

The Role of Media

Time Needed: One class period

Materials Needed:

Student worksheets

Scissors/glue

Copy Instructions:

Reading (2 pages; class set)

Worksheet (2 pages; class set)

Cutout Activity (1 page plus 1/2 page; class set)

Extension Activity (1 page; optional)

Learning Objectives. Students will be able to:

- Analyze the role of mass media in monitoring and influencing government and the public sphere.
- Explain the impact of the media on monitoring and influencing government and the public sphere.
- Analyze media communications for bias.
- Recognize the media acting in its roles as gatekeeper, agenda-setter, and watchdog.

STEP BY STEP

- ☐ **ANTICIPATE** by asking students if they've ever seen a television newscast. Ask students to recall any details they remember (graphics, music, story topics). Ask students who they think makes decisions about what stories television newscasts discuss.
- ☐ **DISTRIBUTE** the *Reading* pages to each student.
- ☐ **READ** the two reading pages with the class, pausing to discuss as necessary.
- ☐ **CHECK** for understanding by doing the T/F *Active Participation* activity. Have students respond "True" or "False" as a chorus or use thumbs up/thumbs down.
- ☐ **DISTRIBUTE** scissors, glue, and the *Agenda Cutout Activity* pages. Students can complete this activity individually or in pairs.
- ☐ **READ** the directions for the cutout activity.
- ☐ **ALLOW** students to complete the cutout activity.
- ☐ **REVIEW** the answers to the cutout activity.
- ☐ **DISTRIBUTE** one worksheet to each student and review the directions for the activities.
- ☐ **ALLOW** students to complete the worksheet.
- ☐ **DISTRIBUTE** one *Extension Activity* to each student and review the directions.
- ☐ **ALLOW** students to complete the extension activity.
- ☐ **CLOSE** by asking students to silently recall as many roles of the media as they can. Call on students until all roles have been named.

This lesson plan is part of the *Media and Influence* series by iCivics, Inc. a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing civic education. For more resources, please visit www.icivics.org/teachers, where you can access the state standards aligned to this lesson plan. Provide feedback to feedback@icivics.org.

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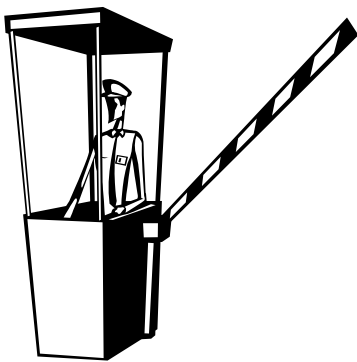
The Role of Media

Name: _____

What is “The Media?”

The word media means different things depending on how it is used.

Media is the plural form of the word medium. A **medium** is a method of communicating information, entertainment, or other messages. Television is one popular medium. Radio, the internet, and cell phones are all examples of commonly used media. The term **mass media** refers to methods of communicating with large numbers of people. A lot of media exists purely for entertainment, such as movies and television sitcoms. But when you hear the phrase “**the media**,” usually it is referring to the sources of our news and information about current events. Paying attention to the media is how we stay informed about what’s going on in the world around us and what our government is doing.



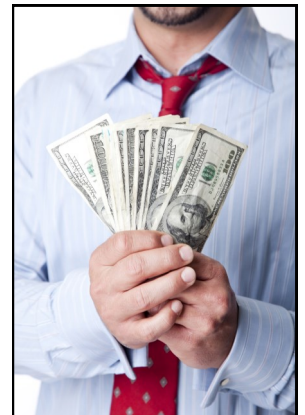
The Media as Gatekeeper

A **gatekeeper** stands guard at a gate and decides who gets to pass through and who doesn’t. In its role as gatekeeper, the media decides which stories and issues are important enough to receive public attention—and which aren’t. As a citizen, it is important for you to realize there are many serious events and issues you will never hear about on the evening news. Each news outlet has its own criteria for deciding which stories get through the gate and into the public eye. To understand why, you need to understand two things: the media is a business, and the media is almost always biased.

Gatekeeper: “B” is for Business

Most people get their news from television, radio, or a newspaper (either print or online). With the exception of PBS, the Public Broadcasting System, most are **commercial** or for-profit sources. They make money by selling time or space to advertisers. But advertisers won’t pay for ads nobody will see, so for-profit media must make the news as exciting as possible to attract lots of viewers.

But let’s face it: News programs are not always as exciting as, say, action films. In order to survive in today’s culture, television news must keep things short, fast paced, and exciting. On-the-hour radio news is even shorter. Stories most likely to get through the gate are those that are the most gripping (ever wonder why the “news” is full of car crashes and house fires?) or that affect the most number of people. If a story can’t be told in a quick, 15-second **sound bite**, it’s likely to be left outside the gate.



Gatekeeper: “B” is for Biased

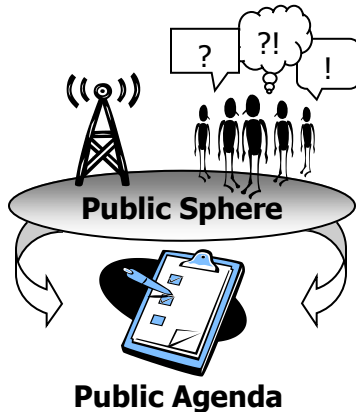
Biased means favoring one view over another. As a human being, it is impossible to be completely *unbiased* even if you try. The media is made up of human beings; therefore, even when media outlets try to be unbiased, they’re not always successful. Bias may cause the media to open the gate to some stories instead of others or to report stories in a way that is weighted toward one side. There are many causes of bias. The most common among media sources is being more politically liberal (leaning toward the Democrats) or conservative (leaning toward the Republicans).

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The Media as Agenda-Setter

Because of its role as gatekeeper, the media is largely responsible for deciding what issues society discusses in the public sphere. That means the media also determines which issues are on the public agenda, which is the to-do list of issues the public agrees are a priority. An issue won't get on the public agenda unless it is being discussed in the public sphere, and it won't be discussed in the public sphere if nobody has heard about it.



The media's role as agenda-setter is controversial. Some people don't think for-profit corporations should set our public agenda. They worry that many important issues will never get public attention. Some issues just aren't exciting enough to compete with entertainment. Others are too complex to fit into a short sound bite. Although the public decides which issues to care about, the media only tells the public about a few of the issues that exist. Therefore, people worry that the public does not really have much of a choice about what issues are important. People also worry that a biased media influences the public agenda toward one way of thinking over another.

The Media as Watchdog

A real watchdog stands as a guard and barks loudly to alert the owner if there is something wrong. In its role as **watchdog**, the media keeps watch on the government and others in power. It speaks out to alert the public if something happens that shouldn't. Local news stations often have a segment in which they investigate problems for people. Entire, hour-long news shows are devoted to **exposés**, which are stories designed to expose wrongdoing. Government officials who engage in bad behavior know they will be on every news show and newspaper in the country if they are caught.



Although a watchdog will bark when there is something wrong, most of the time the watchdog just watches. Thanks to the media, we live in a world where we can turn on the television and watch our government in action at any given moment. Stations such as C-SPAN broadcast activity directly from the floor of Congress for everyone to see. Simply reporting information is playing watchdog, too. Without the media, we would not know what is happening behind closed doors.

The Media's Audience: You

A watchdog doesn't do any good if nobody is paying attention. The public sphere and the public agenda both depend on the same thing—the *public*, which is made up of people like you. If the media reported an event and nobody watched or responded, it would have no influence at all. In the same way, the public influences the media because the media can't function without peoples' attention. How people respond to the media's reporting can affect which stories get through the gate.



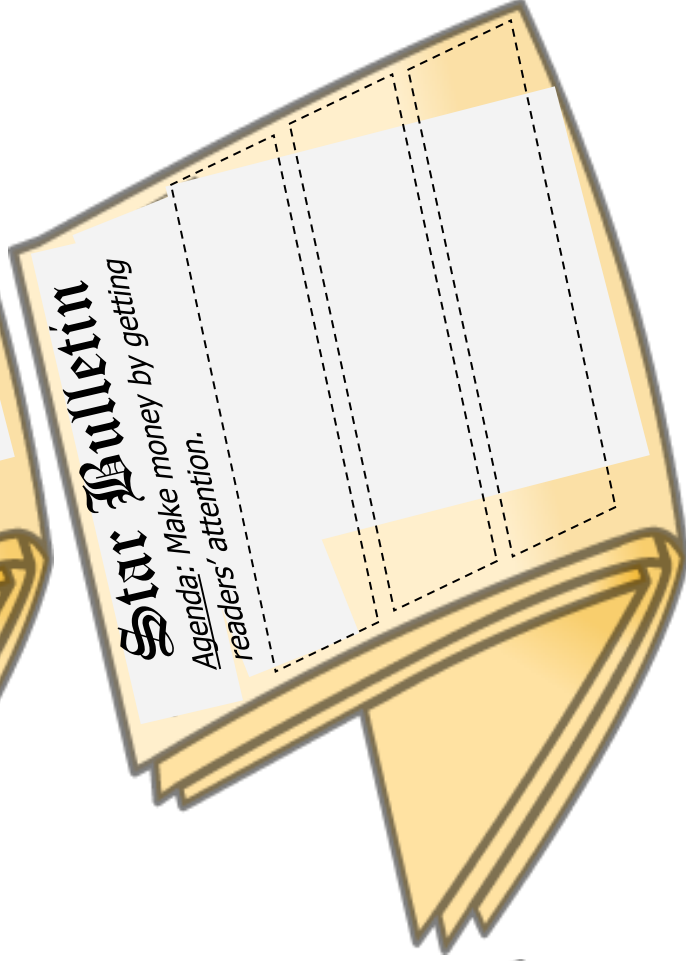
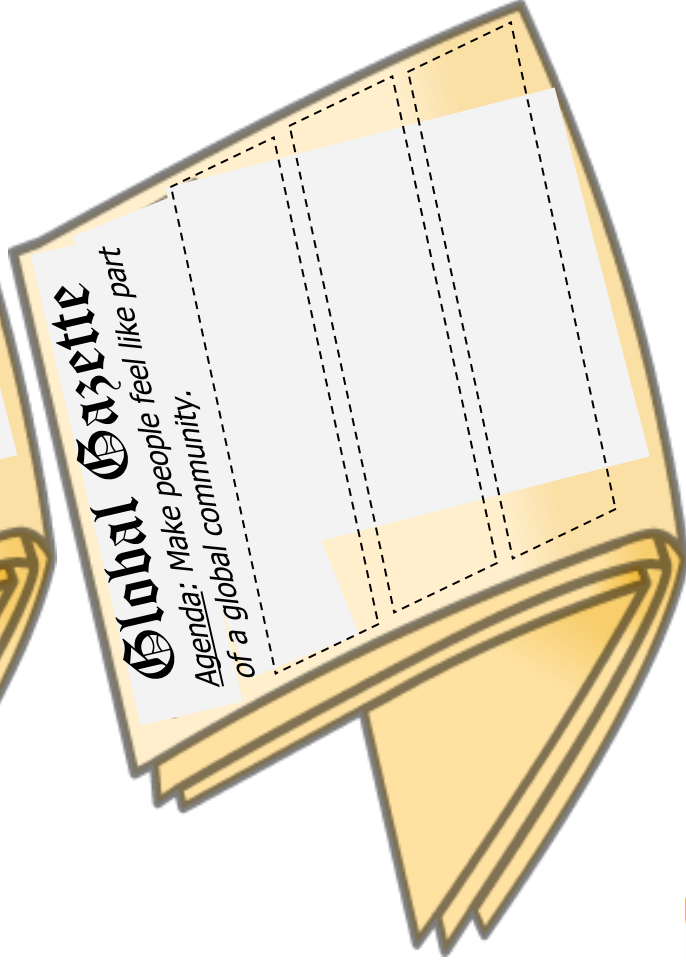
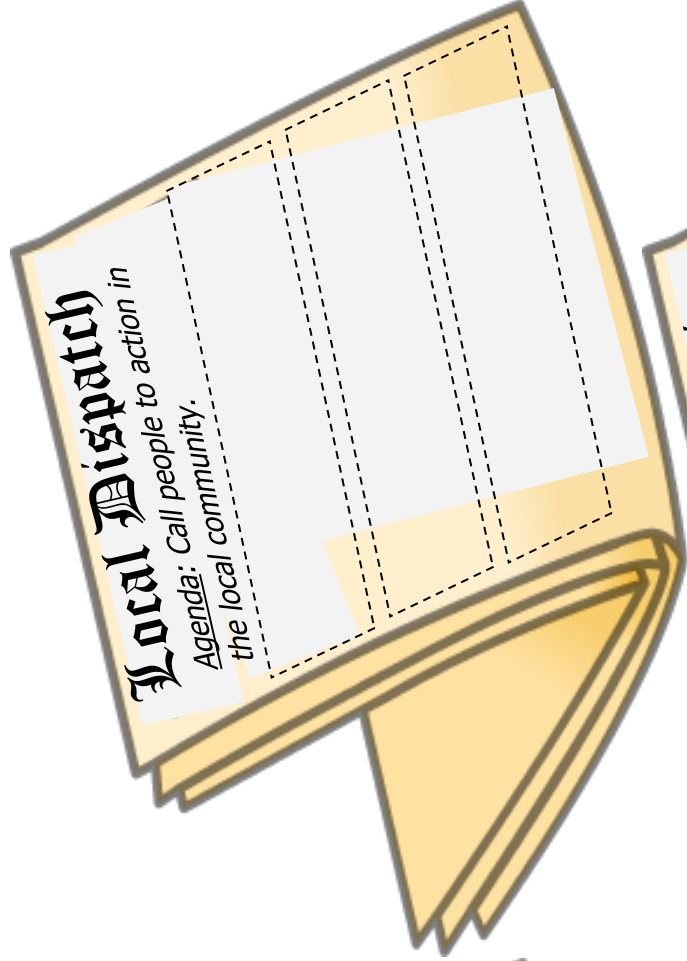
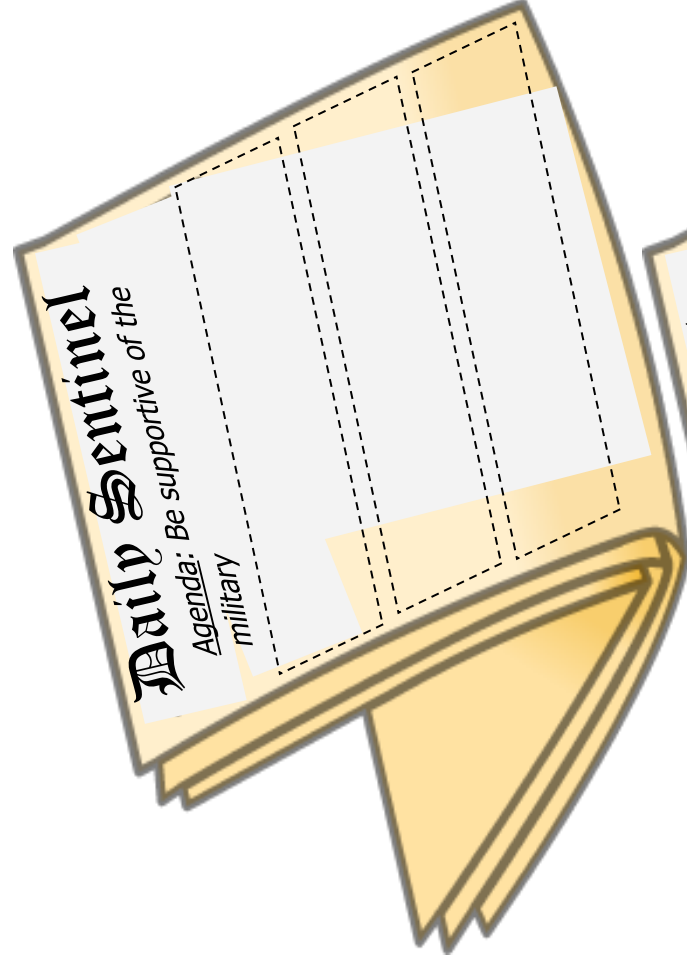
True/False Active Participation Review

Read each statement aloud to the class. Have the class answer "true" or "false" as a chorus, or show you thumbs up/thumbs down to answer. Use "false" statements to discuss what changes would make the statement true.

1. "The media" only refers to television. (F)
2. In its role as gatekeeper, the media decides which stories to run. (T)
3. A "sound bite" is a story designed to expose wrongdoing. (F)
4. Most news sources are not for profit. (F)
5. Biased means favoring one view over another. (T)
6. About half of all human beings are completely unbiased. (F)
7. Bias can affect what stories a media outlet decides are important. (T)
8. An issue can't get on the public agenda if nobody has heard about it. (T)
9. Everyone agrees the media should play the role of agenda-setter. (F)
10. If you watch television news, you will hear about all the issues that exist. (F)
11. In its role as watchdog, the media decides which issues need public action. (F)
12. Thanks to the media's influence, people don't need to pay attention to what's going on. (F)

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The Role of Media

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Activity. The following twelve stories came in on the wire today. But which ones should be front and center? Cut out the headlines, then read each newspaper's agenda on the separate activity page. Decide which newspaper's agenda each story fits and paste the headline to that newspaper's front page.

Jet stream carries China's pollution to U.S.

Monkey escapes during stop at gas station

Health clinic will close due to budget cuts

U.S. soldiers rebuild school in war zone

Successful airstrike destroys terrorist hideout

County food banks running dangerously low

Pilot: Snake popped out of dashboard mid-air

Navy tests new submarine missile

Community garden builds 30 new plots

Waitress attacked over wrong order, cops say

U.S. sends aid to Pakistan flood victims

Cambodian students visit U.S. sister city



Agenda Cutout Activity

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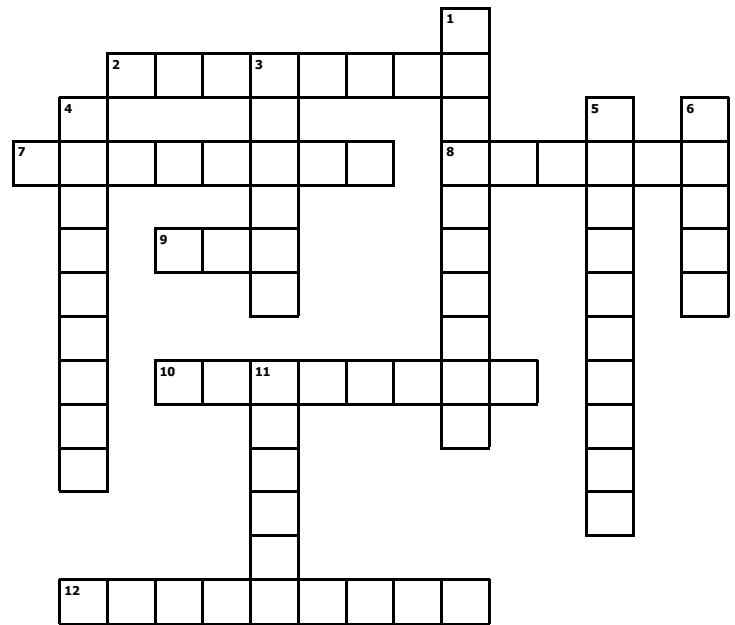
Vocabulary. Complete the crossword puzzle using words in **bold** on the reading pages.

Across

2. the sources of our news and information about current events
7. one who stands guard and sounds an alert if something is wrong
8. story designed to expose wrongdoing
9. person responsible for paying attention to the media
10. not favoring any view
12. something said in 15 seconds or less

Down

1. one who stands guard at a gate and decides who gets to pass through
3. a method of communicating information, entertainment, and other messages
4. methods of communicating with large numbers of people
5. word that means for-profit
6. plural of the word medium
11. favoring one view over another



Media Roles. Draw a line to match each example with the role it illustrates. One role does not have an example.

Media as watchdog

The media begins reporting about a disgusting-looking ingredient found in many common foods. Soon everyone is talking about the ingredient. People begin signing petitions, and soon there is a major movement to convince the government to outlaw the ingredient.

Media as a business

Two hundred people rally in the street to protest a city's decision to cut bus transportation. Instead of covering that event, the evening news runs a story about the mayor's plan to build a new park.

Media as gatekeeper

A politician accepts expensive gifts from a campaign supporter. Two television networks run hour-long exposés about the politician's bad behavior. The politician returns the gifts and resigns from office.

Media as entertainment

A newspaper loses several advertising accounts after sales are down. The paper decides to put crime stories on the front page and move stories about government to page 2. Sales go up, and advertisers begin buying more ad space in the newspaper.

Media as biased

Two presidential candidates give speeches in a city on the same day. One local newspaper features a photo of the Republican candidate with the front page story. The other local paper runs a photo of the Democratic candidate.

Media as agenda-setter

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Headline Influence. Each pair of headlines introduces the *exact same story*! Read the headlines and answer the questions.

A **The Daily Prestige**
Foreclosure rates hold steady

B **The Daily Prestige**
U.S. Home seizures reach record for third time in five months

- 1) Which one emphasizes that lots of homes are being foreclosed?
☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both
- 2) Which one is trying not to alarm people?
☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both
- 3) Which one sounds more dramatic and interesting?
☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both

A **The Daily Prestige**
27% of Indiana students don't graduate

B **The Daily Prestige**
73% of Indiana students graduate

- 4) Which one focuses on the positive side?
☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both
- 5) Which one tells you the Indiana graduation rate?
☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both
- 6) Which one is trying to alert people to a problem?
☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both

A **The Daily Prestige**
Man charged in assault rifle killings of 3 teens

B **The Daily Prestige**
Man charged in triple shootings of Chicago teens

- 7) Which one tells you three teenagers have been killed?
☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both
- 8) Which one wants you to focus on the kind of weapon the killer used?
☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both
- 9) Which one tells you a man was charged?
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A **The Daily Prestige**
Al Qaeda in Iraq far stronger than Bush administration admitting

B **The Daily Prestige**
Al Qaeda's weaker, but won't likely disappear

- 10) Which one focuses on progress that's been made against Al Qaeda?
☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both
- 11) Which one is trying to make President Bush look bad?
☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both
- 12) Which one sounds more alarming?
☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both

A **The Daily Prestige**
Pension cut plan may save over \$5B

B **The Daily Prestige**
Debate looms on state pension

- 13) Which one suggests the plan to cut pensions is something to fear? ☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both
- 14) Which one makes the plan sound like a good idea? ☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both
- 15) Which one uses a dramatic word? ☐ A ☐ B ☐ Both
Write the word on the line: _____

What's YOUR Agenda?

Try your hand at being a media mogul! Imagine you are creating a news and opinion publication. The first thing you need to do is set the focus of your newspaper and create an agenda.

A. **Mix 'n' Match.** Match an intention with an issue to create your own personal agenda.

Intentions

- ☐ Raise awareness about
- ☐ Call people to action about
- ☐ Make people care about
- ☐ Point out the problems with
- ☐ Change peoples' minds about
- ☐ Elect politicians who care about

Issues

- ☐ Poverty in America
- ☐ Disease in poor countries
- ☐ Keeping America's military strong
- ☐ Finding renewable energy sources
- ☐ Finding a cure for _____
- ☐ Saving the _____ from extinction
- ☐ Reforming the education system
- ☐ America's health care system
- ☐ Homelessness
- ☐ Drug/Alcohol abuse
- ☐ Illegal immigration
- ☐ Other: _____

Write your agenda in one sentence here:

My agenda is to

B. **Promote Your Agenda.** Create 3 headlines that will appear on your site. They can be news stories (you'll probably have to make those up) or editorials (opinion articles). Remember to connect the headlines to your agenda!

The Daily Prestige

News Story

The Daily Prestige

Editorial

The Daily Prestige

News Story

The Role of Media

Name: _____

****TEACHER GUIDE****

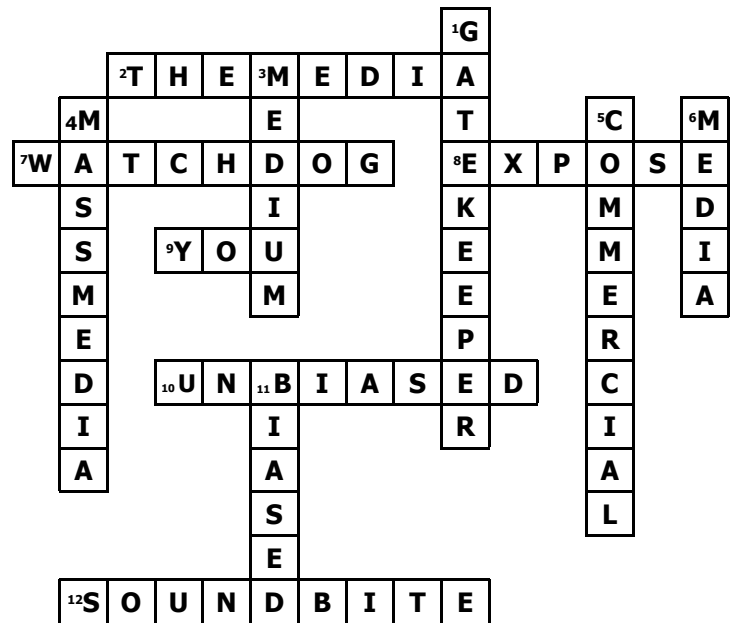
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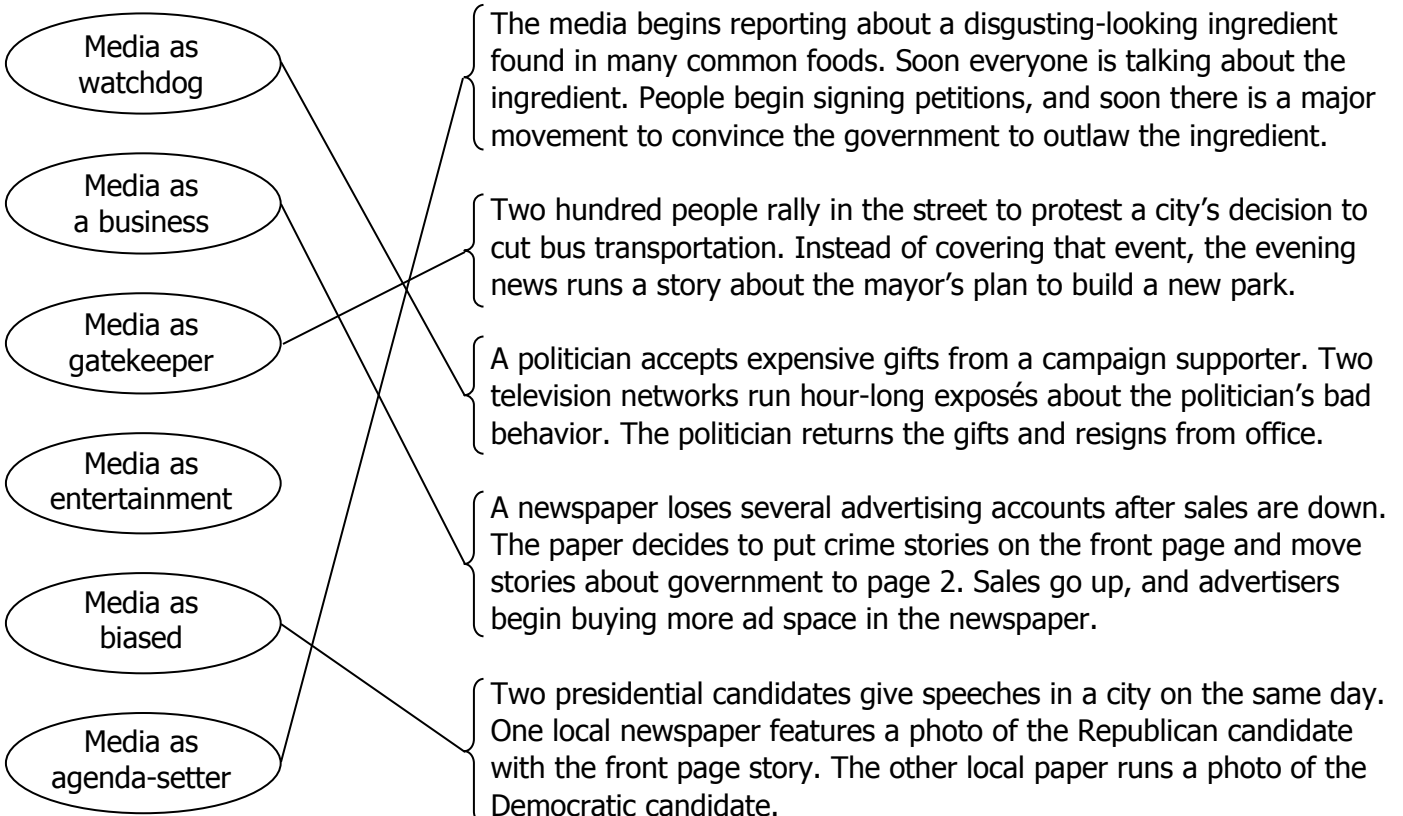
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Write the word on the line: looms