

# FRAME IT IN THE NEWS: TEACHING INFORMATION LITERACY WITHOUT A RESEARCH PAPER

WILLIE MILLER

## INTRODUCTION

The press has significant power in society. Masterman (1985) wrote in *Teaching the Media*, “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” (p. 5). Citizens look to news media organizations to provide an accounting of the significant occurrences of the day. In the current age of the twenty-four 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. Further, widely used wire services, such as Reuters or the Associated Press, have increasingly become embroiled in controversies regarding potentially biased stories, which are then reprinted for readers all over the world. As a result, it behooves the citizen to exercise critical information literacy skills in the daily consumption of news. Many undergraduate students are not equipped to parse through rhetoric to identify questionable reporting. As news media are pervasive institutions concretely entwined with everyday life, which also require critical analysis for responsible engagement, the news makes for an excellent frame in which to teach information literacy.

In First-Year Seminars (FYS) at Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), librarians are charged to introduce first-year students to information literacy. Information literacy proficiency is an expected outcome of an IUPUI baccalaureate education expressed in the institution’s Principles of Undergraduate Learning (IUPUI, 2007). A challenge with these courses is the typical lack of a research paper in which to ground information literacy instruction. This article will discuss ways to cultivate information literacy skills in first-year students through a lesson on evaluating the news in which students are given three articles that provide different reports of one event.

## THE POWER OF NEWS MEDIA

Inasmuch as the public is dependent upon the press to deliver information we might not otherwise know about the world around us, members of the press have an obligation to report on issues objectively and without bias. In his “The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press” Theodore Peterson (1956) outlines six tasks of mass communication. Foremost among them are the tasks of “servicing the political system by providing information, discussion, and debate on public affairs” (p. 74). Moreover, Peterson challenges the press to not only report a fact, but indeed also, the truth about the 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 (Peterson, p. 88). Thus, in the case of contemporary society, it becomes the responsibility of the audience to evaluate the media.

Journalist and social commentator Walter Lippman theorized that mass media or news created our mental pictures of the world around us (1922). Later, in one of the most cited articles in the field, researchers Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (1972) found high, positive correlations between the news coverage of the 1968 election and the importance or significance of political issues in the minds of voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. 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 Lippman’s theory. McCombs and Shaw (1977) 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” (p. 5).

Technological advances of the current times allow for an increased volume of information available for consumers;

increased speed in which reports can be researched, written, and disseminated; more choices for consumers; segmentation of audiences, leading to greater ability to target messages to specific audiences; and more interaction between consumers and producers of media (Abramson, Orren, & Arterton, 1990; Katz, 1997; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004). With a simple click of the mouse or change of the channel, consumers can choose a news media outlet most aligned with their ideological preferences (Morris, 2007, p. 710). This is fragmentation in news. These changes have resulted in the existence of a media environment that is, in many ways, opposed to Peterson's social responsibility theory. In this new fragmented reality, consumers' personal preferences play a larger role in gatekeeping, since individuals use 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 (West, 2001, pp. 93-95). In such a time, Peterson (1956) would agree, it is essential for information consumers to be skilled with information literacy in order to cut through slanted accounts to the truth in reporting.

## **INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND**

As previously stated, Information Literacy (IL) is woven into the undergraduate curriculum at IUPUI through the university's six Principles for Undergraduate Learning. 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 (IUPUI, 2007). 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 information literacy competency.

In addition to the well-known ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (2000), which define information literacy 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" (2000). In light of the similarities between these standards, some librarians have collaborated with journalism or mass communication professors to integrate information literacy instruction through a department's curriculum (Natalle & Crowe, 2012; Ruediger & Jung, 2007).

IUPUI librarians are a part of the First-Year Seminar (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 students developed information literacy competency and experienced authentic learning. As an avid news junkie and as the subject librarian for the School of Journalism and the School of Informatics, I am familiar with fragmentation in news media. Much like McCombs and Shaw (1972), I decided to capitalize on one of the most regularly controversial seasons in the country, the U.S. Presidential Election campaign, to use news fragmentation as the lesson and motivation in refining information literacy skills to journalism and informatics students in FYS.

## **INFORMATION LITERACY THROUGH NEWS ANALYSIS**

Since most of my first-year students were participating for the first time in the voting process in the fall of 2012, I thought it apropos to use news coverage of the presidential campaign to demonstrate the importance of information evaluation. I chose to focus the IL session on standard three of the ACRL IL standards (evaluation), which is coincidentally similar to the ACJEMC standard on evaluating work for accuracy and fairness, as well as to the IUPUI principle core communication and quantitative skill. I then set the following student learning outcomes (SLOs) 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 information literacy, bias, and bias in reporting, I set up a discussion on decoding bias in news media. Also within the lecture, I considered the difference between news articles and opinion or editorial pieces. The lesson used Sloan and Mackay's (2007) 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
- Predisposition or preference. (p. 6)

I encouraged 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.

In order to apply this knowledge through active and authentic learning, I gave each student three articles on the most recent presidential debate from one of several popular news media organizations (NY Times, NPR, Fox News, Reuters,

Associated Press, and USA Today). I taught this lesson to four sections of FYS courses between October 8 and November 1, 2012. The debates and articles varied. With intention, I chose one article with a politically left-leaning slant, one article with a right-leaning slant, and one article I determined to be fair and objective. Within the seventy-five minute session, students in the sections of the journalism FYS had five to seven minutes for a close reading of each article. Further, I highlighted specific portions of each article in student copies. Each portion was emphasized as a special example of questionable or fair reporting.

After the close reading, students engaged in a class discussion on whether the article displayed examples of questionable reporting, and whether or not the article was slanted in one candidate's favor. To offset potentially high emotional investment in the topic, students were required to take a formalist approach to the analysis and use specific portions of the article or the words of the author to illustrate the example of questionable reporting. Students were discouraged from arriving at a conclusion based on feelings, rather than textual examples. During the discussion, I led students to examine the highlighted portions of the articles.

Once each article was read and discussed, class concluded with a final discussion on the importance of evaluating news even, and in the case of Fox News especially, when it comes for a popular or well-regarded source. This session was completed in the journalism FYS before the final presidential debate; 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 provide an APA citation for the article and any references.

In the informatics FYS courses, I had less time than in the journalism FYS (approximately 40 minutes), and more students (more than 30, compared to 17 in journalism). Accordingly, I scaled down the activity to fit the constraints, while maintaining the learning outcomes. Instead of each student reading each article, I split the class into six groups with between four and six members. Two groups closely read each of the three articles for five to seven minutes. Once groups finished reading, they were given five minutes to discuss the article with each other to decide whether or not the article had examples of questionable reporting. After this time, each group reported to the class how it determined whether or not the article was biased. No homework assignment was given in the informatics FYS courses.

## RESULTS

Class discussions evaluating evidence of bias in the articles were fruitful—students engaged in thoughtful debates with fellow students, arguing or seeking clarification on their views. I served more as an informational and rhetorical coach,

challenging students to find textual clues for their claims, rather than an omniscient judge. Through these formative discussions, students verbally and collectively navigated the complex process of information evaluation. For example, in a FoxNews.com article titled “Obama, Romney battle over economic policies in first presidential debate”, I highlighted:

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. (2012)

Students were able to identify this article's unbalanced presentation of the two presidential campaigns. As an article about the first presidential debate, this presentation of a discussion, which took place outside of the debate, displayed preferential treatment of the Romney-Ryan campaign.

In some cases, I had to explain instances of dubious reporting, which students did not initially comprehend. A NPR article stated, “Romney looked straight at his opponent, often wearing a confident Mona Lisa grin” (Greenblatt, 2012). 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 occasionally disagreed with my analysis of an article as biased or unbiased. However, the class environment invited this kind of debate. As long as students could provide significant textual evidence, any opinion was valid. Students did not have to agree with me in order to achieve the learning outcomes.

In the journalism classes, in which students were assigned homework [Appendix A], the papers on bias in reporting the presidential elections were among the finest work produced in the course. 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. Moreover, the course faculty members were very pleased with this IL session. Expressly, the journalism faculty member requested I continue to present IL in this way in future years as the instruction was directly in line with ACEJMC standards.

## CONCLUSION

Framing IL instruction in the news allows the librarian to make real-world connections to information evaluation, analysis, and use. For courses with no research paper or research assignment, I found this activity to rouse students toward authentic engagement with the instruction. The presidential debates provided an exemplary series of political events to cover; yet, it would be simple to find another hot topic in the news. In order for this IL session to work, the only requirement 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.

## REFERENCES

- Abramson, J.B., Orren, G. R., & Arterton, F. C. (1990). *Electronic commonwealth: The impact of new media technologies on democratic politics*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- ACRL. (2000). Information literacy competency standards for higher education. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries: American Library Association.
- ACEJMC. (2000). ACEJMC principles of accreditation: Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism Mass Communications. (Reprinted from: 2009).
- Greenblatt, A. (2012). Five takeaways from the first presidential debate. *NPR.com*. Retrieved October 9, 2012, from NPR website: <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/04/162265100/five-takeaways-from-the-first-presidential-debate>
- IUPUI. (2007). Principles of undergraduate learning. Retrieved November 1, 2012, from <http://academicaffairs.iupui.edu/PlansInitiatives/Plans/Principles-of-Undergraduate-Learning>
- IUPUI. (2010). *A Template for first-year seminars at IUPUI*. Indianapolis, IN: IUPUI University College.
- Katz, J. (1997). *Virtuous reality: How America surrendered discussion of moral values to opportunists, nitwits, and blockheads like William Bennett*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. New York: Macmillan.
- Masterman, L. (1985). *Teaching the media*. London: Comedia Publishing Group.
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187. doi: 10.2307/2747787
- Morris, J. S. (2007). Slanted objectivity? Perceived media bias, cable news exposure, and political attitudes. *Social Science Quarterly*, 88(3), 707-728. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-6237.2007.00479.x
- Natalle, E. J., & Crowe, K. M. (2012). Information literacy and communication research: A case study on interdisciplinary assessment. *Communication Education*, 62(1), 97-104. doi:10.1080/03634523.2012.720690
- Obama, Romney battle over economic policies in first presidential debate. (2012). *FoxNews.com*. Retrieved October 9, 2012, from FoxNews.com website: <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/10/04/obama-romney-battle-over-economic-policies-in-first-presidential-debate/print>
- Peterson, T. (1956). *Four theories of the press*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Ruediger, C., & Jung, D. (2007). When it all comes together: Integrating information literacy and discipline-based accreditation standards. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 14(1), 79-87. doi: 10.1300/J106v14n01-06
- Shaw, D. L., & McCombs, M. E. (1977). *The emergence of American political issues: The agenda-setting function of the press*. St. Paul: West Publishing.
- Sloan, Wm. D., & Mackay, J. B. (2007). *Media bias: Finding it, fixing it*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- West, D. M. (2001). *The rise and fall of the media establishment*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Williams, B. A., & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2004). Monica and Bill all the time and everywhere: The collapse of gatekeeping and agenda setting in the new media environment. *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 47(9), 1208-1230.

## APPENDIX A

### Excerpts from Student Work

1. In the first opening paragraph the author makes the statement, "Vice President Biden wasted no time Thursday trying to do what many Democrats felt President Obama failed to against Mitt Romney, going on offense with an often disdainful attack on Paul Ryan--- who stood his ground against a barrage of Biden grins, guffaws, snickers and interruptions." Here the author makes it seem as though Biden was being rude and repulsive towards Ryan and not letting Ryan get his fair chance at debating towards the questions that were presented at the debate. The author makes it seem as though Ryan was more professional and mature with the debate than Biden by making remarks about Biden.... The author fails to give the article balance on remarks, responses, and attitudes. The author highlights the bad in Biden's attitude and behavior while he highlights only the good in Paul Ryan's attitude and behavior. The author gives bad notes for Biden but good notes for Ryan. Guffaws, snickers, interrupter, aggressive, chuckles, smirks, hammered, gaffes, feisty, are 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.

Sparks fly as Biden, Ryan face off in feisty vice presidential debate. (2012). FoxNews.com.

<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/10/11/biden-ryan-face-off-in-high-stakes-vice-presidential-debate-in-kentucky/>

2. "Biden at times bordered on too hot," "He [Biden] chuckled and smirked through many of Ryan's responses," quotes like these were scattered all around foxnews.com report of the Vice-Presidential debate. It was hard not to find bias in this article on foxnews.com. Throughout the entire article it seemed to be fixed on showing what bad and idiotic things that Joe Biden had done, while showing the positives in everything that Paul Ryan had said. "That's what we get in this administration speeches. But were not getting leadership," said Ryan on the upcoming debt crisis and the president just sitting back and doing nothing. All of the quotes pulled and the article in general show bias in favor of Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan, so it's easy to tell whom foxnews.com is supporting. "In a matter of days, Romney has picked up steam in both battleground and national polls. The latest Fox News national poll of likely voters showed Romney edging Obama, 46 percent to 45 percent," this quote from foxnews.com puts the icing on the cake on showing their bias throughout the article and supporting Paul Ryan and Mitt Romney.

Sparks fly as Biden, Ryan face off in feisty vice presidential debate. (2012). FoxNews.com.

<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/10/11/biden-ryan-face-off-in-high-stakes-vice-presidential-debate-in-kentucky/>

3. This article seemed very subtle in its bias, but bias nonetheless. This is for a few reasons. The first reason is that within the first page of the article it discussed how Ryan stayed calm for the majority of the night, with a description of Biden being worked up almost to a boiling point throughout the entire debate. It described Biden's responses as hectoring, heckling, and interruptive. While this may be the case, the article had an undertone of disgust for Biden's practice of communication with Ryan. 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. The article did not offer, however, an analysis of how Biden's remarks and aggression sat with his fellow Democrats. This was another example of bias within the article. The only time Ryan was conveyed as being sharply critical of the president was in his comments made on the terrorist attack in Libya that killed the American ambassador. This would relay to a reading audience that Ryan was only aggressive throughout the debate when it came to the safety of his fellow Americans, which was not at all the case.

Zeleny, J., & Rutenberg, J. (2012, October 11). Biden and Ryan quarrel aggressively in debate, offering contrasts - NYTimes.com. Retrieved October 12, 2012, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/us/politics/biden-and-ryan-quarrel-aggressively-in-debate-offering-contrasts.html?ref=presidentialdebates&pagewanted=all>

4. In the *Fox News* article “Biden accused of being disrespectful in vice presidential debate with grins, laughs” the bias towards the Romney/Ryan ticket was instantly evident by the title. Any news article deserves a title that informs the readers, in several words, what they can expect to read. The journalist who wrote this did just that- by running with criticism of the opposing party’s debate etiquette.... There is nothing wrong with mentioning what critics have to say after a debate in a news article. However, in order to do so, one needs to mention the criticism that people had of both parties. Yes, Biden had a smile on his face but his debate etiquette seemed to be empowering for the Democratic Party. Some could say he went into the debate swinging but some could also say the same about Governor Romney during the first presidential debate. This proves that who you ask does matter.

Biden accused of being disrespectful in vice presidential debate with grins, laughs. (2012). FoxNews.com. <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/10/11/biden-attacks-with-grin-but-how-will-it-play/>