

Fragmented Stories:

Uncovering News Bias through Information Literacy Instruction¹

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The press has significant power in society. According to Len Masterman, “The media tells us what is important and what is trivial by what they take note of and what they ignore, by what is amplified and what is muted or omitted.”² Citizens look to news and media organizations to provide an accounting of the significant occurrences of the day. In the current age of the 24-hour news cycle, in which we have access to broadcast and written reporting at all times, the classic duties of news programs have given way to more fragmented and populist coverage.³ Further, widely used wire services, such as Reuters and the Associated Press, have increasingly become embroiled in controversies regarding potentially biased stories, which are reprinted for readers all over the world.⁴ As a result, it behooves the citizen to exercise critical information literacy (IL) skills in the daily consumption of news. Many undergraduate students are not equipped to parse through rhetoric to identify questionable reporting or agenda pushing. Because news media are pervasive institutions concretely entwined with everyday life, requiring critical anal-

ysis for responsible engagement, the news makes for an excellent frame in which to teach IL.

Often, IL skills are taught in the context of the classroom and in relation to a paper or a project, which can obscure their real world, everyday application. In her keynote presentation at the 2013 LOEX Conference, Barbara Fister makes the “outrageous claim” that librarians should stop teaching first-year students how to find information and focus on teaching students how to engage in the scholarly conversations.⁵ Though, I would not go as far as to encourage librarians to eliminate information-seeking lessons from first-year curricula, I do believe information seeking is often one of the more simple research tasks in which one engages at this level, and librarians might redirect focus away from database demonstrations. As Google maintains its dominance in online search and proprietary databases become increasingly easier for the average person to navigate, the ease of information seeking provides the librarian educator to use the precious few moments he or she may have in-class with students toward the development of other competencies. Librarians could better serve the IL competency in low-level undergraduate courses by creating learning opportunities and lessons designed to guide students in critiquing information and its producers.

To cultivate IL skill in students enrolled in first-year seminar (FYS) courses in the School of Journalism and the School of Informatics and Computing at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), I created a lesson on evaluating news stories, in which students are given three articles that report on one event. At this time, I have used this approach in eight courses: four in Fall 2012 and four in Fall 2013. The FYS courses in which I used this lesson have no research component; however, the curricula do include a session on IL. This chapter will discuss news media, fragmentation, and the value in using news stories to demonstrate evaluation skills.

The Power of the Press

Inasmuch as the public is dependent upon the press to deliver information we might not otherwise know about the world, members of the press have an obligation to report on issues objectively and without bias. Theodore Peterson outlines, in his seminal chapter “The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press,” six tasks of mass communication. Foremost among them is the task of “servicing

the political system by providing information, discussion, and debate on public affairs.”⁶ Peterson further challenges the press to not only report a fact, but also the *truth* about that fact. Without the full context surrounding a fact, the media suggests to its audience that it has not properly evaluated the credibility of its sources, nor has it supplied the essential perspective needed to completely understand a situation.⁷ Thus, in the absence of this objectivity, it becomes the responsibility of the audience to evaluate the media.

Journalist and social commentator Walter Lippmann theorizes that mass media reports create our mental pictures of the world around us.⁸ In essence, we internalize the images and perspectives we consume through media, and those messages inform the ways in which we view society. Later, in one of the most cited articles in the field, researchers Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw found high, positive correlations between the news coverage of the 1968 election and the significance of political issues in the minds of voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.⁹ By showing a correlation between issues covered in major news stories and the public’s perception of the importance of the issues, this study and many subsequent studies effectively proved Lippmann’s theory. McCombs and Shaw go on to conclude, though “mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think ... they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about.”¹⁰

Fragmentation

The American public has had a long and, at times, tumultuous relationship with the press. While promising to inform, the press sporadically misguides the public, sometimes by accident, other times by design. The newspaper leaders of the 19th century built the philosophical foundation on which modern journalism has its home. On this, Lippmann (1922) provides keen insight:

In the early years of the 19th century, papers used the news as a political weapon; it was distorted, biased, and suppressed to meet the needs of the moment. Later in the century newspapers began to confine their opinions to the editorial pages; they strove to record the news objectively, without personal intrusion and comment, and to present not just one side but all sides. True, there were econom-

ic reasons for the development of objective reporting, apart from a growing sense of professionalism. But there was a philosophical foundation as well. For by separating news and comment, by presenting more than one side, the press was expediting the self-righting process; it was making it easier for the rational reader to discover truth.¹¹

The pursuit of objectivity became the hallmark of good journalism. The model journalist takes pride in presenting information in such a way that the average citizen can come to his or her own opinions without direct guidance. The fixation on objectivity is a laudable goal for the press to reach; however, the pursuit of objectivity can also result in monotony and conformity across mass media. Repetition in coverage and content, homogeneity, exhausts audiences.

As recently as 20 years ago, the press had a tendency to report on topics in a similar fashion. Timothy Crouse lambasted the inclination toward “pack journalism,” in which most stories were essentially the same with infinitesimal variations.¹² A study of the press coverage of the 1992 US presidential election found a widespread similarity in the tone between newspaper and television broadcast stories.¹³ However, homogeneity has arguably decreased in recent years as the prevalence of Internet journalism opened more possibility for news stories framed toward certain ideological perspectives to take hold of mass communication.¹⁴

Technological advances of the past 30 years allow for an increased volume of information available for news consumers.¹⁵ Reports can be researched, written, and disseminated at increased speeds. Moreover, citizen journalists contribute increasing amount of new content into the media environment.¹⁶ An upsurge in both media producers and products allow more choices for consumers, which leads to segmentation of the audience. A benefit of this era is a greater ability to target messages to specific audiences and more interaction between consumers and producers of media.¹⁷

Even in this new media age, vestiges of the old systems are in place. Most of the news content the average person sees comes from one in a handful of media conglomerates.¹⁸ Walt Disney, News Corp. (now split into 21st Century Fox and News Corporation), Time Warner, CBS, and Viacom were the highest grossing conglomerates of 2013.¹⁹ In addition, many news organizations rely on wire stories from the Associated Press or Reuters to reduce costs.²⁰ With this amount of consolidation and aggregation, the frustration of homogeneity still floods mass media, particularly newspapers and televised broadcasts. However,

the proliferation of online news, particularly when mediated through social media or “micro media,” provides niche content producers a large number of platforms for targeted exposure for specific audiences.²¹

With a simple click of the mouse, change of the channel, or file download, consumers can choose a news media outlet most aligned with their ideological preferences.²² This is fragmentation in news. It provides more choice and possible exposure to wider perspectives in the news at the cost of a radical increase in the amount of biased or unbalanced reports propagating in mass media. This is a problem across all news media, but particularly visible in broadcast journalism on 24-hour news networks. Commentators and journalists are paid to view the events of the day with their own personal lenses. Many viewers cannot or do not care to differentiate between those editorial programs and programs that are hard-line, objective news. This results in a misguided citizenry. For example, on the May 30, 2013 edition of Fox News’s *Fox and Friends* broadcast, contributor John Stossel wrongly asserted that no Americans died of hunger during the Great Depression.²³ Though he later issued a correction on his blog, the millions of viewers of the original broadcast who did not check Stossel’s blog were misled by prevarication into believing that one of most difficult periods in American history was, in “fact,” not that bad.

The current media environment resulting from technological advancement is, in many ways, opposed to Peterson’s social responsibility theory. In this new fragmented reality, consumers’ personal preferences play a larger role in media gatekeeping and control because individuals patronize media outlets that are most aligned with their personal beliefs. Instead of the homogeneous news world of the past, in which most stories and reports essentially were the same, the fragmented news era boasts a heterogeneous news environment wherein accounts of one issue, topic, or event can differ significantly depending on the source.²⁴ In such a time, Peterson would agree that it is essential for information consumers to be proficient with IL skills in order to cut through slanted accounts to the truth in reporting. In my experience as a librarian, I have heard students assert, “I don’t trust any of the news. It’s all lies.” However, the teaching opportunity inherent in this frustration is for sharpened information evaluation skills. The belief that all reporters are biased liars is as equally naïve as the contrasting belief that reporters never lie or make mistakes: The problem is that truth is mixed in with fiction.²⁵ As news media are pervasive institutions concretely entwined with everyday life and require critical analysis for responsible engagement, the news makes for a prodigious frame in which to teach IL.

Institutional Context

IL is woven into the undergraduate curriculum at IUPUI through the university's six principles for undergraduate learning (PUL). The first principle on core communication and quantitative skill—defined as a student's ability to express and interpret information, perform quantitative analysis, and use information resources and technology—is noted as a foundational skill needed for student success. The PUL related to critical thinking is defined as the “ability of students to engage in a process of disciplined thinking that informs beliefs and actions.” Further explanation reveals “a student who demonstrates critical thinking applies the process of disciplined thinking by remaining open-minded, reconsidering previous beliefs and actions, and adjusting his or her thinking, beliefs, and actions based on new information.”²⁶ With outcomes including the ability to comprehend, interpret, and analyze ideas and facts and the ability to effectively use information resources and technology, this foundational skill is easily aligned with IL competency.

In addition to the well-known Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, which define IL as the ability to “recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information,” the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC) affirms that students should be able to critically evaluate, not only their work, but the work of others for “accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style, and grammatical correctness.”²⁷ In light of the similarities between these standards, some librarians have collaborated with journalism or mass communication professors to integrate IL instruction through a department's curriculum.²⁸

IUPUI librarians are a part of the FYS instructional team; consequently, considerable time and attention is given to IL instruction in FYS courses. In addition, it is through FYS courses that most students are introduced to library resources and subject librarians. The problem with the course curriculum is often the lack of a research assignment. Because of this, students can seem unengaged in the IL instructional session. Without an explicit need to develop IL competency, like a research paper, students seem to view IL assignments as busy work and IL instruction as inapplicable. My goal was to create an IL session in which FYS students developed IL competency and experienced authentic learning. As an avid news consumer and as the subject librarian for the School of Journalism and the School of Informatics and Computing, I am familiar with fragmentation in news media. Much like McCombs and Shaw I decided to capitalize on one

of the most regularly controversial seasons in the country—the US presidential election—to use news fragmentation as the lesson and motivation in refining IL skills to journalism and informatics students in FYS.²⁹ This endeavor led to several positive and highly effective lessons on navigating news and information.

Information Literacy through News Analysis: Lecture

I started employing this lesson during the Fall 2012 semester in two FYS courses in journalism and two FYS courses in informatics. Since it was an election year and most of my first-year students were preparing to vote for the first time, I took advantage of the news coverage of the presidential campaign to demonstrate the importance of information evaluation. While my students were very interested in analyzing election coverage, I feared future repetitions of the lesson would suffer under from a lack of election enthusiasm. However, I soon learned most political US stories, in which there are two prominent partial leanings (left/liberal and right/conservative), work well for the exercise. Since the election, I have successfully used local and national news stories on the government and officials to achieve learning outcomes.

As previously stated, the IL session addresses information evaluation, standard three of the ACRL IL standards, which is coincidentally similar to the ACJEMC standard on evaluating work for accuracy and fairness as well as to IUPUI's PUL on core communication and quantitative skills and critical thinking. With these standards in mind, I set the following student learning outcomes for the session: (1) describe bias in news media, (2) discuss methods of decoding bias in the news, and (3) illustrate examples of bias in the news.

Starting with a short lecture on IL and facts, opinion, and bias in reporting, I set up a discussion on decoding bias in news media. Also within the lecture, I reflect on the difference between news articles and opinion or editorial pieces by borrowing from “Think Like a Journalist,” a news literacy guide written by the director of the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication at Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Michael Bugeja (tables 15.1 and 15.2).³⁰ This is information that journalism students will cover more than once, but many others, including my informatics and computing students, will possibly never learn.

Table 15.1. News vs. opinion³¹

News	Opinion
Informs	Persuades
Based on multiple viewpoints	Based on singular viewpoints
Facts speak for themselves	Presents informed arguments
Objective and impersonal	Subjective and personal

Table 15.2. News and opinion formats³²

News Formats	Opinion Formats
News Report: disseminating facts the public needs to know	Opinion: a stance about an issue, newsmaker or event
News Analysis: interpreting issues and events objectively and impersonally	Editorial: the voice of an entire publication such as a newspaper or television station
Special Report: focusing in-depth on an issue, newsmaker or event	Interview: questions and answers featuring a newsmaker or source
Breaking News: covering news events as they happen	Speech: spoken remarks by a newsmaker or source
Investigative Reporting: disclosing data, documents, and testimony	Comment: statement or blog post about issues, newsmakers and events
Poll: surveying the public about issues, newsmakers and events	

Further, the lesson uses Wm. David Sloan and Jenn Bursleson Mackay's definition of journalistic bias as evidence of

- partiality;
- one-sidedness;
- unbalanced selection or presentation;
- tendency or inclination that prevents a fair or balanced approach;
- temperamental or emotional leaning to one side;
- favoritism that distorts reality;
- personalized, unreasoned judgment; and
- predisposition or preference.³³

I give illustrations to provide context for the criteria, particularly the more ambiguous phrases. For example, I clarify “unbalanced selection or presentation” with the example of using more quotes from one side or political party. I also quantify “temperamental or emotional leaning to one side” by encouraging

students to consider emotionally expressive language used in reporting. I encourage students to become critical readers and consumers of news by staying alert to the ways in which an author may intentionally or unintentionally express bias.

Information Literacy through News Analysis: Activity

To apply this knowledge through active learning in one instruction session, I give each student three articles on the most recent political controversy from one of several popular news media organizations. I typically use pieces from *New York Times*, National Public Radio (NPR), Fox News, Reuters, Associated Press, and *USA Today*, though I have also used transcripts from televised news reports available through LexisNexis. I intentionally choose one article with a politically left-leaning slant, one article with a right-leaning slant, and one article I determine to be fair, objective, and/or centrist. Within a 75-minute session, students have five to seven minutes for a close reading of each of the three articles. If, after consultation with the course instructor, I believe time is a concern, I highlight specific portions of each article in student copies. Like most librarians, who are generally invited guests into an existing classroom, I do not always have the benefit of the full class time of 70 minutes. However, I found this lesson to be easy to scale up or down. In these cases, the highlighted portions are emphasized as a representative example of questionable or fair reporting in the piece.

After the close reading, students engage in a class discussion on whether the article displayed examples of questionable reporting and whether the article was slanted in one party's or politician's favor. To offset potentially high emotional investment in the topic, I require students to take a formalist approach to criticism. Formalism is a school of literary criticism that postulates the scholar should address the literature rather than the milieu that surrounds it.³⁴ It requires the critic to develop his or her opinions on a piece of writing based exclusively on the words on the page. I instruct students to use quotes from the article to illustrate examples of questionable or fair reporting. I discourage students from arriving at a conclusion based on emotions or inclinations rather than textual examples. One common prejudice is against Fox News. If students know an article is from Fox News, they often jump to the conclusion that the article has a conservative slant. After first noticing this trend in Fall 2012, I concealed the

name of the publisher in the four courses in which I used the activity in Fall 2013.

In addition, I modify the activity to fit the constraints of time and class size while maintaining the learning outcomes. For example, instead of each student reading each article, I split the class into groups of three to five members. Together, the groups closely read one of the given articles for five to seven minutes. Once groups finished reading, they are given about five minutes to discuss the article with each other to decide whether the article had examples of questionable reporting. After this time, each group reports to the class how it determined whether the article has evidence of bias.

Further, one can decide to incorporate computers for additional active-learning activities or homework. In Fall 2013, I taught this lesson in a computer classroom with a small class of eight informatics students. Though I allotted 45 minutes for the students to read and discuss three articles about the rollout of healthcare.gov, we completed the lesson in 30 minutes. To fill the time and explore a few new learning outcomes, I had students use library resources to find articles about the topic and quickly analyze them aloud for the class.

When I prepared this session for the two journalism FYS courses in 2012, it took place before the final presidential debate, and I was able to assign homework. Accordingly, the IL homework was to watch the next debate and find an example of questionable reporting of the final debate, preferably using one of the library's news databases: LexisNexis Academic, EBSCO Newspaper Source, or ProQuest Newsstand. Students were then asked to write a one-page paper illustrating the ways in which the article or report was biased, with textual examples, and to provide an APA citation for the article and any references.

During the discussion, students drew attention to the pre-highlighted portions of the articles, citing them in descriptions of the article's point of view. Once each article was discussed, class concluded with a final discussion on the importance of evaluating news even when it comes from a popular or well-regarded source. In addition, we conceptualized and discussed bias on a scale from fair to extremely prejudiced. We sometimes found that a generally impartial and equalized account had a few instances of unbalanced writing. The idea of a gauge allowed the discussion to reveal that questionable news is not totally black and white with regards to bias.

Results

Class discussions evaluating evidence of bias in the articles are usually fruitful—students engage in thoughtful debates with fellow students, arguing or seeking clarification on their views. I serve more as an informational and rhetorical coach, challenging students to find textual clues for their claims, rather than act as an omniscient judge. Through these formative discussions, students verbally and collectively navigate the complex process of information evaluation. For example, FoxNews.com published an article titled “Obama, Romney Battle over Economic Policies in First Presidential Debate” from which I highlighted the following troubling section: “Republicans seized on a comment by Biden in North Carolina Tuesday in which he said the middle class has been ‘buried’ over the last four years. Romney and running mate Paul Ryan pointed to the admission as proof of what they’ve been arguing all along.”³⁵ In an article seemingly covering the result of the first presidential debate, the quote is discussion of a speech Vice President Joe Biden made days before. Discussion of this gaffe, which is not central to the debate the article alleges to cover, is a display of preferential treatment of the Romney-Ryan campaign. Students were able to identify this article’s unbalanced presentation of the two presidential campaigns.

In some cases, I had to explain instances of dubious reporting, which students did not initially understand. A NPR article stated, “Romney looked straight at his opponent, often wearing a confident Mona Lisa grin.”³⁶ I clarified for the unknowing students that this description could be taken as an insult by insinuating that Mitt Romney was smug at the debate. In addition, students have disagreed with my analysis of an article as biased or unbiased, and these moments have been thrilling. It is my hope that the class environment invites this kind of debate. It is never my goal to imply my own omniscience; I only want students to be able to use the tools of criticism I provide to developed well-reasoned opinions. As long as students can provide significant textual evidence, any opinion is valid. Students do not have to agree with me to achieve the learning outcomes in this lesson.

In the journalism classes, in which students were assigned homework, the papers on bias in reporting the presidential elections were among the finest work produced in the course, according to the instructional team. Through their analysis of articles on the debates, in most cases, students clearly displayed the ability to express and interpret knowledge, analyze facts, and evaluate the work of others for accuracy and fairness. For example, one student writes in response to a conservative leaning piece on the 2012 vice presidential debate:

The author fails to give the article balance on remarks, responses, and attitudes. Guffaws, snickers, interrupter, aggressive, chuckles, smirks, hammered, gaffes, feisty, are just some of the words used to describe Biden's behavior and attitude at the debate. Ryan got remarks such as, "maintaining a steady and comparatively reserved demeanor throughout." You are the judge here, but I call this article biased.

Another student found a *New York Times* article with evidence of temperamental or emotional leaning to one side:

Quotes describing Paul Ryan's statements used words such as said, declared, or pointed out. Biden's began or followed with words like sharply retorted, argued, and asked bluntly. The debate's analysis offered opinion of how the debate resonated with Republicans, describing Biden as annoyed and likened him to Al Gore rolling his eyes in his debate against President Bush.

Teaching faculty in the FYS courses are very pleased with this IL session. The professor leading the instructional team in the journalism FYS courses expressly requested I continue to present IL in this way in future years as the instruction was directly in line with ACEJMC standards.

Students in informatics and computing are not assigned homework. The assessment for the lesson in those courses are formative, often only through the class discussion. However, like in the example of the small class of eight, learning outcomes could be enhanced and easily evaluated by asking students to find additional articles online and to analyze an article spontaneously in class. I found students in these courses took to the concepts and activity well. Discussions with journalism students are often more lively; yet informatics and computing students find ease in discussing gray areas in reporting with the concept of the bias scale.

After successfully executing this lesson a few times, I shared my materials online with colleagues. One colleague who employed the activity found it a refreshing approach to teaching IL. Another found success with the lesson, though she cautioned that many first-year students are not politically engaged enough to read liberal or conservative bias in a news story without an explanation

of the political landscape. In using this activity since the presidential election, I have found the need to give background information on a topic (e.g., the 2013 US government shutdown) before giving out the articles. This process has made me more sympathetic to journalists as I put in effort to not reveal my own political leanings in this process.

Conclusion

Framing IL instruction in the news allows the librarian to make real-world connections to information evaluation, inquiry, and use. For courses with no research paper or research assignment, I found this activity to rouse students toward authentic engagement with the instruction. This approach to instruction is not a new one; anecdotally, many teachers employ similar method to engage learners in information evaluation. However, with appropriate consideration, this activity should be added to the common toolbox of IL activities for its ability to engage students in a real world examination of complex rhetorical arguments. Many undergraduate students are not equipped or have not yet been challenged to parse through the rhetoric to identify media bias.

Moreover, this lesson plan could be used in a variety of settings and audiences. School librarians or teachers in K–12 environments could adopt this plan. The formalist approach and analysis relate to the Common Core English Language Arts Standards for Reading: Informational Text for grades 6–12. Public libraries and educational institutions with approaches for andragogy could engage adult learners in the activity to sharpen IL skills. And, of course, community college, college, and university librarians could employ this lesson, as I have, for the benefit of undergraduate students. Without concentration on database instruction, this lesson deepens the value of librarians as facilitators to IL competency.

The presidential debates provided an exemplary series of political events to cover; yet, it was simple to find another hot topic in the news. The government and politicians provide an abundance of options for this exercise—not only as a result of consistent controversy but also because of the two-party system of American politics. This allows for an approximate unequivocal division in rhetorical scale. However, other industries or interest areas could be considered. International affairs or sports news would easily work as there is often a significant amount of coverage provided by number of platforms.

The only requirement for this IL session to work is evidence of fragmentation in the news. The bittersweet reality is that even casual news consumption reveals substantially different accounts of issues and events as reported in the news. Teaching a student, especially a first-year undergraduate student, to examine media and to evaluate their strengths and failings is worth the time. It can prove its benefits immediately in the lives of students, and the skills will be valuable forever.

Notes

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