



Core units: Inquiry and skills

Illustration 2: Contemporary geographical issues and the media – Year 6

The role of the media

The media plays an important role in raising our awareness of contemporary geographical issues and events. The news dissemination process is, however, a highly selective process. The editorial decisions made by media organisations result in the highlighting of some issues and events while others are ignored. As a result, the media not only determines the public's awareness of such issues and events, it helps shape public discussion and debate of such matters. This is often referred to as the media's 'agenda setting' role. By highlighting some issues and ignoring others, the media can influence the decision-making processes of individuals, governments and corporations.

Media management and the news

When using the media with students, it is important to stress that it is often the media which selects and manages the presentation of news. Commercial concerns (such as the need to attract the largest numbers of readers, listeners and viewers as possible) exert a powerful influence on which issues are examined and the way in which they are presented. For example, newspapers and magazines (including those delivered by the Internet) are used selectively by each reader. That is, they only read the material that is of interest to them. Consequently, the print and online media focus on a wider range of issues that are reported in greater depth than is generally possible in the electronic media (television and radio).

The electronic media, which is governed by the need to attract and maintain an audience's attention, tends to focus on those issues that are likely to appeal to a particular (targeted) audience. In the print and online media, visual images (for example, photographs) play only a supporting role. Television news reports, however, are often built around a visual image with the commentary playing a supporting role. This advantages those issues that are accompanied by action-based images.

It is also important to recognise that there is a difference between the 'objective' reporting of a geographical issue or event and an 'opinion' piece. As students' experience with the media grows, they develop the ability to determine the perspective from which the information is constructed. Traditionally, this has been referred to as 'media bias'. Today, it is more commonly referred to as a 'diversity of opinion'. Whatever it's called, it is important that students become 'critical' users of the media.

The media and interest groups (including non-government organisations)

When using media sources, students should be aware that there is a close relationship between the media and interest groups. Interest groups (and individuals) use the media to gain publicity for their views and activities. Also, the media often draws on the 'conflict' that is generated by interest groups. Interest groups that stage protests or publicity stunts attract the media's attention. This ensures widespread media coverage and helps place an issue before the public. If the public is sympathetic towards the cause, pressure will build and politicians may be forced to respond. The campaign mounted by interest groups such as Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd, for example, has proved very successful in mobilising public opinion against Japanese whaling. Images of whales being harpooned caused international outrage. This forced the Australian Government to support an international ban on whaling.