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Not another quiz: An approach to engage today's students in meaningful current events discussions

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Abstract

Journalism professors are concerned with how effectively students understand current news events and engage with mainstream news sources. This essay is based on a survey administered to students in a newswriting course and analyzed the kinds of current news that students followed in weekly assignments designed with a digital, interactive approach. Some outcomes indicated that students’ grades improved, breaking news and crime were the stories students followed the most, and students appeared to engage better with news sources through the interactive exercise. This essay also discusses practical implications for educators who are searching for innovative ways to boost media literacy and current news discussions in their classrooms.

Keywords: media literacy, interactive exercise, innovation, current events

Introduction

Journalism professors long have stressed the importance of students understanding and engaging with current events. However, based on the authors’ classroom observations and recent scholarship, today’s students do not seem interested in current events and are not engaging with traditional news sources. About three-quarters of college students, typically ages 18-24, consume news through digital platforms such as news websites and social media rather than more traditional sources (Center for People and the Press, 2012b). With students’ heavy reliance on the Internet for information, they might not identify what they see as “news” in the traditional sense. Mihailildis and Cohen (2013) noted that young adults “refer to social networks,
aggregators, and mobile apps for all information habits, instead of siloing out specific media for news, politics, personal communication, and leisure” (p.5). But the ability to find, identify, and use news content is part of media literacy. Knowledge of current events is critical to engendering media literacy skills; therefore, instructors needed a more relevant teaching method.

Considering the engagement and usage of social and digital tools among students, the authors chose to change the outdated method of administering a five-question current events quiz and opted to use a social media tool that encouraged students to consume and produce news stories through an interactive exercise to promote awareness of current events. This essay discusses how to integrate an innovative learning approach to improve media literacy in introductory newswriting classes.

Background

Scholars have defined media literacy a variety of ways. For purposes of this essay, it is “the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts” (Livingstone, 2004, p. 5). Koltay (2011) noted that it can be difficult to separate out media literacy from other types of literacy, such as information literacy, digital literacy, and emerging technology literacy. Martens (2010) dates the concept of media literacy itself to the mid-1980s and found that curriculum often focused on students developing knowledge and skills in four mass media facets: media industries, media messages, media audiences, and media effects. Media literacy might be framed as a tool for achieving another goal, such as fostering active citizenship, improving public health, or appreciating aesthetics. Most initiatives take place in K-12 education (Mihailidis, 2008; Hobbs, 2010; Martens, 2010). At colleges and universities, media literacy education is considered important by faculty but few are involved in teaching the subject (Schmidt, 2012). It often falls to departments of mass communication, journalism, media
studies, and education and might not be aimed solely at future journalism practitioners (Mihailidis, 2008). Mihailidis noted that the concept is either incorporated throughout the curriculum, or more rarely, centered in a single course. At the authors' university, the basic newswriting course, taken by all journalism and public relations students, is one of several courses that embeds media literacy into the content.

Diddi and LaRose (2006) found that the college years are particularly important when it comes to news consumption because these years can shape lifelong habits. This might perhaps stem from young adults’ recent attainment of voting rights and the information needed to participate in the electoral process. The subjects in Diddi and LaRose’s study most frequently consulted their college newspaper for news, before relying on Internet search portals like Yahoo, MSN or AOL. These students made little distinction between print and broadcast news as had been previously studied. One consequence of the reliance on the Internet for news and the abundance of news outlets was the creation of “news grazers,” individuals who check news periodically but do not have time for news consumption (Diddi & LaRose, 2006). Compared to habitual news consumers, the Center for the People and the Press (2002) described grazers as “considerably younger, less interested in serious news, and use media sources at lower rates except for cable and online news. Moreover, fewer grazers than habituals say they enjoy keeping up with the news. By 2010, about 74 percent of adults ages 18-29 said they checked news in this grazing pattern (Center for the People and the Press, 2012a). Overall, news consumption is a lower priority than other daily needs for college and high school students (Huang, 2009). This prioritizing also affects the types of news stories they prefer to consume. Since news might serve as a “temporary escape” from other higher priority needs, students liked brief stories and multimedia visual presentations that were immediately satiating (Huang, 2009, p. 117).
By 2012, the digital preference for receiving news was growing. The Center for the People and the Press (2012b) found that young adults ages 18 to 24 years old were more likely to consume news through digital platforms such as a digital/online news site (41 percent) or social networking site (34 percent) than through television (29 percent), radio (20 percent) or print newspaper (6 percent). News consumption on social networking sites such as Facebook is often “incidental,” as 78 percent of users mostly see news when on the site for other reasons (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014). As could be predicted based on this incidental exposure, news on Facebook predominantly falls into these five categories: entertainment (73 percent); people and events in the community (65 percent); sports (57 percent); national government and politics (55 percent); and crime (51 percent). Matsa and Mitchell reported one positive takeaway from the increasing dispersion of news through social networking sites is increased engagement with news through the sharing of news stories (50 percent) and posting of their own photos or videos of news events (14 percent and 12 percent respectively).

These findings indicate that as college students are exposed to more information online, the nature of that expansion makes their knowledge of “current events” more fragmented than ever. Before the Internet and World Wide Web upended the news industry, journalism professors often used current events quizzes to force their students to find and consume news through traditional channels such as print newspapers and local and network television news programs. Now, students face “the integration of various information types (news, entertainment, personal communication) and mediums (television, radio, print) into aggregated spaces. Search engines and social networks have replaced specific channels, shows, and even websites as the predominant places youth go for information” (Mihailidis & Cohen, 2013, p. 2). All users can
customize the Web to their own tastes through the sites they choose to visit, follow, “like” or subscribe to.

To prompt students to take a more active role in consuming current events news, instructors have placed students into the role of content creator. Howard Rheingold championed the use of social media as a teaching tool, writing that “participatory media literacy is necessarily a hands-on enterprise, requiring active use of digital media by students” (Rheingold, 2008, p. 25), an approach also endorsed by Lee and McLoughlin (2007), Herrington and Parker (2013), and Mihailildis and Cohen (2013). Livingstone (2004), likewise, felt that creation was key to becoming media literate, asserting that “learning to create content helps one to analyze that produced professionally by others; skills in analysis and evaluation open the doors to new uses of the internet, expanding access and so forth” (p.5). With these ideas in mind, the authors set out to update how they integrated current events into the university’s basic news writing course curriculum.

**Overview of the Class Exercise**

The basic news writing class is a requirement in both the journalism and public relations sequences at the authors’ university. Each class had a few students who took it as an elective. The majority of students were freshmen or sophomores.

Prior to 2013, one of the authors of this essay had used a five-question current events quiz to test students’ knowledge about news. The instructor became frustrated when students did not know answers to basic questions such as the names of the two vice presidential candidates debating or location of a national political convention. The instructor then asked students to list five things happening on campus, in the community, or in the world. Several students turned in
papers with five question marks. Even with the alternative format, the average score fell to a 65 in fall 2012, a failing mark in the class.

At the beginning of spring 2013, two instructors, both authors of this essay, decided to try a different approach. They chose to use Fotobabble, a free cloud-based social media app that allows students to use a photograph secured from an online news site and then narrate their own story. Students had to find a news story that had suitable visuals, rewrite the story into their own words, and then record the 60- to 90-second story over a photograph uploaded to Fotobabble. The resulting “story” was embedded into the course blog in Blackboard for spring 2013 and into Blogger in fall 2013. The change in platforms resulted because the authors' university changed learning management system (LMS) providers, and the new LMS could not incorporate course blogs into the system. Students were required to listen to their peers’ work, which gave students greater insight into current events and created a class news product on which to base discussions.

In Spring 2013, instructors introduced the Fotobabble current events assignment to two sections of the basic newswriting class; the instructor in the third section chose not to participate. The combined enrollment of the classes that participated stood at 30. In fall 2013, all three sections of 15 students used Fotobabble as the current events assignment. Enrollment in writing and production classes at the researchers’ university is capped at 15.

**Implementation of the Class Exercise**

At the beginning of each semester, instructors introduced the assignment and demonstrated how to record a Fotobabble during part of a class session. The instructors also suggested news outlets for students to find and read news. Students worked on their own time to find articles and write and record their stories in Fotobabble. Once completed, students used the HTML embed code from Fotobabble to embed the stories into the course blog.
Students also had to write a headline and offer a credit line to the news source. The headline had to consist of more than three or four keywords and had to get a reader’s attention, just as a headline would in a newspaper or online publication. Instructors devised a 20-point rubric and graded the assignments on their content, story structure and flow, and their ability to hook their audience’s attention in the lead. Each instructor required students to listen to their peers’ work and comment on story structure, flow or newsworthiness. This was a weekly assignment. The deadline fell on Tuesday to complete the Fotobabble and Thursday for the comments. During Thursday’s class, the instructors selected three to five of the week’s top stories and opened the class session with an interactive poll, using Poll Everywhere.com. Students voted via texting on their cell phones or tablets, and the class discussed why the winning story merited designation as the most newsworthy story. The instructor displayed the live poll results on the projection screen as the students voted.

After the voting, students discussed additional stories with the instructors, and if a major news story broke during the week, the students and the instructor oftentimes chose to engage in a discussion about that story as well as the winner from the text-polling assignment. Discussions ranged from five to fifteen minutes, depending on the nature of the news and the students’ awareness of the news topics.

Observations and Outcomes

The interactive exercise helped professors and students understand the role of current events and opened a discussion not only about news topics, but news sources and news consumption habits. The professors all had experienced journalism school at a time where newspapers and network or cable television offered the only news sources, but the students are
coming through journalism programs in an era of digital and online, mobile and social media, as well as the traditional news products.

The Fotobabble exercise helped to drive better and more meaningful current events discussions in the introductory news writing classroom. The exercise forced students to become active curators of the news rather than merely passive quiz takers, which had a positive effect on their current events grades. Prior to the implementation of the Fotobabble exercise, current events grades averaged 65 in two basic news writing classes in the fall semester of 2012. The average grade on current events for two sections of news writing for the spring of 2013 rose to an 88 after the implementation of the Fotobabble project. In fall 2013, the average in the first section of JMC 194 with 15 students stood at 95, but the average in the second section fell to a 62.75 and the third section stood at an 89.5. Variances between the sections can be attributed to the seriousness of the students involved. The 16 students in the first section took this project seriously and completed their assignments on time and correctly. In the second 14-student section, several students chose not to complete the assignment, which caused their grades to decline to a failing mark. In the third section of 16 students, the majority of students participated, which reflected in the higher scores.

Seven of the 21 students surveyed from the spring and fall 2013 sections said they believed they would have earned an A with a current events quiz because they felt confident in their abilities to keep up with the news through Twitter and online sites on their own. Five students said they anticipated a B, and nine said they anticipated a C, D or lower because they either could not keep up with the news or did not know what would be considered relevant by the professors. The Fotobabble assignments counted as 10 percent of the total weighted grade for
each student. Thus, those students who chose not to complete the assignment saw their unwillingness to do the work reflected in their course grade.

Comments from students via the anonymous online survey included the following:

“It is so hard to keep up with all the current events. You’d have to check the news almost three times a day. For a college student, it can be tough.”

“I would have read the news before coming to class, but I probably would have missed pieces. News stations cover stories in different ways, and there are often multiple versions of the story with different facts emphasized based on the story angle. What if I had missed that one point.”

“With the amount of work I had to do with this class and my other classes, staying up to date on current events was not a top priority.”

Insight into students’ news preferences was a secondary benefit for the instructors, and one that allowed them to encourage and direct students’ news habits more subtly. Each semester, the authors examined student choices when selecting news stories and characterized the types of stories that students selected as well as the sources they chose. The instructors placed all of their students’ Fotobabbles into categories such as breaking news/crime, technology, business-finance, politics/public policy, lifestyle, health, unusual news, sports, international affairs, and religion and recorded these in an Excel spreadsheet. The authors agreed upon the categories based on the types of stories covered in the news media. In addition, the authors discussed and analyzed students’ responses to the open-ended survey questions. Instructors kept notes from class discussions in which students offered insights and analysis for their choices between the news story options that the professors posed in the interactive PollEverywhere.com session each week.
Breaking news/crime emerged as the most popular category from both the spring and fall semesters (n=95), followed by lifestyle (n=67), unusual news (n=60), technology (n=53), politics/public policy (n=43), sports (n=39), health (n=22), international affairs (n=21), business/finance (n=19), and religion (n=5).

Students also appeared to have consumed a variety of news sources and topics, possibly much more so than they might have had the professors not challenged them to complete the weekly assignment. For instance, the news sources for the spring 2013 ranged from 95 entries from CNN, followed by Yahoo News with 28 entries to national newspapers such as the New York Times and Washington Post with six to 14 entries each to niche publications such as BusinessWeek and NHL.com. Two students chose articles from The Onion, a satirical paper, and Total Frat Move, a college-themed website aimed at fraternity members. Both choices offered instructors a chance to discuss the legitimacy of news sources with their classes.

Of the students surveyed, the majority said they enjoyed the assignment. One student wrote in the survey, “I liked that everyone had a different story to report and it made me more aware of the world around me. And it was fun to be a reporter of some sort.”

Students commented about the entertainment value of keeping up with the news in an interactive method. “It was a fun interesting way to learn about current events and a good way to learn how to summarize and speak an interesting yet short preview of any current event,” one student replied.

Another student said the assignment drove class discussion. “I really liked it. It was fun to see who valued what part of current events. Normally close to everyone talked and had an opinion. I wouldn't change anything - even college kids like having permission to have their phones out in class!”
Technological Best Practices

After running the exercise, the professors have devised some best practices to handle technology issues. During both semesters, several students had issues with browser compatibility (i.e., Chrome, Firefox, etc.) and either could not get the Fotobabble to record properly or embed into the blog. Professors spent one class session each term demonstrating the practice and distributed a detailed instruction sheet and worked individually with students to troubleshoot. In spite of the professors’ best efforts, several students opted against participating or trying to overcome technical issues, and their grades reflected their decision.

Based on the experiences, the professors recommend:

1. Demonstrate how to record the Fotobabble and embed it into the course blog. Spend the rest of the class session helping the students record and narrate a Fotobabble and embed it into the course blog.

2. Record a screencast tutorial about how to record the Fotobabble and embed it into the course blog. Provide students with an example of a sample script that the professor used to create the Fotobabble. Embed both on the Learning Management System and send the link to the students for reference as they work.

3. List the technological requirements for the assignment in the syllabus (a computer with a built-in microphone or an iPad/iPhone with the Fotobabble and Blogger apps installed).

4. Require students to bring their smartphone or texting-compatible tablet to class for class voting days. If the student does not bring his/her device, he or she will not receive points for that assignment.
5. Outline a list of acceptable news sources for the students and discuss the reasons why these are acceptable for your classroom. Some students, even those involved in the lower-level classes of journalism and public relations, might not immediately know the difference between a blogger and a legitimate news source if they have not been exposed to legitimate news sources either at home or in high school. One of the authors of this essay experienced a student that submitted an article from the satirical news outlet The Onion, and the student did not realize it was not a legitimate source at first.

Discussion and Conclusions

Journalism students must be able to engage, interact and connect with news sites in order to read, consume and produce news content. Because 41 percent of young adults ages 18-24 are more likely to read news through digital and online news sites and 34 percent say they get their news through social media sites (Center for the People and the Press, 2012b), professors might be well served to include digital and social media learning tools as part of the media literacy discussion in their classrooms. Although the journalism students in the authors’ courses chose breaking news and crime as their top category, the second most popular fell as lifestyle, which includes entertainment as respondents in the Center for the People and the Press survey listed as the top choice at 73 percent (Center for the People and the Press, 2012b). It could be inferred that journalism students are much more likely to be aware of crime and breaking news because of the emphasis journalism professors place on these topics as news values as well as the discussion that these topics generate in class. With lifestyle news in second place, the instructors have learned that even though they push students to seek hard news such as breaking news/crime and government, students want to keep up with pop culture and entertainment.
Since students use the Internet for social media and news consumption, it is possible that they have become “news grazers” as Diddi and LaRose (2006, p. 205) mentioned. Students may read a tweet from a news organization, but they must click the link and read the story. Their reading must be close as they need to learn how to model their writing to reflect the writing of the media. The Fotobabble assignment helped journalism and public relations students connect not only to major news sources but also to each other; they discussed current events, learned how to produce brief broadcast news stories, and used HTML coding to embed those stories into the course blog. These tasks helped them to connect not only to the larger news community but also to their peers as they completed the weekly assignments. Although instructors used Fotobabble, there are several platforms and other digital exercises that journalism educators can consider and implement. Regardless of the tool selected, a learner engaged in creating and recreating his own learning network allows for a level of understanding. In this case, the students began to understand the categories of news and why a particular story (breaking news, etc.) might be deemed more newsworthy than another story drawn from the lifestyle or unusual category.

Additionally, the students who embraced the assignment not only increased their understanding of media literacy, they also saw their quiz grades rise as they connected better with the news material in a fun and interactive exercise. While academic achievement is certainly important, student enthusiasm in following current news also is just as crucial in the development of a well-prepared news professional. Journalism educators, however, will need to leverage their pedagogical use of digital tools in such a way that the practice of staying on top of current news is emphasized.

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