

Unit: Covering a Catastrophe

By focusing on how journalists respond to catastrophic events, this unit helps students better understand the role of the press in society and the guidelines reporters follow in their work. It includes pre- and post-visit activities designed to bracket the Covering a Catastrophe NewseumED class, plus a class-specific Newseum gallery guide. Through these experiences, students will explore the vital role journalism plays in the wake of a disaster and grapple with real-life dilemmas that journalists have faced when covering a range of traumatic events.

Note: You can find additional activities, worksheets and handouts related to Covering a Catastrophe by searching EDTools on NewseumED.

OBJECTIVE: Students understand the role of journalism in responding to a disaster, including journalists' responsibilities and limitations, and can apply the reporter's code of ethics to a range of dilemmas.

TARGET AUDIENCE: Middle and high school

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What is the role of journalism during and after a disaster?
- What challenges do journalists face when covering a disaster?
- How does the journalist's code of ethics shape disaster news?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of breaking news coverage?
- How does the press shape our experience of these events?

KEY TOPICS AND SKILLS

- The role of the free press
- Media ethics
- How the news is made
- Ethical debate and decision-making

UNIT CONTENTS

1. Before Your Visit
 - **Press Conference Simulation:** Students stage a mock press conference to experience the process and challenges of effectively communicating and disseminating information.
2. During Your Visit
 - **NewseumED Class – Covering a Catastrophe:** Through the lens of the events of Sept. 11, 2001, students explore the unique practical and ethical challenges journalists face when covering catastrophic breaking news.
 - **Covering a Catastrophe Gallery Guide:** Students visit the Comcast 9/11 Gallery to learn about the horrendous events of Sept. 11, 2001, and how journalists covered a story that shook the nation and world.

3. After Your Visit

- **Planning for the Unpredictable:** From the perspective of journalists, students prepare a plan of action for responding to possible traumatic events.

Before Your Visit: Press Conference Simulation

Students stage a mock press conference to experience the process and challenges of effectively communicating and disseminating information.

GRADE LEVEL: Middle and high school

TIME: 30-60 minutes

MATERIALS: Preparing for a Press Conference handout (download)

PREPARE

Print copies of the handout; half of the students will get the one marked Press, the other half will get Mayor's Office.

- Note: If your students require more background to understand how the news is created before their simulated press conference, you can complete Sourcing the Information, an additional activity available on NewseumED.org.

DO

1. Tell students: One way reporters may gather information about a disaster is by attending a press conference. Officials hold press conferences to share information with the public via the press/journalists. Reporters hope to find out about new developments in a story and gather fresh information that they can then report to the public.
2. Tell students they're going to put on a simulated press conference to experience how it works, including the challenges of both sharing and gathering information in this setting.
3. Distribute the Preparing for a Press Conference worksheets. Half of the class will act as reporters, and the other half will act as representatives from the mayor's office. (If your class is large, you may want to create two teams representing the press and two teams representing the mayor's office.)
4. Allow students time to read the background information and prepare their facts/questions.
5. Conduct the press conference simulation according to the directions on the worksheets.

DISCUSS

After the simulation, discuss the students' experiences. Prompts:

- What was that experience like? Was it stressful? Frustrating? Informative?
- What was the most difficult part of the experience? What was the easiest?
- What was it like being a reporter in this situation? How did you decide what questions to ask? Were all of your questions answered?
- What was it like being a public official in this situation? Was it difficult to field the reporters' questions? How did you decide which questions to answer?
- Did the reporters and the officials have the same goals for the press conference?
- Make a chart of the pros and cons of using press conferences as a source of information for reporting on a catastrophic event, from the perspective of the general public.

During Your Visit: Gallery Guide

Students visit the Comcast 9/11 Gallery at the Newseum to learn about the horrendous events of Sept. 11, 2001, and how journalists covered a story that shook the nation and world.

GRADE LEVEL: Middle and high school

TIME: Under 30 minutes

MATERIALS: 9/11 Gallery Guide (download)

After Your Visit: Planning for the Unpredictable

From the perspective of journalists, students prepare a plan of action for responding to possible traumatic events.

GRADE LEVEL: Middle and high school

TIME: 30-60 minutes

MATERIALS: Planning for the Unpredictable worksheet (download)

PREPARE

Print copies of the worksheet, one per student.

DO

1. Tell students: Covering a disaster poses multiple challenges for reporters – physical, emotional, logistical, getting access to information, etc. Working in teams, they'll create plans for how a media outlet should respond to a catastrophe.
2. Divide students into four groups and assign each group a type of news outlet (examples: TV station, local news blog, newspaper, etc.).
3. Each group will use the Planning for the Unpredictable worksheet to build a plan for how their news outlet would respond to a disaster.

DISCUSS

After groups have completed their plans, have them share them with the class. Discuss the plans and the process of creating them. Prompts:

- 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 these plans would be when responding to a real disaster?
- Which policies would work? Which might have to be changed?
- How comprehensive is this plan? Is it missing any key issues?
- How much more detailed would you have to make your plan to make it work in real life?
- Do the plans vary among the different types of news outlets?
- 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?