provide free and unfettered political information, democracy would be impossible.

Agree

No Opinion

Disagree

- Over the past quarter century, professional journalists working for newspapers and television networks have gained more respect and a wider audience.

Agree

No Opinion

Disagree

- Most people prefer to hear news that is heavily laced with political opinions they agree with rather than nonpartisan reporting that presents both sides of the issue.

Agree

No Opinion

Disagree

- If Internet political information sources become the major source for news, there soon will be an information divide for only those who can afford high speed connections, cable and/or satellite systems.

Agree

No Opinion

Disagree

- The Internet is a “cesspool” where false information thrives.

Agree

No Opinion

Disagree

- With the use of handheld digital devices and wireless communication, Americans have unprecedented opportunities for obtaining a wide range of political information. This, in turn will make them more politically aware and more capable of making sound, reasoned decisions.

Agree

No Opinion

Disagree

- In the past, young people have been nonparticipants in the political process. The Internet now promises to turn this around with social networking, viral emails, and video-sharing sites.

Agree

No Opinion

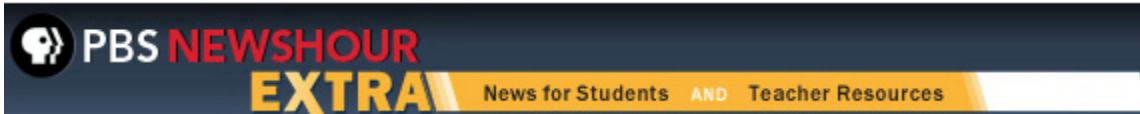
Disagree

- Citizen journalists will someday be more widely viewed respected by the public than traditional journalists.

Agree

No Opinion

Disagree



## Student Handout 2: Comparing Newscasts of Past and Present

**Background:** From the 1950s through the 1970s, in what was known as the “Age of Broadcast News,” most Americans got their political information through news broadcasts in the evenings on the television evening news. Newspapers and news magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* were a distant second. The evening news was a one-half hour program, once a day, usually between 5:00 and 6:30 pm, after people came home from work. There was no opportunity to catch “reruns” or second broadcasts. These news programs were broadcast through local affiliate stations associated with the four major television networks of the time, ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS and were “anchored” by a top-rated journalist (or sometimes a pair of journalists) who projected an aura of seriousness, professionalism, and trust. Print media supplemented broadcast news and, because of their production timeline, could present stories in more depth. But most people got their news from television because it was compelling, timely, and visual.

Today, people get their news from a variety of sources and delivery systems, anytime, anywhere. Cable and satellite delivery systems, computers, cell phone, and pocket televisions allow people to get information all the time, everywhere. Not only have opportunities for obtaining information expanded, so have the forms and sources of this information. There are a multitude of news sources, providing straight reporting news, as well as opinions and commentary, news with an ideological slant and news from foreign countries. This now gives people opportunities they never had to see and hear information from a vast array of viewpoints allowing the viewer to gain a much broader perspective of any given topic, event, or subject.

**Directions:** In this activity, you will view two news stories, one, a Vietnam War-era broadcast on the Vietcong (the enemy of the United States’ efforts to contain Communism) and the other, a 2008 webcast from Al Jazeera/English, on the Taliban (the enemy of United States’ efforts to stop global terrorism.) Al Jazeera/English is a Middle East-based media network that presents a more Middle East-centered (some would say biased) look at the news. View the two clips, possibly more than once to gain a solid understanding of content, perspective, and impression. Then compare and contrast the newscasts’ presentation, content, and impact on the viewer through the discussion questions below.

NBC News *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* news of the Vietnam War, 1969.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F66SeCXIt7E&feature=related>

Al Jazeera/English Network news of the Taliban fighters regrouping for a spring offensive April, 2008 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RC1GILfw2kU>

### Discussion Questions:

- Describe at least five general differences you see in these two newscasts.
- How are the newscasts similar in content, story line, and relation to United States foreign policy?

- Examine the standards of journalism presented in the two newscasts: balanced reporting (more than one opinion), onsite reporting, background explanation, and concluding points). From which newscast do you feel these standards are best represented and why?
- Identify the point of view presented in each of these newscasts. How are they similar and different? How does this difference affect the viewer's ability to gain a full understanding of the information being presented?
- What biases or limits to understanding the topic might viewer experience after viewing each of these reports?

**Assessment Assignment:**

Individually, write a paragraph on your findings. Be sure to include your thoughts on the discussion questions. Address the central question, "What are the advantages and disadvantages for Americans to have access to a wide range of news sources, including international news, and what impact might this wide range sources have on democracy?"

## Student Handout 3: Comparing Ideological Slant in the News

**Background:** In the “Age of Broadcast News,” the sources for political information were primarily the nightly news and newspapers, both of which were committed to telling both sides of the story and in most cases (except in the newspapers editorials or the news program’s “commentary” section) were committed to telling both sides of the story. People were presented with information and perspectives they may not agree with but these were usually accompanied with those that they did agree with. Today’s sources for political information through cable news and the Internet let citizens choose the ideological slant of nearly all information they receive. These sources often provide both sides of the issue, through their own commentary and guests, but a quick listen to the phrasing of news stories and tone of voice or a quick perusal of their website headlines provides a clear indication of their ideological perspective. What does this mean for democracy?

**Directions:** In this activity, you will review three newscasts on the Arizona immigration law passed in April, 2010. Each newscast represents a journalistic style distinct from the others. These are only single representations from each of these sources and shouldn’t be considered a comprehensive examination of every story presented by these news networks. However, for the purposes of this activity, viewing these examples provides good opportunities for discussion of the news Americans are consuming, digesting, and making decisions on for the political future of the country.

### Video Clips

- PBS NewsHour background story (4/23/2010) and guest commentators on the Arizona immigration law [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/law/jan-june10/immigration\\_04-23.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/law/jan-june10/immigration_04-23.html)
- *Fox News*’ Sean Hannity hosts a debate (4/28/2010) on the Arizona immigration law <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xC65jShJYXs>
- *MSNBC*’s Keith Olbermann discusses the Arizona immigration law with Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez (D-Calif.) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhmG1\\_oD-nE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhmG1_oD-nE)

### Discussion Questions

- What similarities and differences do you see in how each newscast sets up the featured debate/discussion? Do any of the set ups indicate a potential bias or slant? If so, which ones and how?
- What similarities and differences do you see in how the hosts facilitate the discussion? What impression does this facilitation style give you as to the bias of the facilitator?
- Explain whether the hosts have other agendas besides the topic of the segment? If so, describe these agendas.

- Do you feel any of the newscasts provided a complete picture of the Arizona immigration law? If so, which ones and how? Which newscast did you feel was the most compelling to watch? Why?
- How might these newscasts provide a feeling of validation for their intended audiences? Do you feel any of the newscasts create a polarization of political discourse? If so, which ones and how?
- If people received their political information from only one of these sources all the time, how might it affect their political positions on issues and how might it affect their participation in American democracy?

**Assessment Assignment:**

Individually, write a paragraph on your findings. Be sure to include your thoughts on the discussion questions. Address the statement, “Obtaining political information from only one ideological source results in Americans holding false and distorted views of reality.”