



## The Price of a Free Press: Is Journalism Worth Dying For?

### OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will investigate the risks that journalists take to report on organized crime and corrupt government leaders. They will first discuss the role and value of a free press and some of the principles that define the work of reporters. Student groups will then role-play the work of a newspaper editorial board that must decide whether or not to publish a controversial story that could put the paper and its staff at risk.

The video clips used in this lesson (in Spanish with English subtitles) are from the film *Reportero*, a documentary that follows a veteran reporter and his colleagues at *Zeta*, a Tijuana-based independent newsweekly, as they stubbornly ply their trade in one of the deadliest places in the world for members of the media.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#). To purchase the institutional version go to [subcine.com](http://subcine.com).

### OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Respond to the question “Is journalism worth dying for?” and explain their views.
- Discuss the role and value of a free press.
- Evaluate the benefits and risks of publishing a controversial story that could put a newspaper and its staff at risk.
- Decide whether or not a paper should publish such a controversial story.

### GRADE LEVELS

9-12

### SUBJECT AREAS

Journalism, Language Arts, Civics, World History, International Studies, Geography, Social Studies, Current Events

### MATERIALS

- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video and resources
- A map showing the location of Tijuana, a city in Mexico near the country’s border with the United States and the city of San Diego
- Handout: [“Editorial Board Role Play”](#) (PDF file)

### ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

One or two 50-minute class periods, depending on the depth of class discussion

## FILM CLIP

Clip 1: “An Independent Newspaper in Mexico” (length: 4:51)

The clip begins at 4:00 with the statement “In 1980, when *Seminario Zeta* was founded....” It ends at 8:51 with the words “We started practicing our freedom before others.”

Clips 2: “It Was a Nightmare” (length 2:12)

The clip begins at 32:36 with the line “No one involved was arrested.” It ends at 34:48 with the statement “I’d rather take care of myself.”

Clip 3: “Risky Reporting” (length 1:42)

The clip begins at 38:36 with the words “After the attempted assassination, in 1997....” It ends at 40:18 with the line “But Francisco wanted the article to have his byline.”

## ACTIVITY

1. Have the class write for a few minutes in response to the question “Is journalism worth dying for?” Ask students briefly to share their responses with partners, and then invite a few pairs to share their thinking with the class.

2. Display a map showing the location of Tijuana, a city in Mexico near the country’s border with the United States and the city of San Diego. Explain that a major industry in the area is drug trafficking. Drug cartels there have networks of dealers and protect their business interests by paying off corrupt police and government officials and by violently solving any conflicts. The area also has a weekly newspaper called *Zeta*, which has historically stood up to the cartels and government corruption by exposing details of their activities in its investigative reports.

3. Show the class Clip 1: “An Independent Newspaper in Mexico” (length 7:48). Focus students’ viewing by having them take notes on the steps the newspaper took to set itself up as an independent source of news, free of government control.

4. Discuss:

- Why was it important for *Zeta* to be independent of government influence?
- What value does an independent and free press bring to a democracy?
- How can a free press protect other human rights?
- What is the role of government in protecting freedom of the press?
- Do we have a free press in America? Explain.

As appropriate during the discussion, refer to the [Principles of Journalism](http://www.journalism.org/resources/principles) (<http://www.journalism.org/resources/principles>) from the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism that outline the purpose of the work done by reporters.

5. Tell the class that reporting on corrupt politicians and organized crime has been extremely dangerous for journalists in Mexico. Display the web page, “[25 Journalists Murdered in Mexico Since 1992](http://www.cpi.org/killed/americas/mexico/murder.php)” (<http://www.cpi.org/killed/americas/mexico/murder.php>) from the Committee to Protect Journalists. In 22 of these cases, the perpetrators of the crimes have not been brought to justice. Point out that the loved ones of journalists who cover controversial stories are also at risk. For example, after the assassination of a

colleague, journalist Sergio Haro did some reporting that put his life and the lives of his family members at risk. Show Clip 2 “It Was a Nightmare” (length :45) to hear the story.

6. Explain that Jesús Blancornelas, a co-founder of *Zeta*, was targeted for assassination but managed to survive. Then, show Clip 3: “Risky Reporting” (length 2:39).

7. Divide the class into groups of three or four and give each student a copy of the handout. Tell the groups to imagine that each is the editorial board for the newspaper *Zeta* and ask them to review the “Today’s Issue to Discuss” section of the handout as a class. Then, ask each group to consider the information on the handout, weigh the benefits and risks related to the issue and come to a group decision on how to handle the story.

8. Have each “editorial board” (student group) share its decision and rationale with the class.

(Note: The scenario provided actually happened in 2004. *Zeta* ultimately decided to run the story and allow Francisco Ortiz to use his name in the byline. He was assassinated, and those who shot him have not been prosecuted.)

## **EXTENSIONS**

1. Explain that students are going to become a “Reportero” in an interactive game on the POV website. Each student will play the role of editor at a Tijuana newspaper, and based on real scenarios, must make decisions that affect the future of the paper, journalistic integrity, and the lives of their staff.

2. Analyze how media ownership and control affect news coverage. For a week, have students keep a media diary that tracks all sources of news that they consume. Who controls these sources of news? Does that control influence the choice of topics for news stories or the way stories are reported? Which source of news seems to be the most independent in its coverage? Ask students to summarize their findings and analysis in writing and include sample news stories that illustrate their arguments.

3. Investigate how social media affects news gathering. Begin by having students research and summarize the thinking of Walter Lippmann and John Dewey about the role of journalists. Then, ask small student groups to read the MediaShift article “[Could Citizen Reporting Be the Sweet Spot for Local Engagement?](http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2012/12/could-citizen-reporting-be-the-sweet-spot-for-local-engagement338.html)” (<http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2012/12/could-citizen-reporting-be-the-sweet-spot-for-local-engagement338.html>) and discuss how they think Lippmann and Dewey would respond to the idea of citizen journalists using mobile devices and social media. Is crowdsourcing news a good idea? Why or why not?

4. Examine the connections between poverty and drug trafficking. *Zeta* reporter Sergio Haro says:

This mess we’re in, caused by narco-trafficking... This violence, that’s growing every day... The way I see it, the root is inequality. So many people struggling to survive. Millions of people who don’t even know whether they’ll eat the next day. That’s how trafficking becomes an attractive alternative to youth. Some become killers. Seems like every day we become more individualized. Desensitized. I think it’s important not to

lose that human connection. And for us reporters to show a slice of that reality.

Ask students whether they agree with Haro that extreme poverty leads to criminal activity? Why or why not? Have students organize their ideas into position papers about the topic, conducting additional research as needed.

5. Explore other POV and PBS films related to Mexico, drug trafficking and journalism. Typically, video, background information and classroom activities are provided online for each film.

- *Al Otro Lado: To the Other Side* (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/alotrolado/>) follows Magdiel, an aspiring corrido composer from the drug capital of Mexico, as he faces two options for bettering his life: to traffic drugs or to cross the border illegally into the United States.
- *El General* (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/elgeneral/>) brings to life audio recordings about Plutarco Elías Calles, a revolutionary general who became president of Mexico in 1924.
- *El Velador (The Night Watchman)* (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/elvelador/>) features a guard who watches over the extravagant mausoleums of some of Mexico's most notorious drug lords.
- *In the Line of Fire* (<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/israel.palestine/>) is a 2003 FRONTLINE/World story that describes the dangers to reporters covering the Israeli/Palestinian territories.
- *Presumed Guilty* (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/presumedguilty>) addresses injustices in the Mexican judicial system as a whole through the individual story of a young man who was picked up off the streets, told he had committed a murder he knew nothing about and sentenced to 20 years in jail.
- *War Feels Like War* (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/warfeelslikewar>) documents the lives of reporters and photographers who circumvent military media control to get access to the real Iraq War.

## RESOURCES

### **Committee to Protect Journalists: Mexico**

<http://www.cpj.org/americas/mexico/>

The Committee to Protect Journalists tracks and publicizes attacks on journalists and offers aid to those who have been attacked. This page reports on violence against journalists in Mexico and includes a count of those killed since 1992.

### **POV Background: *Reportero***

[http://www.pbs.org/pov/reportero/photo\\_gallery\\_background.php](http://www.pbs.org/pov/reportero/photo_gallery_background.php)

This resource describes the brutal violence among drug traffickers in Mexico and provides a history of *Zeta* reporting.

### **Reporters Without Borders: Mexico**

<http://en.rsf.org/mexico.html>

This organization monitors threats to journalists around the world and seeks to protect their freedoms. This page lists the latest news on the dangers to journalists in Mexico.

***The Washington Post: “Gunmen Kill Editor of Tijuana Newspaper”***

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A61807-2004Jun22.html>

This June 23, 2004 story discusses the murder of *Zeta* editor Francisco Ortiz and notes that he was the third *Zeta* journalist ambushed and shot in 16 years. A photo is included.

**STANDARDS**

**Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects** (<http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/>)

SL, 9-10, 11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on [grade-appropriate] topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL, 9-10.4 Present information, findings and supporting evidence clearly, concisely and logically, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and task.

SL, 11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.

**Content Knowledge:** (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Behavioral Studies, Standard 4: Understands conflict, cooperation and interdependence among individuals, groups and institutions.

Civics, Standard 3: Understands the sources, purposes and functions of law, and the importance of the rule of law for the protection of individual rights and the common good.

Civics, Standard 19: Understands what is meant by “the public agenda,” how it is set and how it is influenced by public opinion and the media.

Civics, Standard 29: Understands the importance of political leadership, public service and a knowledgeable citizenry in American constitutional democracy.

Geography, Standard 10: Understands the nature and complexity of Earth’s cultural mosaics.

Geography, Standard 13: Understands the forces of cooperation and conflict that shape the divisions of Earth’s surface.

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Language Arts, Standard 10: Understands the characteristics and components of the media.

World History, Standard 44: Understands the search for community, stability and peace in an interdependent world.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive's director of education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource website (now PBS Teachers) and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and northern Virginia.