

The Media: Past, Present, and Future
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Overview:

This unit will examine the role and impact of the media, including technological advances and new trends, throughout the history of the United States. Although time constraints prohibit a complete history of the media's role in American society, it is my hope that these activities may spark an interest in my students, and that some will research and study the issues presented on their own. Each day can be shortened or lengthened depending on student interest, time available, and new resources or discussion materials (breaking news!).

Objectives:

At the conclusion of this unit, students will:

- Understand the purpose and importance of a free press
- Explain and discuss the role and influence of the media
- Analyze a variety of media sources

Day One: Overview and Background (1 90 minute class period)

1. Begin the class by asking students how they send and receive information. They should bring up obvious devices, such as the internet, cell phones, television, etc. Ask students how reliable they feel these sources are. Discuss who has access to this information, and who is writing it.
2. Show students the First Amendment to the Constitution, emphasizing the freedom of press and freedom of speech clauses. Discuss why the Founding Fathers felt this was important enough to include in the Bill of Rights.
3. Ask students to define the term "media". Does it only apply to newspapers? What about television? Introduce the concept of "social media", which would include cable news, and internet sites including Facebook and Twitter, and could include applications such as instant messaging and texting. Discuss these broad elements of media with students, and brainstorm problems and issues that can arise with such a large amount of information.
4. Lead students in a discussion of how much the issue of media has changed since the First Amendment was written. Points to emphasize include:
 - More sources / formats
 - Instant information
 - More people accessing the information

- Competition between sources

5. Tell students the following statements and quotes come from a presidential campaign. Read each quote or statement, or project them for the students to read along:

“The election of _____ (presidential candidate) will result in the teaching of murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest to our children.”

The opponent is a tyrant who will run the country like a dictatorship.

The opponent does not love the country and is more loyal to foreign nations than America.

The opponent is not Christian and in fact is not religious at all.

The opponent has had several affairs.

5. Ask students which era they believe these quotes are from. Most likely, no one will guess that they are from the election of 1800, when John Adams and Thomas Jefferson and their supporters were quite vicious in their attacks. Discuss similarities between these attacks and similar statements from more recent campaigns.

6. Close the lesson by telling students that over the next few days they will examine the role of the media in reporting the news, and the impact of the media on public opinion.

Day Two: The Presidents and the Media (computer lab time needed) (At least 1 90 minute class period)

1. Begin with a free-write question:

What is the most memorable television commercial you have seen? What made it so memorable? Did you actually want to buy the product, or did you just like the ad?

Give students a few minutes to write, then ask for volunteers to share their responses.

2. Tell students that advertizing for political issues and campaigns is a long tradition in the United States, and the impact of media can have a great effect on campaigns. Tell students that until the 1950’s, the only forms of media available to politicians were newspaper and radio. Beginning in the election of 1952, presidential candidates began to use the newest form of media: television.

3. Lead a discussion with students as to how they feel this new form of media could change campaigns.

4. Divide students into pairs or groups of three, depending on class size. Assign each pair or group one election from 1952 to 2008.

5. Show students the web site The Living Room Candidate, www.livingroomcandidate.org It is a fairly easy web site to navigate, but demonstrate the different areas for students before going to the computer lab.

6. In the computer lab, have each pair or group view the advertisements for each candidate in their assigned election (some elections have 3 candidates), and read the accompanying text. They should also study the results of the election. As they view and read, have students respond to the following questions:

1. Which ad do you feel was the most effective? Describe one from each candidate.
2. How did the candidates use emotion in their ads? Pay special attention to ads that used children.
3. How did the candidates use fear in their ads?
4. Do you think advertizing had an effect on the outcome of the election? Why or why not?
5. Do you like one candidate more than the other, based on the ads? Why or why not?
6. Do you think the ads would have affected your voting? Why or why not?

7. When students have completed the assignment, return to the classroom. Ask each group to report on their campaign, the ads, and the impact they feel the ads had. If time permits, show some of the ads to all the students, in particular, the "Daisy" ad from Lyndon Johnson's 1964 campaign, and the "Willy Horton" ad from George H.W. Bush's 1988 campaign.

8. To conclude the lesson, ask students to respond to one of the following statements:

"The idea that you can merchandise candidates for high office like breakfast cereal is the ultimate indignity to the democratic process."

-Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson, 1956

"Television is no gimmick, and nobody will ever be elected to major office again without presenting themselves well on it."

-Television producer and Nixon campaign consultant Roger Ailes, 1968

As an extension of the topic of the presidency and the media, students could review the Supreme Court Case *New York Times v United States*, which deals with Richard Nixon and the Pentagon Papers. A good summary of the case can be found at www.oyez.org

Another possible extension could be a discussion of the Obama campaign, and the use of e-mail and blogging for the first time, as well as extensive use of web sites for all candidates.

Day Three: Making Informed Decisions in a Multi-Media World (1 90 minute class, computer or media center time needed, or can be assigned as homework)

1. Begin the class by playing a short game of “gossip”. Have the class stand in a circle. Whisper a short statement to a student, and ask them to whisper it to the next student. Continue until everyone in the class has heard the message. Ask the last student in the circle to repeat the statement. The statement will have changed quite a bit as it is passed around the room.

2. Discuss with students why this happens. Connect this to their own lives—how many times do they hear a story, and then hear a different version of the same story later? Why does this happen? What does this do to the credibility of the story, and the reputation of those involved?

Tell students that the same thing happens on a much larger scale with the variety of media sources now available. Tell students there are ways to tell if the source they are reading is reliable, including:

- Who is the author?
- Is the source well known?
- Are there statistics and facts to support the source?
- Is the story based on emotion, or fact?
- It is a source that can be edited by anyone (Wikipedia)?
- If it is a web site, is the address .com (commercial), .org (private organization), or .gov (government)? Those designations can tell you a lot about the source.

3. Have students choose a popular news topic (health care reform, Supreme Court justice appointment, Iraq, etc). Working in pairs or alone, in the media center or computer lab, have students review 3 versions of the same topic, using at least two forms of media (newspaper article, web site, television program, etc). As they review the articles, have them respond to the following questions, writing in paragraph form:

- Which source do you feel was most accurate? Why?
- Which source do you feel was least accurate? Why?
- Did any of the sources have conflicting information? Explain.
- Which source was most detailed? Explain.

- Which source was most appealing to students your age? Explain.

4. To conclude the lesson, have students share and discuss their findings. Point out any commonalities (sources that were consistently accurate or inaccurate, sources that were appealing).

Day Four: Conclusion: Where Are We Now? (30 minutes)

1. To conclude the unit, ask students to respond to this statement:

In today's instant access world, citizens are more informed and educated on current events and issues than ever before.

2. After students finish their responses, ask students to share their ideas. In conclusion, remind students to be informed consumers as they view media in all its forms.