



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

Politics and the Media

LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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Politics and the Media

Lesson Plan and Activities

Grade Level: 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12

Subject(s):

- Social Studies: U.S., State, and Local Government; and
- Language Arts: Reading, Writing.

Duration: 1-2 class sessions

Description: This lesson provides an opportunity for students to evaluate the importance of the broadcast media in a democracy. This lesson is best used prior to an election and may be used to follow the media lesson plan “Young Citizens and Television Broadcasters.”

Goals:

Illinois Learning Standards

- A. **Social Science:** 14A, 14B, 14C, 14D; 16A, 16B; and
B. **Language Arts:** 1A, 1B; 3A, 3B, 3C; 4A, 4B.

Objectives:

1. Survey broadcast media coverage of local events during an election season;
2. Evaluate local news broadcasts for coverage of local, state, and/or federal campaigns;
3. Compare coverage of local events by different types of media; and
4. Understand how different types of media influence different people.

Materials:

Television guides (internet or print)

Instruction and Activity

First, review the lesson “Young Citizens and Television Broadcasters”:

1. Television coverage is a main source of information for the public to learn about candidates running for political office. Ask students what information about candidates they feel would be important to know when deciding on who to vote for. Brainstorm local, state, or federal issues that are important to youth. Examples: Local - curfew laws; State - rules prohibiting non-family members from riding in the car with drivers between the ages of 16 and 18; Federal - the environment, the ‘war on terrorism,’ minimum wage law.
2. The public owns the airwaves. Think of the airwaves as a national park. The airwaves are a valuable, limited resource owned by the public. While it is the public that owns the airwaves, television broadcasters like ABC, NBC and CBS, receive free licenses from the federal

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government to broadcast their shows. If the airwaves are like a national park, broadcasters who have free licenses to use the airwaves are like park rangers. They have a responsibility to make sure that part of their programming is in the public interest.

Q: Which of the following programs would be ‘public interest’ programs? Why?
‘Grey’s Anatomy’
‘Glee’
the nightly news
coverage of a Thanksgiving Day Parade

Q: Ask students what they think the phrase ‘public interest’ means.

Clearly there is no exact answer to this question! The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is the government body in charge of giving licenses to broadcasters and monitoring broadcast use of licenses. Depending on the five members of the FCC at any given time, and that composition is always changing, the working definition of “public interest” may change.

3. The definition of ‘public interest’ programming.

A. 1940’s - 1970’s - Regulation. For thirty years, the FCC highly regulated the type of programming put on television by broadcasters. In order to keep their licenses in good standing, broadcasters had to demonstrate to the FCC that they were providing the public with a reasonable mix of the following types of programming:

- Opportunity for local self-expression
- Development of use of local talent
- Licenses’ editorialization
- Political broadcast
- Weather and market reports
- Service to minority groups
- Entertainment
- Children
- Religious
- Educational
- Public affairs
- Sports
- Agricultural
- News

Question: How much of this kind of programming is on each station today? Have students review program guides.

B. Since the 1980’s, the meaning of ‘public interest’ has changed. Deregulation in the early 1980’s led to the FCC adopting a policy which favored less government oversight of broadcasters. This change from strict oversight to less oversight of broadcaster programming led to a change in the definition of ‘public interest.’ The promotion of ‘free market’ style governance by the FCC led to the notion that in the process competing for viewers, broadcasters

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would regulate themselves. In effect, broadcasters themselves now define what kind of programming serves the ‘public interest.’

Activity 1: Analyzing Political Broadcasts

What kind of information does the public receive about candidates running for office through programmed television? Is it different information from that conveyed in political advertisements? Divide the class into five groups: ABC, CBS, NBC, WGN, and FOX. Each student should keep a journal about the evening newscasts (early, late, or both) of their designated broadcaster for three nights, documenting the following:

Were there any news stories about local state or federal campaigns?

What was the coverage about?

Did the news story actually report on a particular point of view of the candidate or was the story about the candidate strategy for beating an opponent?

Did the candidate speak during the news segment, either in person or in a news clip?

How many candidate commercials ran during the newscast?

What issues were covered during the political ad?

Was there a candidate for office that did not get coverage in the news?

Have students write down what information they learned about candidates from the newscasts or the political ads.

Do they feel like they have enough information to cast a vote for a particular candidate?

Write a letter to the editor or a letter to broadcasters telling them about your project, your results and your opinion.

Write a letter to public officials telling them what was learned from the broadcast coverage and asking where citizens can learn more.

Activity 2

Survey public officials about media coverage. Have students generate a list of ten questions to ask public officials about media coverage. Based on students’ assessment of news coverage, do they think the media is adequately covering the issues they care about? Do they think citizens are informed about local, state and federal issues? What coverage would they like to see? Some sample questions below:

How do you get information out to the public?

What kind of news would they like to see covered that isn’t being covered now?

What would be ideal coverage in their opinion?

How close to that ideal are broadcasters now?

Once the survey of public officials is complete, students can issue their results in a letter to the editor or in a press release.

Sample format for a LETTER TO THE EDITOR:

Date

Dear Editor:

[A short introduction to your letter. Most effective letters pick one topic, i.e. a particular piece of legislation, an upcoming or recent event, or one aspect of a problem.]

I am disheartened by the current state of public health in Illinois.

[One or two reasons why you think the above is important. Write and rewrite your sentences and pick words with the most meaning.]

[Call to action. For example, ask readers to call their legislators to vote for or against legislation or tell elected officials to change their behavior.]

I hope that Representative _____ will support meaningful public health legislation in the General Assembly.

Sincerely,

Your name

Title/Affiliation (optional)

Address

Phone number