

The Scottsboro Trials and the Role of the Press

Written By: Georgiana Jones – Rocky Mountain High School – Fort Collins, CO
News Literacy Summer Institute 2010

Essential Question:

What impact can words and images have on political and social change?
How does the press play the role of a watchdog for our society?

Background Knowledge: Prior to this lesson, teachers have already presented the news literacy topics *news vs. opinion* and *news drivers*. Some students may also need some vocabulary defined in the article prior to reading.

Instructional Objectives:

- Students will evaluate the watchdog role of the media and role of the media as a catalyst for social change.
- Students will assess and analyze the language of a news article in order to distinguish news vs. opinion.
- Students will evaluate how images help shape opinion.
- Students will be able to understand the social context of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

News Literacy Skills to be incorporated:

- News Drivers
- News vs. Opinion
- Source evaluation and bias

Colorado Standards (Evidence Outcomes)

- Identify the intended effects of rhetorical strategies the author uses to influence readers' perspectives
- Judge the usefulness of information based on relevance to purpose, source, objectivity, cultural and world perspective and support decision
- Assess strengths and weaknesses of thinking and thinking of others by using criteria including relevance, clarity, accuracy, fairness, significance, depth, breadth, logic and precision

Introducing and motivating the lesson:

- Students will first respond on paper to a journal prompt about their personal rights: **What personal freedoms are most important to you?**
- After a brief whole class discussion of the prompt, the teacher will show an editorial cartoon from the Scottsboro Trial, followed by discussion.
Possible questions: What does this mean? What is the tone of the image? What can you guess the Scottsboro trial was about based on this image?

- The teacher will present a brief overview of the Scottsboro Trial and a timeline of events.

Process and Activities:

Students will be broken into groups and will be responsible for deconstructing a section of the *New York Times* news article on the testimony of Victoria Price. Each group will look for the following news literacy elements as a group and present to the whole class.

- What is the main idea in the section?
- What are the top two news drivers in the section? Explain.
- Decide what text can be verified and what is opinion.
 - Verification: Underline parts of the story that can be verified (is it true?) *Use one color*. Explain how these facts are evidence. Look at the source of the information.
 - Opinion: Underline words and phrases that editorialize rather than present facts. *Use another color*. Explain the connotations of these words. In what ways does the language help form an opinion for the reader?
- Based on the deconstruction of your section of the article, is this a fair report? Explain, providing at least three examples from the article to support your point.

Summarizing the Lesson: Teacher will lead a whole class discussion of these questions:

- What impact might this article have on American society in the 1930s?
- What might have happened in the Scottsboro case if the story never left Alabama?
- How does the press play the role of a watchdog for our society? (May be turned into an individual paragraph writing assignment.)

Extension Activities:

- Have students rewrite the opinionated parts of the article, making them objective (or the other way around).
- Show additional articles from the case and discuss the far-reaching effects this case had on American society.
- Before and while reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, have students make connections between the Scottsboro Trail and the novel.

Supplemental Materials :

“Girl Repeats Story in Scottsboro Case” *New York Times* article

Scottsboro Editorial Cartoon image

“Image of fear: minority teens allege bias in 'gang profiling.'” (assessment article)