

Unit 3: News and society

These learning materials comprise several short tasks with key questions and resources focusing on news and society.

The materials are available in downloadable PDF or in Word files that you can tailor to your own requirements. The tasks are suitable for a range of attainment levels, and teachers are advised to select the material most appropriate for their students.

Introduction

ACTIVITIES

1. News values revisited
2. Audience
3. What is the function of news?

General information about these lesson ideas:

Aims and Learning Outcomes

What students can expect to learn and achieve.

Assessment

Ways in which tasks might be assessed, either formally or informally.

Curriculum Context

How the materials relate to the requirements of GCSE, AS/A2 Level and BTEC qualifications in Media Studies as well as the Programme of Study for Citizenship and English Language at Key Stage 4.

Introduction

When King Darius (522-486 BC) wanted to tell tales of his far-flung Persian Empire in the wall decorations of his assembly building at Persepolis, he did not allow illustrations of warfare and victories over his many subject peoples. Instead his artists created a panel of exquisite reliefs showing delegations of 23 different races bringing tribute. It was a way of suggesting that unity and good order prevailed across the political and economic system over which he reigned.

Today, this would be called **propaganda**. The instinct to tell contemporary stories about the world is no recent phenomenon. Nor is the capacity for human beings to create images and narratives that are self-serving, distorting and highly ideological – appearing 'natural' but actually being deeply informed by **dominant views** of how the world should be represented.

If we turned on Channel 4 News today and it was crammed with reports of nothing but happy smiling people gathered at school entrances or factory gates across the country to greet this or that Government minister, then something pretty drastic would have happened to the freedoms that we often take for granted.

The existence of an '**unbiased**' news media is one of those freedoms. A media **empowered** and encouraged to discuss the true happenings of the day and get to **the truth** of things despite the smokescreens that politicians, businessmen or institutions might send up. A media that has at its heart **our best interests** and which explains the world around us in a way that **avoids sensation** and focuses on the forces that really shape our destinies and that of this planet. A media that has the time and the finances to be truly **investigative** while at the same time upholding the human rights of all. Sounds good doesn't it?

What is the immediate reaction of the class to this rather optimistic description of the news media in modern Britain? What storm clouds disturb this rather pleasant picture? Use **Worksheet 3.1** and ask students to raise an objection to as many of the assertions that it contains as they can. Invite the class to compare their answers and then come up with a definitive list of possible 'barriers' to a truly effective and informative news media.

Currently, the news media are caught in a struggle between the forces that would render it much more entertaining (commercial) and those that wish it to retain its central duty to be informative, critical (public service). Try to alert students early on in the session to these twin pressures so they are well primed for the specific exercise that explores this issue (Section 3.7).

ACTIVITY 1: News values revisited

1.1 In unit 1, students considered what made a story newsworthy. Now, refer them back to the table of definitions that they created – **Worksheet 1.4**. If these are indeed the litmus tests that editors and reporters apply to events in the world before they can be judged sufficiently interesting to research and include in a news bulletin, then ask students to consider what kinds of stories are in danger of falling through the cracks? **Worksheet 3.2** reproduces those news values and asks that students decide which are possibly the most important and also what kinds of stories risk being missed out of the news agenda.

News sources

1.2 Stories that actually happen live – unfolding before the media's and the world's eyes - are rare. Such 'raw' news coverage is usually reserved for disasters or sudden demonstrations, like the popular uprisings in the Ukraine or 18 months ago in Georgia.

Case study

In his book *My Trade* – the veteran journalist Andrew Marr describes the sudden shift in the news agenda that he witnessed when the Twin Towers were bombed in New York on September 11, 2001. He was sitting in a sound-proof booth in a Brighton Conference Centre about to record a piece to camera discussing a speech that Tony Blair was about to make to the Trades' Union Congress justifying private money being invested in hospitals and schools.

It was a speech that was likely to be unpopular and so stimulate a lot of dissent in the hall. The spin doctors hoped would underline Blair's distance from the Trade Unions' agenda and go down well with 'middle England' voters, suspicious of Labour's previous affiliations.

It was from here he witnessed the assembled journalists deserting the proceedings to answer calls from their editors telling them to drop everything and turn to the business of covering the New York and Washington attacks and their likely consequences. This was an example, all too rare, of 'hard news', says Marr, triumphing over somewhat contrived news – the news constructed out of pre-arranged conferences, political speeches and predictable protests and desirable resulting coverage in the media.

Invite students to return to the notes they made concerning the Channel 4 News programme they viewed and ask them to volunteer stories they watched. Make a master list of these stories and their angles. Then ask students to consider what the sources of these stories were.

Here are some of the possibilities:

- 24-hour news channels such as BBC News 24 or CNN.
- News agencies, employing 'stringers' all over the world and then serving up dozens of stories over the wires from which news editors can select to pursue.
- Tips derived from whistle-blowers or journalists' contacts.
- Stories covered in the early morning breakfast news shows such as Radio 4's Today programme, or the early editions of the newspapers.

- Stories suggested by news releases from organisations such as big corporations, government departments, and leading charities often highlighting a new policy or a new piece of research or the findings of a survey.
- Events such as speeches or press conferences.
- Publicity events such as photo-calls for a stunt or the opening of a major film (stars on the red carpet).
- Others?

Sometimes, the influence of fixers behind the scenes will be hard to detect, but ask students to consider the kinds of arranging and fixing that might need to go on to enable a reporter to visit a hurricane-destroyed town or a road block in Iraq. How do journalists know when a victorious rugby team gets back to Heathrow, and who organises the scrum of cameras and reporters so that one or other correspondent gets to ask a question?

It is said that on an average day over 70% of the articles in newspapers are there either partly or entirely because of the efforts of public relations specialists – is that true or something to be concerned about? Explore the site for information about the origins of news material. Is it necessarily a bad thing that so much media coverage derives from the public relations industry? And what are the dangers?

Often journalists get work helping some of the organisations they report on. For example, leading writers are often employed by the army staff training centre in Wiltshire, to give officers a taste of what it is like to cater to the press in conflict zones. Should they do this, when the following week they may have to cover a story very uncomplimentary to the army? Can students find information on the site about possible conflicts of interest and how journalists have resolved them?

Filters

1.3 The term 'filters' derives from the work of the academic Noam Chomsky, who has spent decades campaigning against what he sees as the docility of the Western news media, particularly in America, and their failure to take stands against the powerful and influential or question the official version of the world received from politicians and big business.

Worksheet 3.3 provides a crash course to the filters Chomsky identifies in many of his books, especially his 1992 work *Manufacturing Consent*, which he co-wrote with Edward Herman. Invite students to have a go at working out how these filters might operate to affect the news that we receive. They could make this a good practice run in the art of conducting an interview.

In other units students examine the kinds of legal frameworks that govern the work of the media. There is not the space here to examine the law in considerable detail, but students should consider how the following might affect what can be broadcast.

1. The laws of libel.
2. The laws associated with privacy.
3. The need to protect contacts so that they can't be identified.
4. Special 'D' notices issued at a time of conflict or war, controlling what can and cannot be reported.
5. Other constraints? Good taste? The regulations governing TV content before the watershed at 9.00pm.

The information derived from this section would make an excellent coursework assignment at Key Stage 4 or 5.

Should we have looked away?

1.4 This was a question posed by journalist Peter Conrad in response to the coverage of the Beslan siege in September 2004. Invite students to read the article, available on-line at <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1302343,00.html>

The following questions might help students, particularly younger students, puzzle out its argument:

1. In paragraph I, Conrad makes a distinction between painters such as Goya and Picasso and their 'representation' of terrible events and the behaviour of film crews and journalists covering the Beslan siege – what are the main differences?
2. Conrad complains in paragraph two about one of the major constraints on journalists and how it can affect their judgement – what is it?
3. In what ways does Conrad feel TV news coverage of Beslan helped the terrorists?
4. Explain in your own words Conrad's views about the fact that however terrible, the siege was potentially entertaining for people watching in the UK in the comfort and safety of their homes?
5. The coverage was of a live event – but what false impressions were created, suggests Conrad, by the use of 'looped' sequences of film that were frequently repeated, or the offer of consoling happy endings before the full facts of the siege emerged?
6. The story discusses Conrad's unease regarding the use of an image of a mother and her dead child in various newspapers – what are his concerns?
7. Other images showed women and young girls in a state of undress. Should they have been shown? Conrad offers two sides to this discussion. Try to establish both points of view.
8. How was the story 'tidied up' by day two?
9. What is the writer's objection to the word 'denouement' used by a BBC journalist to describe what he had witnessed?
10. Conrad describes one mother's awful dilemma during the siege and the terrible loose ends that remain. How can a story be finished with when such uncertainties remain?
11. "It is time that we stopped looking at the agonies of others and began to scrutinise our own motives." This is the last line of the article. What are the views of the class?

General discussion

1.5 Do students think that great care should be taken over what is shown on news bulletins? What would they censor?

1. For example should a news programme show us the full terrible impact of violence on people, rather than be coy about it and film body bags from a distance?
2. Should news bulletins refuse to show the footage of a hostage being harmed or executed?
3. Does it matter if people's faces not directly associated with a story get filmed and shown on a bulletin?

ACTIVITY 2: Audience

2.1 By now pupils will have had a chance to watch several whole Channel 4 News broadcasts. To whom do they think they are addressed? Who is the ideal audience? What is said in interviews on this site?

One clue to this might be the advertising that Channel 4 manages to attract in the breaks between sections of the programme. In unit I, students were asked to note the advertising

when they watch or record a Channel 4 News bulletin. Now they can refer back to this data.

Ask students to also consider how the following elements underline the ideal age group being targeted by Channel 4 News.

1. Its timing – lunchtime and at 7.00 pm.
2. Its presenters – their age and appearance.
3. Its language.
4. Its frame of reference – remember how the piece about Waveland contained an explicit reference to the American Civil War, and a snatch of biblical language to describe the 'feeding of 3000' by the Salvation Army.
5. Its stories – do they require a lot of pre-existing knowledge, or can they be understood from scratch?
6. How does it represent young people or are people under the age of 30 invisible – unless associated with a social problem such as drugs or crime? Do they ever have young people in the studio being interviewed?

Can students think of a news programme that might bridge the gap between Newsround and more adult news broadcasts? If students do watch the news on TV, ask them to identify what news they watch and why? Apart from young people – how do students feel the Channel 4 News broadcasts 'speak' to other audiences in the UK?

- Black or Asian community members?
- Women? (Are most of the stories about active men? What role do the female presenters play in the programme?)
- Older people?

Comparing bulletins

2.2 A separate exercise might be to juxtapose the stories included in a Channel 4 lunchtime bulletin and those in the evening bulletin. The lunchtime slot has a very different demographic than the evening one – as it caters to large numbers of women and students. Is this reflected in its content? The lunchtime programme tries to catch business viewers – how is that apparent in the material included?

Audience and audiences

2.3 In the stories available on this site there are two that students could study in detail to consider how the content can be altered to appeal to different audiences.

Save our buildings

This report concerns the Government's decision to draw up a list of treasured national monuments and buildings that would be officially designated as protected under the Hague Convention, and thus supposedly outlawed as targets for attack by an enemy.

The story comprises an introduction by the anchorman; a report package featuring a montage of stock footage of such places as Stonehenge; Blenheim Palace and Hadrian's Wall (with Roman centurion in full costume). It also features some of the buildings that have not been included on the list such as St Paul's Cathedral. After the package, there is an interview involving the Guardian's architecture correspondent, Jonathan Glancy.

1. What are students' immediate reactions to the story?
2. Ask them to do a quick 'news values' audit of it.
3. Do they think that it is an appealing story for young people?
4. What do they make of Glancy's references to the last war, and his awful mock-German accent when telling one anecdote? Should he have been allowed to tell the story in that way, and not asked to do it again (perhaps it was filmed live and so that option did not exist)?
5. In what way would they alter the content so that it was more appealing to a younger audience – for example, what historic sites or famous buildings might have they included in the montage? Were there some serious points that were not

raised in connection with this story? For example – is the list an invitation to terrorists? Is the exercise absurd in a world in which millions live in poverty or without education – was it a feel-good story that deserved coverage?

Persian treasures

This report is a highly textured package about the opening of a new exhibition at the British Museum. The show concerns the 'forgotten empire' of the Ancient Persians – the centre of which was in modern-day Iran. Many of the exhibits have never been out of Iran and, we discover, after years of careful negotiation, the whole project nearly fell through when elections in Iran in 2004 brought the decidedly anti-Western Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power. The report cuts between arts correspondent Nicholas Glass' visit to Iran to see some of the artefacts in situ and to speak to the curators at the Tehran Museum, and his time with BM curator John Curtis as the exhibition is being set up.

The story has several interesting angles. First, there is explicit reference to the fact that the BM has the money and proper facilities to protect and best exhibit the artefacts – several of the most important items from Tehran are kept only in store. This is highly political, not least because the BM is often under pressure to return artworks to their country of origin (Elgin/Parthenon marbles) and in fact owns a cylindrical tablet covered in writing called the Cyrus Cylinder that is revered in Iran.

Then there is the fact that Iran is in the news at the moment for defying the West regarding its nuclear energy policies. There are those in Washington that regard Iran as a greater enemy to America than Iraq – a member of the 'Evil Empire' that hates the US. Such 'foreign policy hawks' would love the US to push for a regime change in Iran.

Clearly, an exhibition that illustrates the history and culture of Iran can only humanise those that politicians might seek to demonise. This is underlined also, because part of the reason the empire is forgotten is because Ancient Greek historians chose to write highly critical accounts of the Persians, which have been the main ways in which modern people have understood the Persian Empire to date.

1. What are students' immediate reactions to the story?
2. This is a beautifully constructed piece of film. It warrants careful analysis. Notice, for example, the clever fade that brings the curator John Curtis first into view, even as he speaks of this being about a forgotten piece of history. The fade catches the idea that something is being restored, recaptured and brought into view.
3. Ask them to do a quick 'news values' audit.
4. Can they think how they might have added to the suggestion that Tehran really is failing these items and its people by not putting them on display?
5. Do they think that it is an appealing story for young people?
6. In what way would they alter the content so that it was more appealing to a younger audience – for example, are there educational angles or artefacts relating to younger people's lives in Persia that could have been given more attention?
7. Use this story as inspiration for a story involving a nearby museum – every cabinet must have objects that tell fascinating tales and there may be a new local exhibition the story of which students could tell in the same textured way as this package. For example, local museums often suffer huge financial problems and cannot acquire new items because of their tight budgets – how could that be incorporated into a story about objects on show at the museum?

ACTIVITY 3: What is the function of news?

3.1 Ask students to consider the Iran story they have seen. Do they think it was a valid story to include on the news? What made it a useful and important story, in their view? Was it made in a way that was interesting or beautiful? Did it contain all the questions that needed asking and answering?

Now – having listed its virtues, ask them to describe why some might think it was a story that fell short in terms of winning the biggest possible audience.

For example:

- Was it very elitist? Who is interested in an expensive exhibition in the British Museum while only a relatively small number of people will attend?
- Did it assume a lot of knowledge both of ancient history but also of other contemporary news stories? Rather than assuming the audience would pick up on the nuances such as the troubled diplomatic relationship between UK and Iranian politicians, and the issue of the return of stolen artefacts from national collections, should these have been made more explicit?
- Was it all too cosy and middle class?
- Was it too long? Could it have been speedier – losing some of the slow melts and long lingering close ups on artefacts?
- Was the art correspondent's trip to Iran an indulgence?
- Imagine an exhibition of Jordan and Peter Andre's wedding gifts opened on the same day. Should the news have covered this? Since it could be considered more interesting to more people than a long feature about a lot of old tablets and sculptures?

What this exercise attempts to do is highlight the difference between broadcast news as a key ingredient of a democracy with a **set of public sphere responsibilities** and news as dictated to by commercial considerations (the **market**). Clearly, Channel 4's advertising department might have a field day selling commercial slots if a news bulletin contained a well-publicised exclusive view into the life of celebrities such as Jordan, but is that a consideration that should never enter an editor's head as they plan the stories for an evening's broadcast?

Acquaint students with the distinction between commercial stations (Channel 4 included) and the BBC deriving its income from the licence fee – a tax on all of us when we decide to buy a TV. Point out that all terrestrial news stations are obliged to offer news as part of their broadcasting licence, and that Channel 4's distinctiveness is derived from its longer news programmes and more left-of-centre news agenda.

It might also be good to point out that while commercial terrestrial stations might have to offer news they sometimes have grave difficulty knowing where to put it in the schedule.

The public sphere is a 'space' which allows individuals to argue over public affairs and criticise the powerful. The purpose of the public sphere is to allow citizens to be well-informed and aware of different perspectives on events. It works well for democracy when the public sphere is independent of business and the state.

In the modern world the media are the main carriers of this public sphere function – for example, in broadcast news and discussion programmes, in newspaper reports, opinion columns and letters pages, and on internet websites, bulletin boards, blogs and current affairs chat. But other social spaces have this public sphere function – for example, pubs, clubs, trade union meetings, classrooms.

The public sphere is an ideal against which we can judge how well the media act in the interests of the public rather than profit. However, the public sphere model is under increasing attack from those who advocate a market approach to the media. Croteau and Hoynes summarise the difference between these models in a table:

	Market model	Public sphere model
What is the concept of the media?	Private companies selling products	Public service
What is the purpose of the	Profit	Active citizenship, social

media?		integration
How is the audience viewed?	As consumers	As citizens
What audience effect is desired?	Be entertained, watch ads and buy products	Education, active citizenship
What is in the public interest?	Whatever is popular	Diverse, significant and innovative content even if not popular
How is regulation viewed?	Interference with free markets	Protection of public interest
To whom are media accountable?	Owners and shareholders	Public and its representatives in government
How is success measured?	Profit	Serving public interest

Adapted from Croteau and Hoynes (2001) *The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. 2001, p37.

Worksheet 3.4 uses this table of definitions to get students to consider the differences between these two models.

3.2 Having identified the key differences, ask students to consider whether or not they feel Channel 4 News broadcasts they have seen are meeting their public service responsibilities and why. Can they see any signs of **infotainment** in the bulletins they have observed?

Does news as entertainment matter? Does news as sensation matter? Consider the impact on public attitudes and emotions of US news bulletins that serve up a constant diet of shootings and car chases without providing any context? It is an issue raised very effectively in the documentary by Michael Moore, *Bowling for Columbine*.

Advocates of the public sphere have identified a number of reasons why their ideal may never be fully realised:

- Increased commercialisation leading to news as entertainment and reality television rather than serious documentaries.
- Limited public access to the media particularly in television.
- Concentration of news agencies to a few powerful companies thus limiting the range of opinions.
- Public relations and spin leading to a public scepticism over political debate.
- Government censorship.
- Journalists' self-censorship.

3.3 Ask students to comment on each of these 'threats'. Public service advocates argue that a healthy, diverse and socially integrated democracy needs to regulate the media market and ensure that public service broadcasting survives.

3.4 Ask students to come up with a set of regulations that might protect the news from excessive commercialisation.

Aims and Learning Outcomes

At the end of this unit students will have:

- discussed, questioned and determined the difference between news and propaganda.
- explored the factors that act as barriers to the news being informative and investigative.
- reconsidered and deepened their understanding of news values – interrogating them to check their validity.
- considered the kinds of audiences addressed by Channel 4 News and considered how to alter two stories to suit a younger audience.

- discussed and understood the difference between the public service and commercial models of the media and their news coverage.

Worksheets summary

- Worksheet 3.1: We've never had it so good – various statements to analyse concerning the barriers to informative news.
- Worksheet 3.2: News values revisited – assessing their value as criteria.
- Worksheet 3.3: News filters – deepening students understanding of the constraints on the news.
- Worksheet 3.4: The public sphere and the market.

Assessment

This unit has the potential to provide students with all the knowledge to make sophisticated independent 'readings' of subsequent TV news bulletins. The ideal way to test this might be to ask students to create a TV news or newspaper article analysing the 'health' of the news on British TV – is it still informative or is it increasingly becoming infotainment? Another task might be for students to critique Channel 4 News suggesting ways in which it could be altered to appeal to younger people. Such an exercise would enable students to demonstrate again their grasp of the genre and conventions work done in Unit 1.

Curriculum Context

These materials can be used with students of Media Studies at GCSE and AS/A2 Level as well as for teaching the National Curriculum Programme of Study for Citizenship and English at Key Stage 4 and media elements of the People and Society curriculum at 5-14 (Scottish).

The activities require students to reflect on the construction and characteristics of TV news broadcasts (Citizenship 1g). It is also an opportunity, by studying specific news stories for students to fulfil the need to consider current affairs (2a). Structured small group discussion is used to afford students the opportunity to justify their opinions orally (Citizenship 2b).

Discussion of the competing demands of the TV audience and journalistic good practice allows students to take part in exploratory discussion (Citizenship 2c).

The discussions of the Persian Exhibition and the Protecting Monuments story will enable students to assess the impact of these reports on different audiences - a further exercise in empathy. In studying the different ways in which individuals and groups might be addressed by news stories, students will be able to identify the perspectives offered on individuals, communities and society at large (English EN2 1d, 1e). Students will be taught to appreciate how meaning is conveyed in a short news bulletin (English EN2 5a) as well as the ways in which the audience of TV journalism responds to the media (English EN2 5d).

Work in this unit will enable students of Media Studies to become more familiar with issues of representation, news values, audience and media regulation as well as the specifics of the regulation/deregulation and public service v market driven models of media control – both key current affairs issues (Citizenship 2a). The activities suggested engage with debate about the wider social and moral context in which media texts are produced, supporting GCSE and AS/A2 Assessment Objectives in the following ways:

OCR GCSE Media Studies AO5: Media Messages and Values
AQA GCSE Media Studies AO1b, AO2b
WJEC GCSE Media Studies AO1
OCR AS Level Media Studies AO3: Representation
AQA AS/A2 Level Media Studies AO2, AO3i
WJEC AS/A2 Level Media Studies AO1i, AO2ii

BTEC Level 4 Certificate in Media: Professional Context for Digital Video Editing

The unit can also be used in Scottish Qualifications Authority Intermediate 2 and Higher Media Studies courses: Media Analysis (Non-Fiction).