

In the Newsroom: The Fairness Formula

Rationale/Main Concept: Journalists face difficult decisions every day. Should a reporter use unnamed sources? What about publishing an unflattering photo of an important public leader? In this lesson plan, students learn about media ethics by reading an article describing the many concerns the news media must juggle to ensure fair coverage of events. Students then take on the role of reporters balancing these concerns.

Objectives – Students will understand:

- The standards journalists use when reporting a story: fairness, accuracy and clarity.
- The qualities of a fair report in the news media.
- The editorial decisions that affect the reader’s perception of a story.

Time: 40 minutes, plus 15 minutes of pre-class preparation

Materials:

- Handouts 1-1 and 1-2: “Fairness Formula Starts With Accuracy” article and worksheet (one per student, included in this packet).
- Three news articles (recent, if possible) that raise questions about accuracy, fairness or clarity (such as an [article](#) about weapons in pre-war Iraq that includes anonymous sources, or a [report](#) on President George W. Bush’s National Guard service that relied on questionable documentation and did not include alternative viewpoints).
- The transcript of [“Lurking in the Shadows”](#) from “The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer,” Sept. 30, 1998 (optional).
- Copies of the local newspaper or access to online newspapers.

Procedure:

- Assign Handouts 1-1 and 1-2 for reading the night before class. (Additionally, you may wish to review and/or assign [“Lurking in the Shadows.”](#) In this story from “The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer,” media correspondent Terence Smith leads a discussion about anonymous sources with journalists Bob Woodward and Jack Nelson and former White House official Lanny Davis.)
- Explain to students that they will explore some of the challenges journalists face when trying to report a story fairly. Hand out the three recent newspaper articles you selected. Give students a few minutes to read each one.
- Lead a class discussion that explores why the reporter chose to cover each of the three stories. Questions students should consider include:
 - What are the articles about? Are these controversial topics? Why or why not?
 - Is this a story that the public needs to know? Why or why not?
 - Does the information in the story affect a lot of people or only a few?
 - Is this a story about something that already happened or a future event?

- Next, ask questions that help students analyze the choices made in *how* the story is reported. Students should refer to the “Fairness Formula Starts With Accuracy” article for guidance. Questions they should consider include:
 - Does the story contain facts? Rumors? How can you tell the difference?
 - If there is a photograph, is it needed to tell the story? What does it add?
 - Does the story or photograph invade someone’s privacy?
 - Is the story or photograph sensational or does it blow something out of proportion?
 - Do you believe the story is accurate? Why or why not?

- Finally, have students work in small groups to look through a digital or a print newspaper and find at least two examples of stories that use anonymous sources (people who give reporters information but don’t want their names published). For example, the source might be identified as a person familiar with the investigation, a senior White House official or a neighbor who didn’t want to be identified.

- Ask students to discuss the questions below. Note: You may find it useful to watch the video “Sources,” which can be found [here](#) on the Newseum’s Digital Classroom.
 - Why do you think the person wanted to remain anonymous? (Possible prompts: Was he/she embarrassed or trying to embarrass someone? Not supposed to be talking with the media? Fearful of losing his/her job or of retribution?)
 - Why would a reporter use an anonymous source?
 - Are there any named sources?
 - Does the fact that the person doesn’t want to be identified affect the reliability of the information? Does it make you more or less likely to believe the story?

Extension Activities

1. Distribute “Media Ethics Scenarios” (Handout 1-3). Have students test their understanding of journalistic standards by completing the scenarios and discussing their answers. In each scenario, evaluate what is the most accurate, fair and clear thing to do.

2. Invite a local reporter to speak to your class. You may want to check with your local paper’s Newspaper In Education program for assistance finding a newsperson. Students should prepare for the visit by researching and reading the reporter’s articles and writing interview questions related to ethical situations the journalist has faced.

For elementary school students: Explore the role of anonymous sources in the news and the difference between facts and rumors. Define anonymous for them, provide examples from a news article and ask why people might want to remain anonymous. (Possible answers may include: They don’t want to get someone else in trouble; the information is supposed to be secret; they are not sure the information is accurate.) Define facts versus rumors. Play a round of “telephone.” (One student whispers a fact to the person to his/her right, who repeats it to the next student, until everyone has heard it; the last person shares it out loud.) What changed in the phrase? What stayed the same? Is it now a rumor or a fact? Could this happen to reporters? Do you trust anonymous sources? Why or why not?

In the Newsroom: Planning for the Unpredictable

Rationale/Main Concept: Why do we need the news media when disaster strikes? What challenges do newspaper reporters and editors, TV anchors, bloggers and other journalists face when covering catastrophic events? In this lesson, students reinforce their understanding of media ethics by grappling with how to balance plans with the unpredictable nature of disasters. In teams, students explore the role of the press in the wake of catastrophic events. They prepare a plan of action for responding to such a scenario from a journalist’s perspective and compare and contrast their experiences.

Objectives – Students will understand:

- The role journalists play in the wake of a disaster.
- The strengths and weaknesses of different media when covering a catastrophe.
- The particular challenges journalists face when covering a catastrophe.

Time: 45 minutes

Materials:

- Handout 1-4: “Planning for the Unpredictable” (one per group, included in this packet)

Procedure:

- Tell students that now they have studied how journalists respond to ethical concerns, they will learn how journalists and news media outlets respond to disasters. They’ll put their knowledge into action by creating emergency response plans from the media’s perspective.
- Divide students into four groups and assign each group a type of news outlet (such as a newspaper, TV station, social media site or weekly news magazine).
- Groups will use the “Planning for the Unpredictable” worksheet to create plans for how their news outlets will respond to a disaster.
- After groups have completed their plans, have them share them with the class. Discuss the plans and the process of creating them. Possible prompts include:
 - Which part of the plan was the easiest to decide? Which was the most difficult? Why?
 - Would this plan work for all types of disasters? If yes, why? If not, which ones might require different plans, and why?
 - How effective do you think this plan would be when responding to a real disaster? Which parts of the plan would work? Which might have to be changed?
 - How comprehensive is this plan? Is it missing any key issues? What did you list under “Other ideas for how your news outlet will respond to a disaster”?
 - How much more detailed would you have to make your plan for it to work in real life?
 - How flexible is your plan?
 - Imagine you were making a disaster response plan for yourself and your family. How would it be the same as and different from this plan?
 - Do the plans vary among the different types of news outlets? What are the pros and cons of each?

Extension Activities

1. Divide students into small groups. Ask each group to choose a recent catastrophe and two different types of news outlets. (Possible outlets include newspapers, TV stations, social media sites, etc.) Research each outlet's coverage of the catastrophe. Compare and contrast: How quickly did each outlet report on the event? How frequently did each outlet provide updates on the event? How many sources did the outlets quote? Did they make any mistakes? What can you deduce about the size of their staffs and their approaches to covering catastrophes? Record your answers using Handout 1-5.

2. Invite a local first responder, such as a firefighter or EMT, to your class. (Check on your city or county website for community outreach programs or contacts.) Prepare questions about his/her organization's processes for responding to catastrophes and working with media outlets. Then discuss how that plan compares to yours. What similarities and differences do you notice? Based on what you learned, do you want to make any revisions to your plan? What steps do you want to keep?

For elementary school students: Ask students to name emergency plans they practice at school or at home (for example, fire safety drills). Choose a specific type of emergency. What steps are involved in their drill? After writing the steps on the board, ask students to imagine they are a first responder to the same type of emergency. What steps should that person take? What about a reporter covering the event? Add their steps in columns next to the students' steps. Compare and contrast the procedures. Which steps are the same? Which ones are different? Why? Prompt students: What is each person's goal(s)? Be sure to emphasize that reporters have a special goal: informing the public about the emergency.

Handout 1-1: Fairness Formula Starts With Accuracy, by Charles L. Overby

People who talk with the [Freedom Forum](#) about news complain that the media can and should do a better job. Most newspeople tell us the same thing. So what's the problem? A lack of attention to basics.

In meetings with small groups around the country, we encouraged people to talk about fairness in the media. The topic quickly became a broad umbrella for complaints in general about the media. Most of the complaints focused on the basics of newsgathering and presentation. From those discussions, I have broken down the components of fairness into five basic categories that provide an easy-to-remember formula: A + B + C + D + E = F (Fairness).

Accuracy + Balance + Completeness + Detachment + Ethics = Fairness

There are other ways to state it, but these five categories generally capture most of the complaints we have heard about the need for fairness and improvement in the media. Many editors and news directors may think the components are so basic that their news reports meet those standards easily. But many of the people whom we interviewed do not think so. The public expects all five categories — not two or three — to be applied to all news stories. A quick look at the five categories:

Accuracy — This is the basic component of fairness, but it generated lots of discussion, especially in the area of corrections. Most newspapers still do a superficial job of correcting their errors. Procedures often are not reader-friendly. The better newspapers run more corrections, not fewer, every day than average newspapers. Unfortunately, it is rare to see corrections on television.

Balance — Many in the public think stories reflect definite points of view. Often, the other side is given scant, secondary attention, far down in the news report.

Completeness — This was the biggest complaint that we heard. Our respondents said reporters fail to tell the whole story because of inexperience, ineptitude, laziness or lack of space or time. The lack of completeness affects context.

Detachment — A frequent complaint lodged by people who deal with the media was that reporters and editors construct their stories in advance and only want news sources to confirm their preconceived notions. Once the news "hook" is established, there is not much fair and open reporting that follows.

Ethics — This involves the way reporters and editors pursue stories, the feeling that editorial viewpoints drive news content, placement and headlines. This category also focuses on the methodology of reporting, ranging from paparazzi photography to insensitivity to victims. These five areas need more discussion in newsrooms. If the public could see improvements and regular explanations about these basic elements, they probably would develop more trust in the mainstream media. This isn't rocket science. Every editor and news director should be capable of identifying ways to improve these deficiencies. For those news executives who think they are doing just fine in all these categories, bring in a dozen readers or viewers and ask them.

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Handout 1-2: Fairness Formula Worksheet

Name:

Date:

A + B + C + D + E = Fairness

Read “Fairness Formula Starts With Accuracy.” Written by Charles L. Overby, former chairman, chief executive officer and president of the Freedom Forum and chief executive officer of the Newseum, this article sums up the five essential components of fairness.

1. Define each of the following terms as used by journalists and expected by the public.

Accuracy

Balance

Completeness

Detachment

Ethics

2. Write your own definition of fairness.

3. Why is accuracy so important to readers?

4. Select a topic that is currently in the news. Whom would you interview to provide balance in an article on the topic or for more in-depth coverage of the issue?

Topic:

Interviewees (three or more, name and title, reason for selection):

5. Read an article from today's newspaper. Evaluate whether it meets the "completeness" test. Has the reporter given a full account of the story? What else might the reporter have been expected to know by the time the newspaper went to press or was posted online? What else do you want to know?

6. What guidelines would you give a young reporter to remain detached?

7. Write a statement of policy to guide ethical reporting by your newspaper staff.

Handout 1-3: Media Ethics Scenarios

Name:

Date:

You are the editor of your school's newspaper. Consider each of the following scenarios. Make a decision about whom you will cover, what your angle will be and what you will publish. How can you be sure to make ethical decisions? In your answers, explain how you will be accurate, fair and clear.

1. A student at your school is highlighted on the local TV news. A reporter for the school newspaper uses information from the TV newscast, giving credit to the station. It turns out that several facts from the TV news report are wrong. How will you set the record straight? What can you do to make sure your staff doesn't use incorrect information from other news sources in future?

2. A well-known musician is filming an anti-smoking PSA (public service announcement) at your school. The school newspaper photographer gets pictures of him smoking a cigarette during a break. Your photo editor wants to run the photograph with the caption "Rock Star Filmed Anti-Smoking PSA on Tuesday." Do you reword the caption?

3. The owner of a local business has refused to buy an advertisement in your newspaper. He graduated from your school, so you are upset that he won't support his alma mater. Later that day, as you look at the sports spread, you notice that the photo of the cross-country event the sports editor plans to use has a billboard in the background with the name of the local business prominently displayed. It would be easy to remove the billboard with photo-editing software. Do you alter the photograph?

4. The daughter of the principal at your rival high school has been arrested on drunken driving charges. Do you report it?

5. One of your best friends says she saw the new basketball coach smoking marijuana at a rock concert. The coach tells you he wasn't even at the concert. Do you report the allegation?

Handout 1-4: Disaster Response Plan

Name:

Date:

You and your team are going to design a plan for a news outlet to respond to a possible disaster. When formulating your plan, keep in mind that you may want to have multiple options in response to each question to maximize flexibility.

Your news outlet (TV news station, local news blog, etc.):

When will you begin reporting on the disaster? (Immediately? After public safety officials have briefed the public on what happened/is happening? The next day?)

How will you communicate with your staff? (Keep in mind that some forms of communication may be working better than others.)

Who will work? (If large numbers of your staff are unable to reach the office, are people available to fill in?)

Where will your staff work? (If your office space is no longer safe, where will you go?)

Who will you attempt to contact to get information about what has happened/is happening? (Keep in mind that many people will be trying to gather this information. Some sources may become overwhelmed, so you will need multiple options.)

How will you share information with the public? (What if your usual form of publication is not working? Are there other ways to share the information you gather?)

What instructions will you give your staff concerning balancing their safety with the need to gather information?

What instructions will you give your staff concerning fact-checking/confirming information about what has happened/is happening?

Other ideas for how your news outlet will respond to a disaster:

Handout 1-5: Catastrophe Coverage Comparison

Name:

Date:

Event:

News Outlet 1:

News Outlet 2:

How frequently did each outlet provide updates on the event (include dates of coverage)?

Outlet 1:

Outlet 2:

How many sources were quoted throughout the coverage?

Outlet 1:

Outlet 2:

Were there mistakes? If so, note them.

Outlet 1:

Outlet 2:

What can you deduce about each outlet's staff size and approach to covering catastrophes? Explain your answer.

Outlet 1:

Outlet 2: