

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 Jazerra/English, on the Taliban (the enemy of United States’ efforts to stop global terrorism.) Al Jazerra/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 Jazerra/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?"