

Topic 4.8: Media Spin in the Coverage of Political Debates

Political debates provide politicians with a platform to share ideas and information with their constituents and potential voters. At the presidential level, debates have become huge media events. Some 73 million people watched the first debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump in 2020.

Leading up to, during, and after the debates, political campaigns and partisan groups try to spin the results. **Spin** (also called political spin) is a term for how individuals use words and images to portray what happened in ways that put themselves or their political parties in the most favorable terms. Commentators, too, often spin the results of debates in partisan terms.

The origins of spin as a media phenomenon can be traced back to President Theodore Roosevelt, noted historian and journalist David Greenberg in his book, [*The Republic of Spin*](#) (2016). Before then, most newspaper reporters did not even cover the White House. But Roosevelt aggressively began communicating directly with the public as President. He gave Presidential addresses, participated in sit-down interviews with reporters, and went on speech-making tours around the nation. Since then, politicians have been using the media every chance they can to present themselves and their ideas in forcefully positive terms.

Meanwhile, news outlets, eager for viewers as a way to sell advertising, seek to capture and maintain audience attention.

How do these different agendas influence the way messages are framed to viewers?



Watch on YouTube <https://edtechbooks.org/-gSwI>

In these activities, you will examine how news outlets covered the 2020 Vice Presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Mike Pence, then write purposefully biased reports in which you generate political spin about the event from different political perspectives.

Activity 1: Examine how News Outlets Covered the 2020 Vice Presidential Debate

- Watch the [2020 vice presidential debate](#), then find news articles from [different sides](#) that discuss the performance of Vice President Mike Pence and Senator Kamala Harris.
- Examine how news outlets framed the performance of both candidates using the following prompts as a guide:
 - **Production:** Who wrote this article? What is the article's message?
 - **Language:** What words are used to tell the story? What do the stories say? How do you know? Give some examples of language showing the author's bias.
 - **Audience:** Who is this story aimed at? How do you know? How do people access this story?
 - **Bias:** How did the author use biased language, visuals, or perspectives in the news report?
- Then, use the [Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing News & Newspapers](#) to take a deeper dive into evaluating the news articles.
- **Present your findings in the form of a news report video.**

Activity 2: Produce a Biased Media Report for the 2020 Vice Presidential Debate

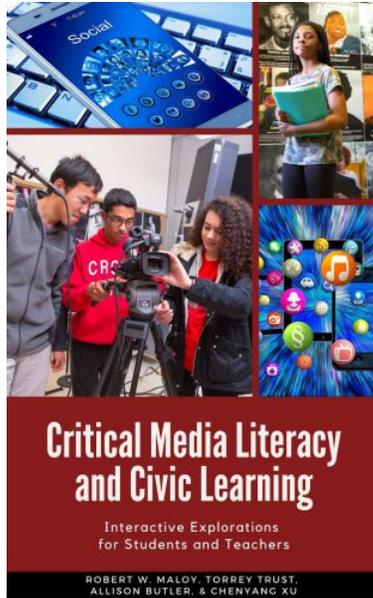
- In groups of 3, have one member write a news report purposefully favorable to VP Pence (Fox News style), one member write a news report purposefully favorable to Senator Harris (MSNBC style), and one member write an objective news report for a major newspaper (e.g., New York Times).
- Then, critically review one another's reports using the following prompts as a guide:
 - **Production:** What is the news report's message? Why was this message chosen?
 - **Language:** What types of words were used to tell the story?
 - **Audience:** Who is the story aimed at? How do you know? How will people access the story?
 - **Bias:** How did the author use biased language, visuals, or perspectives in the news report?
- Based on what you learned, **create a presentation, interactive image, or video** to inform your peers and family members about political spin as well as the differences between left-leaning, center, and right-leaning news articles about political debates.

Connecting to the eBook

[Building Democracy for All: Presidential Debates in U.S. Politics](#)

Connecting to the Standards

- [Massachusetts Civics & Government Standards](#)
 - Evaluate information related to elections. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) [8.T4.6]
- [ISTE Standards](#)
 - Digital Citizen
 - 2c: Students demonstrate an understanding of and respect for the rights and obligations of using and sharing intellectual property.
 - Knowledge Constructor
 - 3a: Students plan and employ effective research strategies to locate information and other resources for their intellectual or creative pursuits.
 - 3b: Students evaluate the accuracy, perspective, credibility and relevance of information, media, data or other resources.
 - Creative Communicator
 - 6a: Students choose the appropriate platforms and tools for meeting the desired objectives of their creation or communication.
 - 6b: Students create original works or responsibly repurpose or remix digital resources into new creations.
 - 6d: Students publish or present content that customizes the message and medium for the intended audiences.
- [DLCS Standards](#)
 - Ethics and Laws (CAS.b)
 - Interpersonal and Societal Impact (CAS.c)
 - Digital Tools (DTC.a)
 - Collaboration and Communication (DTC.b)
 - Research (DTC.c)
- [English Language Arts > History/Social Studies Common Core Standards](#)
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.5
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8



Maloy, R. W., Trust, T., , & Xu, C. (2021). *Critical Media Literacy and Civic Learning*. EdTech Books. <https://edtechbooks.org/mediaandciviclearning>