Public Opinion and News Reporting: Different Viewpoints, Changing Perspectives

**Grades:** 7-12

**Subjects:** History, Oregon History, Civics, Social Studies

**Suggested Time Allotment:** 1-2 class periods

**Lesson Background:**

Our impressions of events can often be influenced by the manner in which they are reported to us in the media. Begin by staging a class discussion of some recent news event(s) that have caused controversy. Can the students think of any news stories that strongly divide public opinions? Any that have been reported in a variety of different ways, depending on which television channels you watch or magazines you read? Can they think of examples where they thought one way or formed a certain opinion about a certain news event, only to have their minds change and opinion shift later, when more information came to light in the media? Moving on from this discussion, the lesson can demonstrate these issues of perspective.

**Lesson #1: Joaquin Miller—Genius or Cad?**

Joaquin Miller was the pen name of Cincinnatus Heine Miller, a colorful and controversial poet of the nineteenth century. (Read a detailed biography of Joaquin Miller on Wikipedia, [here.](#))

Known in his day as the ‘Poet of the Sierras,’ the ‘Byron of the Rockies,’ and the ‘Bard of Oregon,’ Miller became a celebrity throughout the United States, and especially in England. He was an associate of such enduring literary figures as Ambrose Bierce and Brett Hart. However, it could be argued that Miller’s fame came more from the popular image he created for himself—frontiersman, outdoorsman—than from the actual quality of his literary work. Even in his own day, he was a controversial figure. Ambrose Bierce once called him “the greatest liar this country has ever produced.”

Have the class read a few different newspaper stories about Miller—each giving a very distinct view of the famous poet.

“Joaquin Miller Writes on Oregon for the Chicago Times,” from Jacksonville Oregon Sentinel, September 25, 1886. In this article he coins a nickname that would become popular: “The Emerald Land.” This piece was reprinted in many papers back east, helping to form Oregon’s image with the rest of the country.
“For Joaquin Miller Day,” from Portland Morning Oregonian, July 16, 1905. The famous Poet is given a reception and a day in his honor during the Lewis & Clark Exposition.

Contrast this with the often scathing coverage of Joaquin Miller in The New Northwest:

For example, “Such Is Fame,” published August 18, 1871 (article begins at top of column 4), and the untitled item beginning “Mrs. Minnie Myrtle Miller…” (near the bottom of column 3) published January 17, 1873. This paper, dedicated to suffrage and women’s issues, presents a very different image of the famous poet!

Lesson #2—Coastal Bias: The University of Oregon Wins The ‘Rose Bowl’ in 1917.

It was many years ago that an Oregon college football team made its first January trip to Pasadena for the postseason game that would later come to be branded as the “Rose Bowl.” In the early days of intercollegiate athletics, it was commonly believed that a better, more competitive brand of college sports were played at Universities back East. Stars from eastern squads dominated the end-of-season All America all-star team, and, when teams from the east and west actually met to compete on the field, the eastern team was always regarded as the prohibitive favorite. Such was the case when the University of Oregon faced off against the University of Pennsylvania in 1917. For more background on the big game, you can read this article on the ODNP Blog.

Study of the reportage and commentary on this game in the sports pages of historic newspapers from around the country will reveal to students that the so-called “East Coast Bias” in sports reporting is nothing new! Compare and contrast the reports from various Oregon and Western newspapers, with those from cities back East. How does reporting of something as simple as a sporting event vary between various news sources?


“At The New Year Football Game,” from Philadelphia (PA) Evening Public Ledger, January 10, 1917. A photograph from the game; other photos on the page provide context of American life and other news events in 1916.

“Pennsylvania Defeated: Oregon Overwhelms Easterners,” from Klamath Falls Evening Herald, January 2, 1917. Results of the game as reported in an Oregon paper.


“West Happy Over Game,” and “Western Team Shows East Something About Football,” from Tacoma (WA) Tacoma Times, January 12, 1917. Newspaper from Washington takes particular glee in Penn’s defeat. Another photo from the game is published with the January 12th story.
“Athletics,” from Bend Bulletin, January 18, 1917. Fascinating early editorial on the positive effects of athletic victory on “community success and development.” Cites University of Oregon’s defeat of Penn: “That football victory attracted more national press comment than a small earthquake.”

“Penn Team Was Not Physically Fit For Battle With Team Of Oregon Caliber,” from Philadelphia (PA) Evening Public Ledger, January 2, 1917. For comparison, examine these reports of the game from the University of Pennsylvania’s home city.