

Free Press: Helpful or Harmful?

Purpose:

One of the roles of a free press is to serve as a “watchdog” for the citizenry. This role inevitably brings the press into conflict with the government and with businesses or other organizations about which the press is publishing information they would prefer to keep from the public. In this lesson students examine why this watchdog role is important to a democracy. First, students delete stories from the newspaper that might be censored in a society without First Amendment freedoms. Then they consider some cases in which the press uncovered stories that improved the lives of Americans.

Procedure:

1. Review with students the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of the press: “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.” Ask, “Does this cover TV news? What other media are covered?” (For example, movies, documentaries, videos, radio, tabloids, magazines, books, pamphlets, etc.) Ask students how they think a free press benefits them. Accept all answers.
2. Organize students into five groups. Give each group one or two editions of the local newspaper and several markers. Distribute the handout *Instructions for Censoring Your Newspaper* and go over the instructions with the class. Allow the groups time to mark their newspapers and to select the stories they think are most valuable to the community.
3. Ask each group to explain how not having the information in the story they selected would be harmful to the community. Conduct a brief class discussion on how this exercise helped them clarify their understanding of the importance of freedom of the press.
4. Explain that students are going to analyze cases in which the use of freedom of the press resulted in changes that improved the lives of Americans. Some of the cases are historical, while others are contemporary. Ask students to return to their groups, and give each group a copy of one Case Study. Allow 10 to 15 minutes for students to read and discuss the cases.
5. Next, tell students that they are going to take part in a talk show in which the topic is *Free Press: Helpful or Harmful?* Each group will select one member to represent the journalist in their case study, as well as one student to represent a member of a group who might have favored censorship in the case. Other group members will serve as the audience. The teacher will serve as the host. Allow a

few minutes for the groups to select their representatives and prepare a brief overview of the case for presentation to the "audience."

6. Seat the 10 guests in the front of the room, and begin the "show" by asking each journalist on the panel to briefly describe how he or she used freedom of the press to help people. Allow the other members of the panel to respond by indicating how publication of the information harmed them or their organizations. After all the panelists have had a chance to speak allow the audience members to ask questions or make comments.

7. Conclude the lesson by telling students that the press is said to serve as a "watchdog" for the public. Ask each student to create a drawing, cartoon or essay that illustrates why this is a good metaphor for the press, or have students suggest a better metaphor for the function of the press explored in this lesson.

Enrichment/Extension:

1. Invite a journalist to class to talk about local examples of ways in which the use of press freedom has helped the community. Students could then make a mural depicting these cases for display in the school.
2. Encourage students to read biographies or memoirs by well-known journalists. How did their work benefit society? What stories did the students view as most important? Why?

Instructions for Censoring Your Newspaper

Imagine that you live in a country where newspapers can be censored by the government and by powerful businesses and organizations.

1. Go through your newspaper and cross out every article or ad that criticizes or contains unfavorable information about the local, state or national government.
2. Go through your newspaper and cross out every article or ad that criticizes or contains unfavorable information about a business or organization (for example, clubs, unions, environmental groups).
3. From the stories you censored, pick the one that you think contains the information most valuable to the community. How would not having this information be harmful to the community? Be prepared to share your group's answer with the class.

Case Study 1

In the early years of the 20th century, people were concerned that huge companies seemed to have unlimited power. These companies often used their power in ways that harmed people. For example, large meat-packing companies were not concerned about producing food that was safe for people to eat. Nor did they care about the safety of their workers. They seemed only to be concerned with profits.

A young man named Upton Sinclair wrote about the meat-packing plants in a novel called *The Jungle*. He wrote *The Jungle* to get the public interested in the workers in the meat-packing plants. The book's main character was a worker named Jurgis, whose job was "shoveller of guts." The book described many problems in the meat-packing plants of Chicago, including the canning of poisoned meats, unsafe working conditions, and passing off horse meat as beef.

People who read Sinclair's book, including President Theodore Roosevelt, were shocked. President Roosevelt named a commission to investigate conditions in the meat industry. The commission found that things were even worse than Sinclair had described. When the president made the commission's report public, sale of canned meat dropped by one-half. Public pressure finally caused Congress to pass the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act. These laws were considered a step toward ensuring a safe food supply for Americans.

1. How did the use of freedom of the press help make life better for Americans in this case?
2. Who probably did not want this information made public? Why?

Case Study 2

In 1885, very few women worked for newspapers. But young Elizabeth Cochran had always wanted to be a reporter. When she wrote a letter to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* describing how hard it was for a woman to find an interesting job, he offered her a position as a reporter. Nellie Bly, as she signed her articles, became the first woman reporter to go undercover. She posed as a factory worker to write articles about the conditions in which women and children worked. These articles helped bring about better working conditions for women and stricter labor laws for children.

Even though she became a well-known reporter in Pittsburgh, her articles on working women ended. No one was sure why, but some people thought the newspaper worried about losing advertising dollars. Nellie was not happy writing stories about fashion and flower shows.

When she tried to get a job at the *World* in New York, she found that her experience still wasn't enough. She had to go on a dangerous assignment to convince the editor to hire her. This time she went undercover as a patient at an insane asylum. She learned that the patients were locked in crowded rooms and given moldy food. Patients were sometimes beaten by staff members. This story and later stories about prison conditions resulted in better conditions in government-run institutions. Bly also wrote a story about a corrupt lobbyist who wanted to kill a bill that would stop drug companies from producing harmful medicines. She revealed that the lobbyist agreed to accept a bribe from her, and the bill was saved.

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Case Study 3

In 1972, Jean Heller, a reporter for the Associated Press, broke a story that shocked many people. For 40 years the U.S. Public Health Service had been studying the effects of untreated syphilis on African-American men in Macon County, Alabama. Untreated syphilis can result in paralysis, followed by insanity and death.

When the study began in the 1930s only one treatment for syphilis was available. While government doctors sometimes gave the 400 men in the study doses of the treatment—an arsenic compound called salvaran—they did not give the men enough of the drug to cure the disease.

When penicillin became available as a treatment for syphilis it was not offered to the patients in the study. In fact, men enrolled in the study were carefully monitored by the project's head nurse, Eunice Rivers, and by local doctors to ensure that they received no treatment for syphilis. Over the course of the study many of the men died. Those who didn't die and lived to describe their experience said that they never understood what the study was about. They believed they were being treated for "bad blood."

An employee of the Public Health Service tried to get the study stopped in the late 1960s, but it was not until the information was published in national newspapers that the study was quickly halted. Eventually the survivors of the study and heirs of deceased participants received cash payments as compensation from the government. As a result of hearings on the study the federal government wrote new regulations for human experimentation.

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Case Study 4

People who lived in Philadelphia had been hearing rumors about scandals in the city's court system for a long time. It was believed that lawyers and judges made secret deals in back rooms. The politically powerful got special deals. People hired relatives for jobs they were not qualified to do. No one seemed to care about doing good work.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* assigned three reporters to investigate the court system. The investigation took H.G. Bissinger, Daniel R. Biddle and Fredric N. Tulsy three years to complete. They spent time in courtrooms observing what went on, interviewed more than 200 people, and reviewed tons of documents and records. They uncovered many problems, including the fact that lawyers who gave campaign contributions to the judges who heard their cases won more often than other lawyers.

The result of the three-year investigation was a newspaper series called "Disorder in the Courts." After it was published the Pennsylvania Supreme Court seized control of the Philadelphia court system. New rules were established to ensure greater fairness. The reporters won a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting.

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Case Study 5

When the *Exxon Valdez* spilled millions of gallons of oil into Prince William Sound on March 24, 1989, it was hardly a secret. Newspaper readers and television viewers around the world soon knew about the environmental disaster. While many reporters focused on the ship's captain, who was suspected of being drunk, journalists from *The Seattle Times* decided to take a more in-depth approach. Their work revealed that the oil industry's influence in Alaskan politics resulted in poor regulations for oil spills. The federal government had ignored warnings about possible problems in the Sound. The Coast Guard, oil industry and court system had done little about drunkenness by crew members of oil tankers.

The *Times* reporters also found that Exxon was not cleaning up the spill as they had promised and that protection against oil spills was almost nonexistent. The Coast Guard, the government agency responsible for policing shipping, was devoting most of its resources to the drug war and was paying little attention to environmental protection. The reporters also revealed that requiring double-hulls on oil tankers could prevent many future oil spills.

At least one company, Conoco, announced after the *Times* articles ran that it would replace all of its tankers with double-hulled ships. Environmentalists now had information they could use to push Congress to pass legislation that would help prevent future oil spills.

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