Growing Voters and Election 2016: College Level

Class Activity Title: HACK the Spin! Press Room Simulation

See the poster presentation on this simulation at the American Political Science Association annual meetings, Philadelphia, Sept 2016.

In Part One: Working in teams students will participate in a classroom debate between two candidates with preparation and practice. Part Two concentrates on media literacy so that by students simulating their own candidate spin, they will gain the tools to identify and analyze media messages, interpretation, and manipulation.

> "Media literacy emphasizes…a critical thinking skill that allows audiences to develop independent judgments about media content; an understanding of the process of mass communication; an awareness of the impact of media on the individual and society; the development of strategies with which to discuss and analyze media messages; an awareness of media content as 'text' that provides insight into our contemporary culture..." (Art Silverblatt, Media Literacy, Keys to Interpreting Media Messages, 2001)

Overview

To be an informed voter requires that we critically listen and analyze the information in the debates, speeches, and commercials of each candidate to insure we make an informed decision when we cast our votes. It is important to research the issues and critically view the vast amounts of information disseminated during the campaigns.

Upon completion of this learning module, students will be able to separate propaganda from process, gain media literacy, and see behind what efforts are directed to get voters to choose a candidate to support.

Objectives: Evaluate the ways in which journalism, experts, the media, and public opinion are used to influence and shape the election.

1. Students will understand the role of commentary and media coverage of the candidates and issues on how the public perceives their choices in the election.
2. Students will identify for themselves the issues that require the voters' decisions.
3. Students will role-play influential individuals in the current political arena, including opinion-makers.
4. Students will understand the issues in the campaign and be able to debate them.
5. Students will understand the role and issues of each political party.

Activity Instructions:

1   Students will become a member of a political party in the United States through the instructor's selection process. Suggestion: students will pick a REP or DEM party card out of a dish or instructor will assign students to a political party.

Students will further be put into teams divided accordingly based on class size and teacher preferences for activity purposes:

1. A Democratic Party Prep Team to prepare and support Hillary Clinton in the debate
2. A Republican Party Prep Team to prepare and support Donald Trump in the debate.
3. A Media Consultants Republican Team to develop "spin" analysts for the post-debate media room.
4. A Media Consultants Democrats Team to develop "spin" analysts for the post-debate media room.
5. A Journalists Team to generate questions in advance and then conduct interviews with (spinners) experts following the debate in the media room.
6. (optional)A Video (or Audio) Crew Team to use webcams, cell phones, or video camera to film/record debate plus spin interviews.

Preparation for Debate:

1. Students will research, create, and turn in a list of 10 resources about their representative party.
2. Students will peruse primary source documents from prior presidential election debates, including online video footage and editorial commentaries.
3. Students will outline the details of what they know about the Presidential electoral process and any questions they have about how it works or about the role of political parties.
4. Students will generate debate questions on the major issues affecting their party and its platform.
5. Each prep team should think up arguments and then prepare and practice to counter their opposing candidate in the debate.
5. Students should seek out debate footage from a previous election and watch the interpretation and re-interpretation in the coverage to see how it is done.

Specific team play**:

Each **candidate prep team** selects a student to play each Presidential candidate (either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton). Each complete team must work together to prepare their candidate before the debate:

Identify key issues and where the candidate stands (and where the opponent stands)
Identify key arguments and points which each candidate should try to make about himself and against the other candidate
Anticipate tough points which the opponent will make and need to be countered.
Put the candidate through a practice session with the other team members playing the part of the opponent and the journalists posing questions to the candidates.

Each **media consultants team** selects party notables and/or key specialists to be spokespeople for each candidate in the post-debate media room. Depending on time and number of students available, there can be multiple "spinners" for each party. Students should look up this process to discover the types of people who are put into these positions and simulate those selections. Each team then works to prepare the spin experts for their interpretive work following the debate. This means:
- anticipating the issues which are most likely to come up during the debate

- understanding how the assigned party wants the messages of the key issues to be interpreted and explained by the spin expert in the media room.

- practicing taking what the candidate may have said, misspoken, or not said "on message" and re-interpreting it so that it fits the message that the party is looking for on that issue.

(tip: study online footage of spin experts. Example is YouTube.com footage of spin experts interpreting and declaring who won after presidential candidate debate.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2StvPrEvTk)

Journalists team: Identify key issues and generate questions for candidates during debate, follow-up questions for debate analysis, and questions for spin experts to interpret the debate in post-debate media room.

Pose questions during debate.

Interview party notables and pundits in post-debate "spin room".

Time permitting, journalists team can develop a "news analysis" story to report on the debate afterwards (i.e. who "won", what key sound bites were noteworthy, what was newsworthy about the debate, what the media and party pundits had to say about the debate). This can be a TV news (video) story or a newspaper print story, or an online story.

Video or Audio Crew team has two main roles which can also be further divided. One function is to film the debate and interviews and the other role is to edit together footage to broadcast debate coverage.

In their first role, the video (or audio) crew team prepares

a) to record/ film the debate itself; b) to capture individual interviews with media analysts (spin experts) following the debate; and

c) to organize simulated journalist news coverage of debate. The video team needs to decide who is behind the camera, who is organizing the shots, who is directing the filming, who is the technician, etc.

For their second role, students on the video team think about what shots they will need and prepare to edit the footage from the candidate debate and the spin room interviews. A student video simulating TV news footage can be produced.

For a radio, podcast version: use similar advance organizing – who to record, where to put the microphone(s), photos needed for thumbnails, etc.

Video or Audio Competing Versions of Debate Coverage

Use the same raw film (or audio) footage and student media crews edit two (or more) different "stories" or debate coverage each showing different conclusions (or spin) with the same material.

Use free media resources
Video:
Videolicious
WeVideo
Loopster
Photostory

Audio:
TwistedWave
Audacity

Students should post the link to their video or podcast and share the link.
Google docs are also encouraged as a way to share work in collaboration as well as submit to instruction for evaluation.

Overview of Simulation Activities:
1. Prepare candidates with Debate Camp practice.
2. Stage a debate between the candidates.
3. Have journalists pose questions during the debate and in the spin room.
4. Have party notables and political pundits interpret, analyze and spin the debate afterward.
5. Film debate and post-debate analysis
6. Students produce movie or sound clip(s) simulating TV/radio coverage.
7. Put video and news analysis online to share and continue the discussion, collaborate outside classroom.
8. Show video / play radio podcast to other classes/venues.

Suggested Reading and Resources for Students:

- Doris Graber, *Mass Media & American Politics*. Congressional Quarterly Press, 8th edition, 2010.
- Washington Post education resource includes 5 Myths About Spin.

- Local daily newspaper, either in print or online.
- Political websites Politico.com, RealClearPolitics.com and FiveThirtyEight.com; also, follow FactCheck.org andPolitiFact.com.
- Local political websites or blogs, including "The Monkey Cage" political science blog at the *Washington Post* and "The Upshot" at the *New York Times.*
- Editorial pages, blogs or websites with various ideological perspectives.
- The political news programs of cable television networks.
- Clearhouse sites like the Electoral Knowledge Network's area for Media and Elections can be helpful: https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/me/me10/default and Journalist's Resource: http://journalistsresource.org/

(list adapted from http://journalistsresource.org/syllabi/political-reporting)