

# UNIT

# 8

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## *The Media and Your Right to Know: How Information Shapes Public Policy*

### ◆ **OBJECTIVES**

- 1) Understand the importance of the media in shaping public debate in a democracy
- 2) Understand the form and content of different kinds of media
- 3) Explore the question of media bias in its coverage of events
- 4) Understand how public policy is influenced by information and access

### ◆ **TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED**

- 1) Web access for online projects and research
- 2) Examples of local newspapers (online links will be provided)

### ◆ **ACTIVITIES**

- 1) Group Activity 1: “The Media and Your Right to Know. How Does the Media Function in a Democracy?”
- 2) Group Activity 2: “Tracking a News Story”
- 3) Group Activity 3: “Watching the News”

### **SUMMARY of the LESSON**

The goal of this lesson is to explain the role of the media in distributing information and shaping public policy. Politics is often a battlefield of ideas that shape the character of local, state and federal laws and regulations. Various agendas and ideas compete for regulatory and financial support from politicians and their constituents. The participation of all citizens in the democratic process is based upon the assumption that everyone has access to relevant information and can make intelligent choices about candidates and policies. Citizens expect public officials to respect their concerns and further their interests. Access to this information is a central concern in a democracy.

The Internet has changed the landscape of information and access and opens up many opportunities for research and activism. This lesson provides a guide to the media as a shaper of public opinion. The students will review the format and content of newspapers and television news to evaluate their handling of public issues.

# ***The Media And Your Right To Know***

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## ***Implementation Outline***

- 1. The media and your right to know: How does the media function in a democracy?**
- 2. How do news stories evolve? What is the impact of news on decision-making?**
- 3. How does the media use opinion polls?**

# ***TEACHER'S GUIDE to CLASS DISCUSSION***

## ***UNIT 8: The Media and Your Right To Know***

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### ***Teacher's Note!***

Students are aware of media. It is all around them, regardless of whether or not they connect media with its impact on public policy. It may be valuable to use this unit in parallel with other units to increase awareness over time of the importance of media and public policy. Excellent Internet resources are offered for a more in-depth exploration of media.

### **1. Student Activity**



***Student Activity 1: The Media and Your Right to Know. How Does the Media Function in a Democracy?*** Use the questions included in Handout 1 to explore students' information gathering habits and discuss the role of the media.

### **2. How do news stories evolve? What is the impact of news on decision-making?**

- Normally, a story begins as a news item in one of the various sections of the paper. Stories might result from a long investigation or be a breaking story from current events such as the attacks perpetrated against the U.S. on September 11<sup>th</sup>.
- Some stories seem to take on a life of their own. If the topic merits enough attention, the paper's editorial board may express an opinion. Discuss the differences between news coverage and commentary. Officially, a paper separates its coverage of an event from the political opinion(s) of its staff. An example of this can be seen during political campaigns when a paper covers a field of candidates even though it may decide to endorse one above the others.
- Papers also publish opinion editorials (or op-eds) from permanent members of their staff or outside authorities. These accounts are understood to be expressions of individual opinion. In response to their coverage, newspapers receive and publish letters from the community. These letters are often the last to appear at the end of the news cycle. For example, a political candidate gives a speech announcing a policy position or recommendation. A paper might cover the event and produce an article and photographs. If the topic merits further commentary, it may produce an editorial in support or opposition to the candidate's ideas. It may publish opinion editorials, cartoons and letters that further comment on the matter.
- Examples from local news sources will be the best way to illustrate the different functions of the paper. The next step is to ask: who wrote each part and why? There is a big debate about the media and its coverage of events. Personal political opinions influence the coverage of political campaigns? Officially, a newspaper separates the coverage of events from their


commentary on them yet when newspapers report and comment on public events, these two functions can be at odds with one another.



**Student Activity 2: Tracking a News Story.** Use the guide included in Handout 2 to follow the development of specific news to learn about the impact on our society across time. See the attached teacher's guide.



**Student Activity 3: Watching the News.** The goal of this exercise is to have your students pay attention to television news and see what kinds of stories it covers (see Handout 3). You may want to combine this activity with *Activity 2*.

<p><b>Internet Resources</b></p> 	<p><b>September 11<sup>th</sup> News</b></p> <p>An excellent example of the power of media and news coverage occurred during the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. Explore with your students how the news developed and the extent of coverage that this tragic event had all over the world.</p> <p>At <a href="http://www.september11news.com/">http://www.september11news.com/</a></p>
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### 3. How does media use opinion polls?



**Group Activity 4: What's your favorite color?** Start the discussion about why we take Apolls@ to measure public opinion. Ask the students for their favorite colors. See how many students pick the same ones. Then begin with the following example: if a local school decides to change its team colors, what factors should be considered? Student preferences, school history, mascot, rival teams, etc. Asking students their color preferences is one way to begin to find out which colors are best for the school.

- Why do people use polls? To find out what people want and think about things and people! Coke and Pepsi conduct Ataste tests@ to find out what flavors people like. Politicians need to know what their constituents want. Politicians and policy makers must respond to public concerns. Of course, many politicians, like advertisers, try to shape the kinds of responses they get by asking questions in a certain manner.

- Most complex questions cannot be reduced to A, B, C, or D responses. Polls can be used to show more support for one position than truly exists because open discussion leads to complicating factors. For example, if someone asks you for your favorite color, but only gives you red, yellow, green, and blue, you might complain that your answer does not represent your honest opinion. Despite these limitations, polls are an accepted way to measure public opinion.

<p><b>Internet Resources</b></p> 	<p><b>Survey Research, Internet Research, and Political Links</b> The Internet Surveys of American Opinion project is based at the California Institute of Technology and provides interesting links to the major institutes and organizations dedicated to research public opinion, nationally and internationally.</p> <p>At <a href="http://survey.caltech.edu/links.html">http://survey.caltech.edu/links.html</a></p>
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## ***WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?***

- ❖ **Without informed, involved citizens, we allow others to take advantage of political office and encourage politicians to focus on those that make their interests known, whether they serve everyone's interests or not.**
- ❖ **The media records public events, serves as public records, and disseminates information.**
- ❖ **The media is important because it sets an agenda, validates an issue or person, and helps shape public opinion.**
- ❖ **Although the media is an important tool in a democratic society, it is often biased, creates sensationalism, and simplifies complex issues.**

## ***KEY TERMS or CONCEPTS***

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\*Unless otherwise noted, all definitions are taken from Webster Dictionary at <http://www.m-w.com>

- ❖ **Manipulation:** To control or play upon by artful, unfair, or insidious means especially to one's own advantage; to change by artful or unfair means so as to serve one's purpose.
- ❖ **Political Public Opinion:** The collective preferences expressed by people on political issues, policies, institutions, and individuals (Gitelson, Dudley, & Dubnick, 2001, P. 129)
- ❖ **Bias:** An inclination of temperament or outlook; especially, a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment.
- ❖ **Constituents:** A body of citizens entitled to elect a representative (as to a legislative or executive position); the residents in an electoral district; a group or body that patronizes, supports, or offers representation; the people involved in or served by an organization (as a business or institution).



## ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS INDEX

The Illinois Learning Standards for Social Science were developed using the 1985 Illinois State Goals for Social Science, the National Standards for World History, the National Standards for United States History, the National Geography Standards, and National Standards for Civics and Government, other various state and national work, and local standards contributed by team members.

### *Online Resource:*

Information regarding the Illinois State Board of Education Learning Standards can be found online at: <http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/default0.html>

### Illinois Learning Standards Alignment

State Goal	14	Understand political systems, with an emphasis on the United States.
Learning Standards	A, B, C, D, F	
Major Emphasis	14.D.3, 14.D.4, 14.D.5, 16.B.4, 16B.5a-b	
State Goal	16	Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, The United States and other nations



## NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

The Curriculum Standards for Social Studies were developed by a Task Force of the National Council for the Social Studies and approved by the NCSS Board of Directors in April 1994. Its *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* focuses on ten thematic strands in social studies considered essential for educators and students. More information can be found at their website: <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/>

This unit addresses the following thematic standards:

- ❑ Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- ❑ Power, Authority, and Governance
- ❑ Individual Development and Identity
- ❑ Civic, Ideals, and Practices

# ***DICTIONARY and INFORMATION LINKS***

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There are many helpful resources online for you and your students. Those below will just get you started.

## **LibrarySpot.com**

This is one of the best places to begin any kind of information search. It provides direct links to encyclopedias, dictionaries, curriculum ideas and library resources.

<http://www.libraryspot.com/>

## **Dictionary.com**

Free online English dictionary, thesaurus and reference guide, crossword puzzles and other word games, online translator and Word of the Day.

<http://www.Dictionary.com>

## **Webster Dictionary** at [www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)

Online version of the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary. Simply enter keywords for a comprehensive definition, with thesaurus option.

<http://www.m-w.com>

## **AllWords.com** - Dictionary, Guide, Community and More

allwords.com provides English definitions plus a multi-lingual search. Search in German, Dutch, French, Italian, Spanish and English. It provides a helpful pronunciation guide and gives students a chance to see how words often share cultural roots with geographic, and cultural neighbors.

<http://www.allwords.com/>

## **AskJeeves.com**

One of the best search engines on the web. Web users simply put questions to AJeeves@the butler, who then searches the web for relevant information and web sites.

<http://www.askjeeves.com/>



## ***INTERNET RESOURCES on MEDIA***

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Visit the following web sites for more information on how to connect your students to public life. Some of these sites provide information while others outline opportunities for getting students connected to their communities. Unless otherwise noticed, all quoted material is taken directly from the listed web sites.

⊕ ***National Opinion Research Center***

This is a clearinghouse of current and historical poll information.

At <http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/>

⊕ ***Gallup Organization***

This is the home site for a well-known polling firm. You can find information about the latest polls they are involved in.

At <http://www.gallup.com/>

⊕ ***Public Opinion Polls***

This site explains how polls work and how to interpret the numbers.

At <http://www.learner.org/exhibits/statistics>

⊕ ***Pew Research Center***

This organization studies the relationship between citizens, the media and politics. It provides surveys of national topics and social attitudes.

At <http://www.people-press.org/>

⊕ ***PBS: Frontline Program***

The PBS web site provides teacher resources to supplement their television programs. For a very interesting program that covers the role of the media in youth culture is “Merchants of Cool.”

At <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/cool/index.html>

⊕ ***The Center for Media Literacy***

Provides resources for understanding how to “see and hear” the media.

At <http://www.medialit.org/ReadingRoom/keyarticles/key.html>

⊕ ***Additional references are available at the ERIC site***

Using Newspapers as Effective Teaching Tools@Prepared by Nola Kortner Aiex for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communications Digest, #35.

At [http://www.indiana.edu/~eric\\_rec/ieo/digests/d35.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~eric_rec/ieo/digests/d35.html)

# ***CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT***

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This curriculum was developed with the support of a grant to the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL), Loyola University Chicago, from the Technology Innovation Challenge Grant Program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. The project team consisted of:

- ✦ Brian C. Shea, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Philosophy, coordinator and principal author;
- ✦ Alan Gitelson, Ph.D., Department of Political Science, faculty consultant;
- ✦ Nelson Portillo, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Psychology, evaluation, editing, and web design;
- ✦ Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, evaluation supervision;
- ✦ Linda Von Dreele, Associate Director of CURL, oversight and editing.

The original community partners were Erie Neighborhood House (ENH), Howard Area Alternative High School (HAAHS), and Family Matters (FM) where the curriculum was piloted on a limited basis. The project is indebted to Ric Estarda and Maria xx (ENH), Chris DeNevue (HAAHS), and Twanna Brown and Kim DeLong (FM).

We value the help of Phyllis Henry, Ph.D. candidate, who contacted many of the reviewers for the evaluation process. We also appreciate the assistance of all reviewers who helped us improve the quality of our civic engagement curriculum, including Erin Peterson, David Arredondo, Ratib Al-Ali, Andrew Coneen, Vanessa Lal, Jennifer Lemkin, Demetra Makris, Jacqueline McCord, Joan Podkul, and Christopher Wilberding. The constructive critique of these educators from Chicago and as far away as Ohio and California has greatly enhanced the potential for the curriculum's implementation as a quality tool for youth civics education.

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