



Lesson Plan: Can the Media Influence the Fairness of Criminal Trials?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will investigate how press coverage of criminal trials has the potential to influence public opinion and the rights of the accused. Using a video case study of a trial in the Philippines, the class will first discuss how a man was characterized in the media following his arrest, and then analyze the coverage of the trial and verdict. Students will then apply their media literacy skills to analyze a news story about a criminal trial in the United States. For more information on media education and the case featured in the activity, please see the [Resources](#) section of this lesson.

The clips used in this lesson are from the film **Give Up Tomorrow**. This documentary tells the story of Paco Larrañaga, a man in the Philippines who was arrested at age 19, tried and sentenced to death for the rape and murder of two women, despite evidence of his innocence. To date, Larrañaga has spent more than 15 years of his life in prison while his family and others work for his release and to clear his name.

Note: The filmmakers' version of the film contains graphic crime scene footage and language that may not be appropriate for classroom use. (Such content is not included in the clips provided with this lesson.) If you wish to screen the entire film with your students, you may want to record the edited broadcast version, which can be used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast. Alternatively, you can ask to borrow the broadcast version of the film from POV's lending library anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Discuss the purposes that are served by public trials.
- Analyze press coverage of a trial shown in a documentary.
- Determine whether the media influenced the fairness of this trial.
- Evaluate an example of media coverage of a criminal case in the United States.

GRADE LEVELS

9-12

SUBJECT AREAS

Language Arts, Journalism, Current Events, Global Studies, Social Studies

MATERIALS

- Internet access and equipment to watch online video and conduct research
- Handout: [“Case Study: The Media and the Trial of Paco Larrañaga”](#) (PDF file)

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

One 50-minute class period

FILM CLIPS

Clip 1: "Paco's Arrest" (length 4:56)

The clip begins at 4:02 with the words "On September 15, my husband and I..." It ends at 8:58 with the statement "I did not pay a single centavo to any one of them."

Clip 2: "The Prosecution's Star Witness" (length 4:33)

The clip begins at 25:04 with a shot of a packed courtroom. It ends at 29:30 with the words "Rusia was repeatedly tortured."

Clip 3: "The Verdict" (length 4:35)

The clip begins at 38:40 with the judge entering the courtroom. It ends at 42:37 with a shot of Larrañaga through the bars of a truck.

ACTIVITY

1. Explain to the class that public trials have long been considered a basic right of those accused of a crime. Briefly discuss what purposes are served by public trials, and the ways that we can follow what happens in courtrooms today. Ask students to explain why some cases receive more media attention than others, and to name examples of high-profile trial proceedings that support their arguments.
2. Give each student a copy of the handout. Explain that the class is going to watch three clips from the documentary ***Give Up Tomorrow***. These clips show how the media in the Philippines covered a criminal trial there. Review the background information at the top of the handout with students, then watch the first clip. Next, discuss the related media literacy questions. Repeat this process for the other two clips.
3. Talk with students about how the media coverage shown in the film might have influenced the fairness of the trial. Whose interests were served by the attention given to these events? Should other interests have been a higher priority? Explain.
4. Have students conduct research to locate examples of media coverage of criminal cases in the United States. Based on the messages in their chosen examples, do students have the perception that the defendants are guilty of the crimes? Why or why not? Are race, class or other factors involved in the coverage? If so, how? Ask them to do written analyses of how the pieces characterize the defendants and whether or not they think the reporting on the cases is fair. In what ways could coverage be improved? Instruct students to use specific examples from the pieces to support their conclusions.

EXTENSIONS

1. Discuss potential bias in the documentary ***Give Up Tomorrow*** based on its authorship. First, have the class watch the entire film. Tell students that one of the filmmakers is a relative of Paco Larrañaga's. Using POV's "[Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films](http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php)" (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php>) as a guide, talk about how this family connection may have affected access, perspective, the choice of parts of the story to emphasize and other factors during the production of the film. Does knowing the authorship of the documentary cause students to question its

objectivity? Why or why not? Also, discuss how the documentary might raise awareness about Larrañaga's case and potentially help his situation. Do students think that possibility increases or diminishes the value of the film? Explain.

2. Investigate how past trials in the United States have balanced the rights of the accused and the freedoms of the press. Start by reviewing the language of the First and Sixth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution. Then, have small student groups study and prepare presentations on the trials outlined in the resource [Free Press and Fair Trial](http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Spring01/Woell/index.html) (<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Spring01/Woell/index.html>). For each case, discuss how the rights to a free press and a fair trial came into conflict and how the situation was resolved. Do students think the resolution for their cases was effective? Why or why not?

3. Evaluate whether U.S. journalists follow professional codes of ethics in their reporting. First, have students review the Society of Professional Journalists [Code of Ethics](http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp) (<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>) and the [Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct](http://www.rtnda.org/pages/media_items/code-of-ethics-and-professional-conduct48.php) (http://www.rtnda.org/pages/media_items/code-of-ethics-and-professional-conduct48.php) from the Radio Television Digital News Association. Ask students to identify which parts of these codes would come into play when covering a criminal trial and then incorporate these points into a rubric. Students should then conduct research to collect at least five examples of courtroom press coverage and then use their rubric to grade each piece. Based on your curricular needs, you may want to ask students to study reporting from a number of trials during a given time period, to focus on local trials or to perform an in-depth analysis of media coverage during one specific trial.

4. Explore additional POV films that tell stories related to criminal justice and/or the press. Video, background information and classroom resources are provided online for each film.

- ***Better This World*** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/betterthisworld/>) explores how political dissent, civil rights, friendship and betrayal intersect when two young men are accused of planning to firebomb the 2008 Republican National Convention.
- ***Granito: How to Nail a Dictator*** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/granito/>) shows the process of gathering evidence to prosecute the perpetrators of genocide in Guatemala.
- ***If A Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front*** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/ifatreefalls/>) tells the story of a member of the environmental group Earth Liberation Front who faces life in prison for participating in arsons against timber companies.
- ***Presumed Guilty*** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/presumedguilty/>) depicts a man in Mexico struggling for his freedom and to clear his name after he is wrongly imprisoned for murder.
- ***Reportero*** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/reportero/>) tells the story of journalists at a newspaper in Mexico who risk their lives by reporting on the drug trade.

RESOURCES

The Case of Paco Larrañaga

FreePacoNow.com: Read Paco's Story
<http://freepaconow.com/pacos-story/>

This summary of Paco Larrañaga's case is provided by his loved ones, who are working to free him.

POV: Background Information for *Give Up Tomorrow*

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/giveuptomorrow/>

Find additional context on Paco Larrañaga's case.

Media Literacy

KQED Education: Media Literacy

<http://www.kqed.org/education/digitalmedia/media-literacy.jsp>

This site provides resources on media literacy concepts, a glossary, tips on how to integrate media literacy into teaching and more.

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php>

This resource provides a set of topic-based questions that educators can use to help students conduct analysis of media messages.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts

(<http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/>)

SL.9-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–12 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.9-10.3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

SL.11-12.3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used.

W.9-12.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization and analysis of content.

W.9-12.4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

W.9-10.8. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

W.11-12.8. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

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).

Arts and Communication, Standard 4: Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication.

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

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.

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.