

Poynter Kent State Media Ethics Workshop
<http://mediaethics.jmc.kent.edu/2012>
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**Lesson Plans and Discussion Questions
to Accompany the Content of the Workshop**

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These lesson plans can serve as a supplement to the workshop content, which will be archived on the website following each session. You will need to adapt them to meet your students' needs as well as time constraints. Some of the activities require Internet access or the ability to project Web pages onto a screen.

Journalism's Responsibility and Role in the Political Process

Rationale: Journalists play an essential role in helping political operatives reach the public. Today, however, social media and other direct forms of communication allow political strategists and candidates to bypass media gatekeepers. Understanding how both of these communication processes work can allow students to be better informed about how the news media help to share the public's sense of reality about political discourse.

Objectives:

1. To understand how news coverage shapes public understanding of an election and the candidates.
2. To analyze how the public responds to news media coverage of candidates and other election-related issues.
3. To understand the ethical obligations journalists have to provide credible, verifiable information among competing voices.

Procedures:

1. As a warm-up, ask students how they receive most of their information about political candidates and elections. Some might not seek out this information at all, but try to gauge how students learn about candidates and issues—through television news, social media, conversations with others, materials created by the campaigns themselves, comedic programming (like *The Daily Show*), etc.
2. As a follow-up, ask about their perceptions of candidates for various positions in the current or a recent election—president, members of Congress and local offices. How do they think those perceptions are shaped?

The news media play a profound role in shaping those perceptions, even if the students don't realize it. Most election campaigns, especially those at the national level, run through a news media filter. Ask students how election campaigns would be different if the news media didn't discuss the candidates.

3. To illustrate this point, play the following audio clips to the class. Each is about four minutes. As they listen, students should pay attention to how these stories could influence the public's perception of the candidates and issues discussed in the story. What facts can they find to support their conclusion? Encourage them to jot notes as they listen.

Clip 1:

<http://www.npr.org/2012/09/03/160484771/labor-day-mark-homestretch-in-presidential-race>

Clip 2:

<http://www.npr.org/2012/08/13/158676727/ryan-energizes-romneys-weekend-campaign-stops>

Before discussing their findings, play this clip. Students should consider the impression this clip creates in their minds as compared with the previous two. What's different about this clip's focus? (This clip focuses heavily on the candidates' standing in the polls.)

<http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/video/obama-pulls-ahead-romney-poll-17204768>

4. After listening to these clips, break the class into groups and ask them to compare notes. They should focus on how the information found in the stories could influence the public's perceptions of the candidates. Also, they should discuss how the last clip was different from the first two.

5. After a brief discussion in groups, discuss their findings as a class. This can serve as an introduction to understand the "mediated" nature of modern political campaigns—most of the general public learns about candidates and their chances of being elected through news coverage.

6. Because of this power, ask the class to consider a journalist's responsibility when covering elections and candidates. What types of coverage will enable voters to make informed decisions? What types of coverage will detract from their ability to do this? Make a list of the types of behaviors journalists should exemplify when covering politics to serve the public's interest. For instance, they should verify information from candidates, not report things they can't verify, seek corroborating sources, create stories that seek to understand how issues will affect voters, etc.

7. Because of the prevalence of so much information available today, it's often tougher for the public to sort through it all. Journalists are more important than ever. As such, a new phenomenon, known as fact-check journalism, has arisen in the past few years. Share this piece with the class. Allow them to work in groups to discuss the following points about fact-check journalism:

- A) The symbiotic relationship between journalists and politicians
- B) The need for voters to receive accurate information
- C) The role of journalists in providing that information

<http://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/2012/04/24/fact-checking-a-necessary-supplement-to-modern-political-reporting-panelists-say/>

In their discussion, they should form a conclusion and offer supporting evidence about a journalist's responsibility to the public to provide accurate information. In other words, do journalists have an ethical duty to call out politicians who might be lying or deceitful? Or it is acceptable to allow others, like specific fact-checkers, to draw attention to lies and shortcomings?

8. To aid in the discussion, draw their attention to www.politifact.com, a well-known political journalism fact-checking website. Also draw their attention to this article on site by Neil Brown, editor of the Tampa Bay Times, which owns Politifact.

<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2012/sep/12/you-can-handle-truth/>

Some criticize fact-checking as merely politically motivated. Many of these criticisms arise from those whose claims are disputed by journalists. As students read this article, ask them to look for the main points about why fact-checking plays an important role in the process of creating an informed electorate.

9. Equally important is the need to be transparent with the public about how this process takes place. Draw the students' attention to the following link that describes the process Politifact uses to assess claims and assign ratings. <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/feb/21/principles-truth-o-meter/>

Also encourage students to play around on the site and see how it works. They should pay attention to which claims are selected for verification, how rulings are made, and the importance of understanding the context surrounding a given claim. For instance, these links point to examples in which small nuances in way claims could be interpreted required detailed explanations beyond what the public might assume if it heard the claim outright.

<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/aug/29/scott-walker/scott-walker-says-44-50-states-last-month-saw-unem/>

<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/sep/06/ted-strickland/strickland-credits-auto-rescue-ohio-manufacturing-/>

<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/sep/05/kathleen-sebelius/kathleen-sebelius-repeats-problematic-claim-romney/>

After viewing these resources, students should share their opinions about fact-checking journalism and the role it plays in modern elections.

10. An additional prong in understanding how candidates, journalists and the public relate to one another, is to examine how social media and other direct forms of online communication influence the information journalists use to cover politicians and the politicians' ability to bypass the media-imposed filter to reach the public directly. To begin this portion of the lesson, share this article with the class about the importance of social media in the 2012 presidential election.

<http://newsroom.cisco.com/feature/1006785/2012-The-Social-Media-Election->

11. After reading the article, ask students to view the social media pages and websites of both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. The following questions should guide their analysis:

- How do these pages/sites bolster the images of each candidate?
- What type of image does this help to create of the individual candidate?
- How much of content posted on these pages is devoted to tearing down the opponent?
- What can viewers learn about the candidate from the content on these pages?
- Do you have any advice for making these pages more user-friendly?

- How can journalists use the information found on these pages?
- If you were a social media strategist for both of these campaigns, what advice would you give to each of them to improve their social media presence to better reach voters?

Students should prepare a short essay summarizing their analysis. They should also discuss their own habits of gathering information about candidates and what role, if any, social media play in that endeavor.

Pages to use in the analysis (Feel free to include more if you so choose):

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mittromney> &
<https://www.facebook.com/barackobama>

YouTube usernames: Mittromney & BarackObama.com

Twitter: @BarackObama & @MittRomney

Ads and Political Campaign Communications

Rationale: Political campaigns actively seek to shape, spin and manipulate the public's perceptions of both their candidates and issues. Students will gain an appreciation of the role journalists play in the process and the ethical decisions they must make when choosing which information to publish about candidates and campaigns.

Objectives:

1. To understand how campaigns and political organizations attempt to shape, spin and manipulate public opinion.
2. To examine the role of the news media as a conduit of information between campaigns and the public.
3. To study the ethical values and loyalties of those who manage campaigns compared with journalists covering the campaigns.

Procedure:

1. To begin, ask students to answer this warm-up question: What makes a candidate "electable" (in other words, "likeable") to the general public? What qualities should he/she possess? After they answer this question, ask them to think about what types of activities/events could cause a candidate to fall out of the public's favor (allegations of extramarital affairs, embezzlement, etc.)
2. Draw students' attention to that fact that political campaigns, especially those at the state and national level, are scripted and managed. The public has few chances to get to know the "real" candidates. All of the interactions candidates have with the public are carefully monitored and controlled. Candidates not only try to guard their own image; they actively try to shape the public's views of their opponents.
3. As such, candidates and other political action groups invest vast amounts of time and money creating attack ads in hopes of discrediting their political opponents. Share this article with the class (either in print or on screen) and discuss briefly some of the issues the article raises about the resonance of negative political advertising. Do negative ads necessarily change people's perceptions? Does a viewer's propensity to watch such ads online necessarily translate into agreement with views the ad expresses?
4. For some examples, show the following ads political ads to the class. As they watch, students should pay attention to the following points:
What claims are the ads making?
Do the ads offer facts to back-up the claims made about an opposing candidate?
Do the ads offer facts to stress how the candidate who produced the ad would act differently than his opponent?
How does the imagery and language used bolster the claims made?

Clip 1

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQzZdyzDZVY&feature=plcp>

Clip 2

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oM7SpCAPEs&list=UUS6scxofr3K4j5q7hn6xQmQ&index=4&feature=plcp>

Clip 3

<http://www.youtube.com/user/mittromney?feature=CAwQwRs%3D>

Clip 4

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sSqHSY_Z2o&list=UUZtZuLHzPSeodii1DhtQzWA&index=42&feature=plpp_video

5. To further explore this topic, ask students read this article from the American Psychological Association about the effect of campaign advertising.

<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/04/advertising.aspx>

Ask students to identify and discuss the main points presented in the article. They can do this in smaller groups if time permits. They should pay particular attention to how audience members tended to react to positive and negative ads in the study. Under what circumstances are political ads most influential?

As they are discussing the article in groups, ask the class to compare and contrast the values journalists espouse compared with those of campaign operatives? For instance, are things like lying or stretching the truth as problematic for the latter as the former? Where are each side's main loyalties? How does this affect their decision-making process? They can use this article from "Bloomberg Businessweek" to spur their discussion about proposed ethical values for political operatives.

<http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2008-04-17/a-campaign-code-of-ethicsbusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice>

Discuss their findings as a class.

6. Political advertising is one facet of a campaign's communication strategy with the public. Campaigns rely heavily on interactions with the news media, gatherings with voters, volunteer efforts and social media to bolster their candidate's image. As an activity to assess what they've learned, break the class into groups and ask them to work through the following scenarios. The group members should pretend they work for a candidate seeking a high-level political office. They need to create plans of action to deal with these issues by using a wide range of communication strategies where advisable. Students must be able to justify their courses of action.

A) An opponent releases a campaign ad claiming your candidate has cheated taxpayers out of money for the past three years by inflating his business expenses while serving in Congress.

B) A political commentator on a national cable channel accuses your candidate of being out of touch with everyday people because he has spent too many years serving in Congress.