

Topic 7

Freedom of the Press and News/Media Literacy

Topic 7 explores the role of the Press, News, and Media Literacy in 21st century America's digital society. The News is everything of importance that happens when we are not physically present to see it for ourselves. Since we were not there, we rely on the Press to report it to us.



[World Press Freedom Day 2017 Poster](#) from [UNESCO](#) licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0-igo](#)

Massachusetts Standards [8.T7.1-6]

1. [Freedom of the Press](#)
2. [Competing Information in a Free Press](#)
3. [Writing the News: Functions of Different Formats](#)
4. [Digital News and Social Media](#)
5. [Evaluating Print and Online Media](#)
6. [Analyze Editorials, Editorial Cartoons or Op-Ed Commentaries](#)

Advanced Placement Standards

- AP Government and Politics Unit 3.4: First Amendment/Freedom of the Press
- AP Government and Politics Unit 5.12: The Media
- AP Government and Politics Unit 5.13: Changing Media

This topic's standards and modules about the freedom of the press and news/media literacy raise the following question: **What is the Press and how is a free press and critical media literacy essential to democratic government?**

The Press and the Fifth Estate

The **Press** is a broad term, referring to the people (reporters, photographers, commentators, editorial writers and behind-the-scenes workers in media organizations) that bring us the news. It is known as the **Fourth Estate** or the **Fourth Branch** of government in our democracy because it is intended to report openly and fairly on what is happening in the community, the nation and the world.

Some researchers are now referring to social media as the **Fifth Estate** ([Educators Meet the Fifth Estate: Social Media in Education](#), *Elementary School Journal* Special Issue, 2021).

This meaning of the word "Press" derives from Johann Gutenberg's history-altering invention in the 1440s of the movable type printing press, a technology that could produce 4000 pages a day, more than 1000 times what an individual human could write by hand. Initially, a printer or publishing house were called the press, but since the 18th century, journalists and the newspaper industry have been known as the press.

In the 1938 case [Lovell v. City of Griffin](#), Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes authored a legal definition of the press as "**every sort of publication which affords a vehicle of information and opinion**" (bold added). That decision overturned the conviction of a Jehovah Witness who had gone door to door selling religious pamphlets and magazine. Hughes said those materials were part of the press and protected by the freedom of the press clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution. Today, the press means forms of publication from newspapers to blogs.

All of us members of a democratic system of government rely on the people of the press to report the news about what happens in our neighborhood, city or town, state, nation, and world and help us make sense of what it means for our lives. Only when there is **clear** and **unbiased** information available from the press can people make decisions about what public policies and governmental actions they want to support or oppose.



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Getting the News from the Press

The press includes organizations large and small—including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* newspapers, national television networks like NBC, CNN, or Fox, public radio, and local community-based publications and television stations. It includes writers and journalists, well-known and locally prominent, as well as bloggers and online commentators. The press includes print materials, multimedia (e.g., videos, podcasts, infographics), and social media (e.g., posts and tweets).

[World Press Freedom Day](#) has been celebrated around the world on May 3 every year since 1991 by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).

Today's students are immersed in a world of computers, smartphones, apps, interactive digital tools, and instantaneously available online information. They get news and political information from Google, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, Snapchat and other digital sources unlike older generations of Americans who grew up reading newspapers and magazines, watching television, listening to the radio, and talking about politics in coffee places, lunchrooms, barber shops, community centers, and family dinner tables.

Students are challenged by how different media present facts and opinions in highly polarized political environments. The Rand Corporation's 2018 report, [Truth Decay](#), identified four alarming trends in how news is presented to readers and viewers in our digital age:

1. increasing disagreement about objective facts, data, and analysis;
 2. a blurring of the line between fact and opinion;
 3. an increasing relative volume of opinion over fact; and
 4. declining trust in government, media, and other institutions that used to be sources of factual information
- (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018)

Developing Critical Media Literacy

Given these trends, there is a pressing need for everyone to develop the **critical media literacy** skills to identify and rely on **fact-based media** that report the news fully, objectively and ethically in digital, electronic and print formats. How students go about understanding and utilizing the media creates multiple challenges and opportunities for sustaining and energizing our democratic systems of government.

To build news and media literacy, students and teachers can go to [PBS Newshour Classroom](#) for learning activities including a daily news lesson.

Freedom of the Press and News/Media Literacy Choice Board

<p>Contextualize Press Freedom</p> <p>Evaluate and then suggest ways to improve the U.S. ranking on the World Press Freedom Index.</p> 	<p>Uncover Reporters' Perspectives</p> <p>Analyze how reporters covered the 2016 Hong Kong protests. Report your findings in a TikTok or Snapchat video.</p> 	<p>Be an Investigative Journalist</p> <p>Investigate an issue that is important to you by conducting research and interviewing credible sources.</p> 	<p>Analyze Newspaper Photographs</p> <p>Conduct a critical analysis of a famous or recent newspaper photograph.</p> 
<p>Interpret Memes and TikToks as Political Cartoons</p> <p>Examine political editorial cartoons, memes, and TikToks and then create your own about a political issue you care about.</p> 	<p>Freedom of the Press & News/Media Literacy Digital Choice Board</p>  <p><i>Critical Media Literacy and Civic Learning</i>, a free eBook by Robert Maloy, Torrey Trust, Allison Butler, and Chenyang Xu explores these topics and more</p>		<p>Write The News From All Sides</p> <p>Write a brief news report about an issue that interests you from three different perspectives (i.e., left, center, right) or points of view (e.g., favorable, unfavorable, objective).</p> 
<p>Create a News Evaluation Tool</p> <p>Create a rubric, checklist, or other instructional tool (e.g., podcast, video) to help others evaluate news sources.</p> <p>FAKE NEWS</p>	<p>Analyze Your Online Search Habits</p> <p>Spend 20 minutes conducting an online search about a topic of your choosing. Then, analyze your search actions and history.</p> 	<p>Conduct a Critical Visual Analysis</p> <p>Conduct a critical visual analysis of an online article, primary source, advertisement, or doctored historical image.</p> 	<p>Evaluate & Design a Recommendation Algorithm</p> <p>Critically evaluate YouTube's recommendation algorithm and then design your own.</p> 

Freedom of the Press & News/Media Literacy Choice Board ([view](#))
[\(make your own copy of this choice board to remix/share/use\)](#)

Topic 7 Chapters

Freedom of the Press
Competing Information in a Free Press
Writing the News: Different Formats and Their Functions
Digital News and Social Media
Evaluating Print and Online Media
Analyzing Editorials, Editorial Cartoons, or Op-Ed Commentaries



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