

CITIZENSHIP LEARNING ACTIVITIES

News and views: citizenship and the mass media



Introduction for staff

The second half of the 20th century saw the birth of a phenomenon unknown to the generation that was born before the Second World War. Although film, the press and radio had had their earliest beginnings, no one could have imagined the impact they would eventually have on people's ideas, beliefs and behaviour. With the advent of television in the 1950s, the place of the mass media was firmly established as one of the most powerful forces on the planet.

Constant developments in technology* have increased the penetration of the media into our everyday lives – people listen to the radio through MP3 players while travelling, they watch movies on their laptops on the beach, they catch up with the latest news through the internet at their workstations, and they interact with broadcasters through their mobile phones. Nowhere is out of reach any more; news is instantaneous and celebrities have no hiding places – they are recognised the world over. This makes the media very influential, and also potentially dangerous. Often one of the first acts of any undemocratic government is to take control of the media to prevent people hearing alternative explanations for events. Even in free societies, however, the media can present us with attitudes and values that are rarely questioned, or they can present issues in simplistic and stereotyped ways.

Citizenship learning opportunities

It is an important part of citizenship education that young people learn to be sceptical about what they hear and read. They need the skills of critical analysis, interpretation and recognition of bias, and they should learn to access a wide range of facts and opinions before coming to any conclusions. Stimulus material taken from the mass media is an excellent resource since young people are familiar with the media's commonly-used language and symbols. But they should always question the views expressed, consider alternative opinions and take action themselves to challenge coverage they regard as unfair or biased.

These materials aimed at levels 2 and 3 examine the following issues: the role of the print and broadcast media in supporting freedom of speech and opinion; the balance to be struck between the public interest and invasion of privacy; the promotion of celebrity culture and the impact of this on young people's aspirations; the role of the BBC and the licence fee; the extent to which people require the media to meet certain standards of 'taste' and 'decency'; and lastly images of young people in the press.

*This resource does not focus on new ICT media but concentrates on the role of film, press, television and radio.



Suggestions for using the materials

- **Good for us or not?** (page 4) is an opening activity that encourages young people to consider the pros and cons of the mass media. Eight cards give a variety of views on the value of the media, and there are two blank cards which can be used to reflect the young people's own ideas. The activity suggests that they can decide which of the cards they agree with and which they disagree with. You could also use the cards as a preparation for an article for the organisation's website or magazine on the value of the media in Britain today.
- **Public interest or public fascination?** (pages 5–6) aims to clarify what is meant by 'public interest'. There are clearly some grey areas here. The questionnaire is based on one used in a BBC survey¹ and provides examples of matters that might be seen as news items in the public interest or not. As a follow-up activity, you could provide copies of national and local papers and ask the young people to select examples of stories that are, or are not, in the public interest, in their view. If they feel strongly that a story is intrusive, they could email or write to the editor of the paper explaining their view.
- **Celebrity culture** (page 7) is closely linked to the phenomenon of reality TV, and a key issue is the impact of celebrity culture on children. Young people can debate the motion 'This House believes that celebrity culture is damaging the nation's youth' or 'This House believes that celebrity culture is good for democracy'. You can divide the group into pairs and ask As to prepare arguments in favour of celebrity culture and Bs arguments against. They can debate the issue for five minutes to see if anyone wins the argument. Young people can prepare an exhibition, aimed at their peers, which communicates key messages about celebrity culture.
- **Battle for the Beeb** (pages 9–10) covers two possible scenarios – the public debate about the bounds of decency arising from the Ross–Brand affair in October 2008, and the issue of the BBC licence fee. Choose one of these scenarios as the basis for the role play – you can use the same role cards for either scenario. Divide the group into fours; each person in the group of four takes on one of the roles. Young people would benefit from preparing for their role by doing some internet research to explore the issues. The role play takes place in three stages which involve the characters meeting each other in a series of encounters. Before each stage, explain who meets who to set the scene. Time each encounter (about five minutes) and then make a signal to move players to the next meeting. In debriefing you can draw out the similarities and differences between the arguments and outcomes for each character. Young people can be encouraged to discuss BBC programmes and services among themselves and offer real feedback to the BBC via www.bbc.co.uk/feedback
- **Press images of children and young people** (page 11) raises a question that is important to many young people, i.e. the way they are portrayed in the press, and the impact of this upon the way they are sometimes treated. It refers particularly to a campaign initiated by the children's charity Barnardo's, which believes that society is demonising all children because of the bad behaviour of a minority. Young people are encouraged to think about how they could change this image of anti-social criminality through conferences and campaigns.



¹ Report available to download from www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/assets/research/pubint.pdf

Good for us or not?

How good for us are the mass media? Use the cards, copied and cut up from this page, to discuss different views, and decide what you think about the influences the media have upon us. Which of these cards do you agree with, and which do you disagree with?



The media keep us up-to-date with everything that is going on in the world so that we can **help people** who have suffered from a crisis, such as famine, war, injustice or natural disaster.

The media present complex issues in a simplistic way. This prevents us from understanding the background to these issues and forces us to come to **judgements too quickly**.

The media have made the world a smaller place. Because we know so much about people from other parts of the world, we are more likely to **understand and accept differences** between different nations, cultures and religions.

The media make sure that the public is kept informed about the actions of powerful people – they **'shine a light'** on the dark places behind closed doors where decisions that affect us all are often made.

The media promote the idea that being a celebrity is easy and wonderful, so that many people become **dissatisfied with their lives**. They think that they can win a talent show, become a fashion model, a sports personality or a TV contestant, and their lives will change for ever.

The media often have an 'angle' on life which is influenced by the political opinions of the people who own the paper, the channel or the magazine. It is not always obvious that there is a **political bias**, and people sometimes believe everything they hear or read, even if it is false.

The media provide a vast array of **entertainment**. We have a huge choice of films, television shows, radio stations, newspapers and magazines which keep us occupied during our leisure hours.

The media are always looking for a story that will appeal to the public, and because they have created an intense interest in celebrities, the media pursue these celebrities and **invade their privacy** in order to get a story or a photograph.

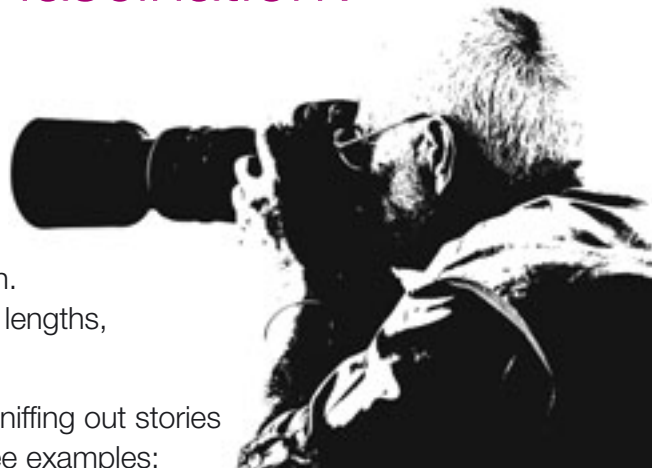
Write your own...

Write your own...

Public interest or public fascination?

Journalists are always on the look-out for a good story, either because they believe in the cause of truth or because their audiences want one. If they manage to get a 'scoop' (i.e. if they are first to break a story), then they get praise from their employers and respect among their profession. Some journalists will, therefore, go to extraordinary lengths, even personal danger, to investigate a story.

The press and broadcast media have a history of sniffing out stories that might never have been exposed. Here are three examples:



'Watergate' was a story from the USA that linked a burglary of the Democratic Party's committee headquarters with the Republican President Nixon's re-election campaign. An investigation was carried out by two reporters from the *Washington Post*, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. They revealed, through an informant, that knowledge of the burglary and its attempted cover-up led directly back to the White House.



The Sunday Times took up the case of disabled children affected by the drug Thalidomide, prescribed to treat morning sickness in pregnant women. The paper took their story to the European Court of Human Rights and forced a change in the compensation law when the UK licence holders Diageo (then called Distillers) offered paltry sums to victims.



An episode of the television documentary programme *MacIntyre Undercover*, in which Donal MacIntyre and several other BBC journalists secretly filmed football violence and the organising of fights, led to the prosecution and jailing of some of Chelsea's so-called 'Headhunter' football hooligans.

These are stories that are clearly 'in the public interest' (in other words, important for the public to know about because of the impact on lots of people). However, some investigations by journalists involving famous people, although fascinating to some readers, are not of great importance for society as a whole and are an intrusion into people's private lives.

A BBC survey asked people whether a whole range of matters were, or were not, in the public interest. See what you think... Look at the questionnaire 'Is this a matter for public interest?' and decide how far each of the questions is in the public interest.

Is this a matter for public interest?

	Definitely is	Probably is	Probably not	Definitely not	Don't know
1. Foods sold by a major supermarket have been contaminated with bacteria	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. The diaries of a dead politician suggest he had an affair with a woman who is still alive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. A local bus driver has a history of drink driving	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. A company testing medicines is suspected of cruelty to animals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. A member of a pop group has cosmetic surgery to change her face shape	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. A schoolteacher has been passing on exam questions to her students to help their GCSE grades	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. A celebrity's daughter is found drunk in public	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. A local council has overspent its budget despite warnings from staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. A High Court judge has large investments in foreign companies linked to the illegal drugs trade	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. A sex offender, recently released from prison, is living somewhere in the UK under a new identity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. A local person has been charged with supplying drugs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Many electrical appliances sold across the UK may be unsafe	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Celebrity culture

A major phenomenon of recent years is the rise of celebrity culture which has been created and promoted by the media. For people with a real talent, for example as footballers or pop stars, their celebrity status has meant getting TV and newspaper coverage often with a focus on their private lives rather than their careers. But the phenomenon has also led to those with little or no talent achieving, fame, fortune and notoriety, especially through reality TV shows; they are 'famous for being famous', and this is then used to sell newspapers and magazines.

Here are some of the arguments for and against celebrity culture:



Celebrity fills a vacuum in the lives of people who are not religious; they can feel they are part of a community of believers who 'worship' the same celebrity.

The time we spend as spectators, listening to and watching celebrities, means we are passively observing, rather than thinking, debating important issues or taking action.

Following the private lives of celebrities provides hours of harmless fun for millions of people.

Young girls and boys are presented with body images of celebrities which are impossible to match, and this can lead to depression and eating disorders.





We all like to see people who look good, and celebrity culture cannot be blamed for some people becoming anorexic.

The media's focus on the negative behaviour of some celebrities encourages under-age drinking and anti-social behaviour.

A survey of teachers showed that they feared their pupils' obsessions with footballers, pop stars and actors were lowering their career aspirations. Many young people believe that celebrity status is available to everyone and that this means success at school is not essential, as they can achieve what they want via reality TV.

Many celebrities set a good example for children through their charitable and fund-raising work.

It is surely democratic that anyone can be famous one day and that we can all vote for who we want to be a star on TV shows.

Celebrity culture is a form of escapism. Reading the gossip magazines and newspapers allows us to get away from our (sometimes) depressing everyday existence.

- **What do you think about celebrity culture? Do you think young people value fame over real achievement?**
- **What, if anything, can be done to stop young people becoming obsessed with celebrities?**
- **Conduct a survey to find out whether young people in your school or college think that celebrity culture is having a bad effect on their generation.**
- **Prepare an exhibition to show some of the issues raised by celebrity culture.**

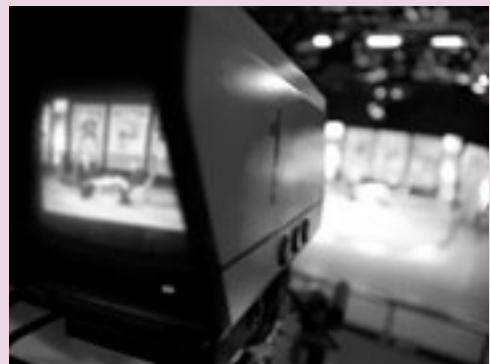


Battle for the Beeb

The BBC was founded in 1922 as an 'independent British broadcaster able to educate, inform and entertain the whole nation, free from political interference and commercial pressure'. Today the BBC is under pressure from its critics among politicians and the public. The media panic caused by the Ross–Brand affair on BBC Radio (October 2008) involved newspapers attacking the BBC for allowing standards of good taste and decency to be breached. This stimulated a huge number of critical emails from the public. The crisis also raised again the issue of the BBC's licence fee (£139.50 for a colour TV in February 2009) which is a tax on every household with a TV. The funding of the BBC continues to be a controversial political issue. You have a chance to debate these issues by taking on the role of a character in a role play about the BBC using one of the scenarios below.

Scenario 1

Room 101 is the BBC comedy programme hosted by Paul Merton in which he debates with guests things they would like to send to oblivion by despatching them to Room 101. This is based on George Orwell's nightmare vision in his book, *1984*. A well-known and outrageous comedian appears on the show and nominates kosher food, the bible, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the hijab for Room 101*. Before the programme is broadcast, a newspaper runs a campaign against the programme on the grounds of bad taste and offending religious groups.



Should the programme be broadcast or scrapped?

Scenario 2

The BBC is a public service broadcaster which provides a range of media services through the licence fee. This means that it can cater for minority interests and does not have to rely on advertising which interrupts programming. It is respected throughout the world for high standards of news production and journalism and has produced many of the best loved entertainment, documentaries and educational programmes. Critics of the licence fee argue that it is a tax on the poor, illustrated by detector vans targeting deprived areas (see BBC Resistance at www.tvlicensing.biz). Anyone with a TV has to pay or face a criminal record. Some critics also argue that the BBC has an unfair advantage against commercial media companies and newspapers in the field of the internet.



Is it time to end the licence fee?

* Based on a dilemma devised for a BBC seminar for TV editors by Robin Kent and John Bridcut

Battle for the Beeb – Role cards



BBC Comedy Producer

You are a young BBC producer. You are proud of the BBC's long history of nurturing young British comedy talent. The BBC has always pushed at the boundaries of 'good taste and decency'. You also believe that it is important to capture a young audience and not just to produce bland programmes that appeal to all ages. Most BBC staff are not highly paid, and the licence fee represents excellent value for money for the vast majority of people.

Situations

1. You take part in a radio phone-in programme and take a call from a fan of BBC comedy programmes.
2. On the same programme you get a call from someone not quite so supportive.
3. You take part in a TV discussion programme about the future of the BBC with an MP and meet beforehand in the 'Green Room'.

BBC Viewer

You are a young fan of BBC alternative comedy programmes. You visit comedy clubs and enjoy programmes like *Mock the Week*, *Have I got News for You* and *Friday Night with Jonathan Ross*. You have some Jewish and Muslim friends who are sometimes a bit sensitive about their religion. You live in a flat and find the licence fee a bit steep at £139.50 a year as you tend not to watch a lot of TV. You spend more time watching Sky Sports and Sky Movies than the BBC.

Situations

1. You take part in a radio phone-in programme to show your support.
2. You and your college friend get a lift home with his father who is an MP and talk about the BBC.
3. You attend a lecture on 'The future of the BBC' and meet a fellow licence payer.

BBC Licence Payer

You are a BBC licence payer who has been increasingly troubled by the apparent lack of control over bad language and outrageous remarks on so-called TV comedy programmes. You are a churchgoer who believes that it is important for the BBC to uphold the highest standards. The BBC should be much more accountable to the taxpayers. The licence fee needs to be reviewed, and bloated salaries for TV personalities like Jonathan Ross should be ended.

Situations

1. While out shopping you run into your local MP who is also interested in the BBC.
2. You take part in a radio phone-in programme and call to speak to a BBC comedy producer.
3. You attend a lecture on 'The future of the BBC' and meet a fellow licence payer.

Member of Parliament

You are a local MP with a particular interest in the media. You strongly support high standards in the media and do not like the impact cynical comedians have on the public's view of politicians. The BBC needs to be reminded regularly that it is funded by the taxpayer. You also support more competition in the industry and think that the BBC should be made to compete on a more even playing field with other TV companies and newspapers.

Situations

1. While out shopping you run into a local supporter who wants to talk to you.
2. You give your son a lift home from college and talk to his friend about the issues with the BBC.
3. You take part in a TV discussion programme about the future of the BBC with a BBC comedy producer and meet beforehand in the 'Green Room'.

Press images of children and young people



A recent survey commissioned by the children's charity Barnardo's found that more than half of the adult population of Britain (54%) thought that British children are beginning to 'behave like animals'. The Chief Executive of Barnardo's, commenting on the findings, said:

*"It is appalling that words like 'animal', 'feral' and 'vermin' are used daily in reference to children. These are not references to a small minority of children but represent the public view of all children. Despite the fact that most children are not troublesome, there is still a perception that today's young people are a more unruly, criminal lot than ever before".**

Similar findings came from The British Crime Survey, which found that the public thought young people committed up to half of all crime, when in fact they are responsible for 12% of crime. The United Nations also reported that children in Britain are treated unfairly because of a 'general climate of intolerance' towards them.

Much of this intolerance comes from the press. Here is one example:

"Above all, the sexual revolution, the permissive society and the abolition of marriage... have created this terrifying generation of murderous, morally blank wolf-children, fatherless, undisciplined, indulged one minute then brutalised the next." (Daily Mail)

Many young people are aware that some anti-social young people do behave badly, commit crimes and make everyone's life (including theirs) a misery, but they are getting increasingly worried that all young people are treated as a problem. What could be done about this?

Barnardo's is mounting the 'Children in trouble' campaign (www.barnardos.org.uk) to try to stop the 'demonisation of children'.

Look at their advertisement at: <http://tinyurl.com/62xka9>

- Carry out your own survey among adults to find out what they think about children and young people
- Hold a conference in your organisation about the impact of press images, and ways of changing perceptions of children and young people
- Based on evidence gathered, mount your own campaign locally and involve the council, the police and the local newspaper.

* Barnardo's press release, 17 November 2008

Resources

BFI Teaching resources: Teaching television news in citizenship

BFI Education publishes a growing range of teaching packs, teaching guides (many of which are free) and resources to support the use of moving image media in schools.

<http://tinyurl.com/66jgr5>

Contact BFI: Telephone: 020 7815 1350, or visit www.bfi.org.uk

This is Citizenship Studies for key stage 4 and GCSE

Terry Fiehn et al., Hodder Murray, 2003, Section 6, The Media

A course book for key stage 4 citizenship education which provides a structured programme of flexible learning activities that cover the knowledge, skills and understanding requirements of both the compulsory citizenship curriculum and the GCSE short-course specifications.

UK newspapers online and worldwide newspapers in English

This website contains many local, national and international newspapers. It is an excellent site for young people to compare the treatment of news stories.

www.thebigproject.co.uk/news

Freedom of speech

Available from: <http://tinyurl.com/5bb8ko>

A module from Citizenship Teaching Online, aimed at key stage 3, but providing information useful for post-16, such as the history of free speech, definitions and arguments for and against.

www.citizenshipteacher.co.uk

Media issues, theories and debates

Available from Classroom Resources:

<http://tinyurl.com/5aqs37>

These PowerPoint resources are designed to encourage students to firstly engage with a contemporary media issue, debate it, and finally to come to a conclusion. Each PowerPoint resource is organised with a starter, main and plenary section. Most of the resources come with hyperlinks to key online resources and have appended teacher's notes and full-length essays to stimulate students and model good practice. Issues covered include: celebrity culture, censorship, who controls what we watch? £49.99 (ex VAT).

www.classroom-resources.co.uk

Headliners

Headliners promotes young people's voices through a national news agency run for and by young people. It provides current stories written from young people's perspectives.

www.headliners.org

Post-16 Citizenship Support Programme

Activity books that encourage the development of citizenship-related skills:

Agree to disagree: Citizenship and controversial issues

For the sake of argument: Discussion and debating skills in citizenship

Choosing an angle: Citizenship through video production

For these and other resources, which are all available free to order or download, go to:

www.post16citizenship.org/publications