

“A Government Without Newspapers, or Newspapers Without Government:” Jefferson’s Ambivalent Attitude Towards the Press

Title: “A Government Without Newspapers, or Newspapers Without Government:” Jefferson’s Ambivalent Attitude Towards the Press

Descriptive Subtitle: With more and more discussion lately about “fake news” and the protections of the press guaranteed under the First Amendment, explore how Thomas Jefferson might approach the media today. Through exposure to his letters regarding his changing views of the media (from member of the Continental Congress to his time as President) students will be able to compare statements of Jefferson regarding the press and make connections to our government’s varying views on the media.

Grade Level: upper middle (7-8), high school (9-12)

Author Information:

Name: Michele Gabrielson
Email: gabrielsonm@wellesleyps.org
School: Wellesley Middle School
City: Wellesley
State: MA

Duration: 2-3 (45 minute) classes

Overview:

In his 1787 letter to Edward Carrington, Jefferson writes, “The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” While Jefferson champions the freedom of the press time and time again during the revolutionary and immediate post-revolutionary years, as he serves out his time as President his protective attitude towards the press changes drastically.

Ideally this lesson would be taught in conjunction with a unit on Civics and Bill of Rights. It may also be used as a mini lesson when teaching about current events – specifically the current attitudes towards the media from our government.

Prior knowledge:

Students should have an in-depth understanding of the history of Jefferson's time as a member of the Continental Congress through his Presidency. Due to the examination of primary sources and the need for context, students should already have learned of the causes of the Revolution, with the differences of the Federalist and Democratic-Republicans party beliefs, the Election of 1800, and Jefferson's time as President.

Students will have read the piece provided by the Bill of Rights Institute titled "Background Essay: Why Does a Free Press Matter?" for homework.

Students should also be comfortable with determining bias and supporting opinions with text-based documentation.

For educators, the book [American Aurora : a Democratic-Republican Returns : the Suppressed History of Our Nation's Beginnings and the Heroic Newspaper That Tried to Report It](#) written by Richard Rosenfeld is a helpful resource.

Standards:

Massachusetts

USI.22: Summarize the major policies and developments that took place during the presidencies of George Washington (1789-1797), John Adams (1797-1801), and Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809).

USG5.3: Describe how citizens can monitor and influence local, state, and national government as individuals and members of interest groups.

Common Core

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1](#): Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2](#): Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4](#): Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

Objectives:

- Students will be able to analyze and evaluate primary source documents
- Students will be able to draw historic and contemporary connections of the relationship between government and press
- Students will be able to express their opinion on the significance of the first amendment as determined in early American history as well as today

Steps:

(5 minutes) Warm Up/ Bell Ringer

Based on our reading from last night, answer the following question, “What is the importance of the first amendment in regard to freedom of the press?” Students may either free-write, draw a picture or do a wordsplash. Discuss student answers to begin class.

(10 minutes) “Why Does a Free Press Matter?” debrief

Students will have read the piece provided by the Bill of Rights Institute titled “Background Essay: Why Does a Free Press Matter?” for homework. As a class, we will debrief the questions answered for homework using a turn and talk strategy. Students will turn to their partner and discuss the questions together.

(30 minutes) Jefferson’s Views on the Press: Determining Bias

Teacher will redirect students’ attention using the segue that even today, debates are held regarding the value of the First Amendment: Freedom of the Press. Share out some of the following quotes. Which ones strike you? Why?

- [“Freedom of conscience, of education, of speech, of assembly are among the very fundamentals of democracy and all of them would be nullified should freedom of the press ever be successfully challenged.” Franklin D. Roosevelt](#)
- [“Freedom of the press is not just important to democracy, it is democracy.” Walter Cronkite](#)
- [“Whoever controls the media, controls the mind.” Jim Morrison](#)
- [“Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.” Napoleon Bonaparte](#)
- [“There are laws to protect the freedom of the press’s speech, but none that are worth anything to protect the people from the press.” Mark Twain](#)
- [“Freedom of the press is a precious privilege that no country can forego.” Mahatma Gandhi](#)

Some individuals, like Thomas Jefferson, changed his opinion on the press throughout his life.

Using the “Jefferson’s Views of the Press” resource packet, read through the primary source quotes written by Thomas Jefferson regarding his attitudes towards the media.

In partners or small groups (no larger than 3), determine the bias of the quote. Is Jefferson championing the freedom of the press, or is he criticizing the press? Students may sort the quotes in to piles.

As a class, discuss the bias using context clues from the sources:

- What words or phrases in the quote led you to determine the bias? Explain your reasoning.

(45 minutes) Jefferson’s Views on the Press: Determining Context

In partners or small groups (no larger than 3) students will be assigned one of the primary sources in the resource packet to examine more closely. Students will place their quote in historic context using the

following resources:

Jefferson timeline on Monticello's website <https://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/timeline-jeffersons-life>

and the Library of Congress' Thomas Jefferson Papers Timeline:

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/thomas-jefferson-papers/articles-and-essays/the-thomas-jefferson-papers-timeline-1743-to-1827/>

Students should use the following as focus questions:

- To whom is Jefferson writing? About whom is Jefferson writing?
- What was happening in the country/ or Jefferson's life that this primary source may be placed?
- Can you make an inference as to why Jefferson's attitude towards the press was this particular way?

(30 minutes) Creating a class timeline of Jefferson's Attitudes Towards the Press

Partners/groups will share out their findings and place their quote in historic context. As a class, students will create a physical class timeline about Jefferson's major life experiences and what might cause him to shift his attitudes over the years. Suggestions might be using an online template for a timeline, poster project or index cards on a bulletin board.

Essential question:

- Can we make any conclusions that despite Jefferson's criticisms of the press, he would still staunchly defend the right of the press to make such statements?

(5 minutes) Ticket to Leave- Exit Ticket

Based on what we've gained from the wide variety of primary sources placed in context, tweet as Jefferson and summarize his views on freedom of the press. Remember to stay within the 140-character limit and don't forget a hashtag or two!

Materials: List the links to primary sources, images, etc. attach any handouts or presentations, and list any technology needed for the lesson.

- *Background Essay: Why Does a Free Press Matter?*

<http://billofrightsintstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Free-Press-lesson-plan.pdf>

- "Jefferson's Views of the Press" Resource Packet
 - Make as many copies as partners/small groups needed. Cut packet in to slips.
 - Pre-assign one quote per group for Activity #2
- Rosenfeld, Richard N. *American Aurora : a Democratic-Republican Returns : the Suppressed History of Our Nation's Beginnings and the Heroic Newspaper That Tried to Report It.* New York :St. Martin's Press, 1997. Print.
- "Tweet to Leave"- Exit Ticket Template

Accommodations:

Struggling Readers/ ELL Students

- Modify length and vocabulary, or highlight main ideas in the Bill of Rights Institute's *Background Essay*
- Modify comprehension questions at end of homework reading
- Select age/developmentally appropriate quotes and provide transcriptions or create a vocabulary reference sheet for difficult text
- Limit the number of quotes students must read and sort through in the first activity, "Determining Bias"
- Generate a timeline in advance for Jefferson's life and have students place their quotes in order to chart his attitudes towards the press

High-Level Readers/ Upper grades

- Familiarize students with the National Archives Founders Online database, or Monticello's Jefferson's Quotes database and allow them to search for a primary source quotation themselves
- Students may attempt to transcribe their own primary source document
- As an extension activity, students can research further connections to Jefferson's changing attitudes on freedom of the press by studying specifically his relationship with James Callender. Students can use the following resources for reference:
 - Daley, Christopher B. October 10, 2016. "Think the Press is Partisan? It Was Much Worse for Our Founding Fathers- Who We Were." *Zocalo Public Square*.p., 07 Oct. 2016. Web. 13 July 2017.
<http://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2016/10/10/think-press-partisan-much-worse-founding-fathers/chronicles/who-we-were/>
 - http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/jefferson/episodes/list/1_2
 - <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/james-callender>