

press is essential to the workings of a healthy democracy. Much more recently, the Knight Commission's 2009 report *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age* stressed the importance of news literacy, and one of its key recommendations was to "integrate digital and media literacy as critical elements for education at all levels" (p. xvii). Learning how to analyze news stories is clearly essential to helping students become prepared to be "active citizens."

By the time they graduate from high school, students who are "news literate" should be able to distinguish between factual news and opinion and among journalists, pundits, and commentators. They should also

- know what makes a news report reliable (e.g., verification of facts, presentation of evidence, source citation);
- recognize the problems inherent in using anonymous sources;
- be aware that photographs can be digitally manipulated (e.g., cropped, Photoshopped);
- recognize the ways in which editing and other production choices influence the messages; and
- understand the value of letting events or individuals speak for themselves.

The multiple forms of news and commentary that populate the Internet today make all of this increasingly challenging for both students and adults. Blogs, in particular, are often mistaken for news reports, and there is increasing pressure to report stories quickly, without taking the necessary time to verify the information or reflect on the impact of a news story on the individuals involved.

The Nature of News

To determine how you might help students achieve these goals in ways that are integral to your core curriculum, it is helpful to know a bit about news. Depending on the age of your students, you may want to build these concepts into your discussion of news.

The Agenda-Setting Function of News

The news media certainly influence what we think about the issues that they cover. But perhaps more important, the news media influence which issues we think about at all. Like the person in charge of the agenda in a meeting, the news media have considerable power in determining what people, events, and topics are important enough to consider each day. Traditional journalistic criteria such as "What will have the greatest impact on the largest number of people?" are often offset by other criteria, such as "What has the best pictures?" or "What will be dramatic enough (or salacious or frightening enough) to sell the most copy?" For example, a headline like "Senate Overhauls Social Security" refers to a story with more important implications than "Congressman Caught Sucking Toes of Secretary in Hotel Tryst," but the latter

is likely to generate more web hits than the former. In the United States, the pressures to generate revenue also lead to a preference for coverage of items that are directly related to Americans, so international news is often ignored unless something especially explosive has happened.¹⁴ For an exercise that highlights the agenda-setting function of news media, see the companion website.



News as Paradox

Another important thing to know about the impact of news on our “knowledge” about the world is that we tend to believe the most that which we know the least about. The more we know about a person, place, or topic, the greater our ability to question what we read or hear about him, her, or it. So we are better able to assess whether a report about the neighborhood we live in is accurate than a report about someplace across the globe that neither we—nor anyone we know—has personally visited. By definition, most news is about things that are unusual—so it’s not a good source for learning about daily life in other places, though we often take it that way. Also, because news media cover and repeat those unusual stories (e.g., shark attacks, murders), we think they happen more often than they actually do (Ruscio, 2006), and we rarely hear about daily occurrences even when they are dramatic (e.g., thousands of children worldwide don’t have access to clean drinking water or enough to eat).

“Parasocial Relationships”

We only “know” many celebrities and other people through the media, but we feel as though we actually know what they are like (their personalities and preferences) and that we have some kind of relationship with them. We even make judgments about whether news stories about them are believable based on “knowing” their character. This tendency can also occur with fictional characters; actors, for example, often tell stories about fans treating them as though they are the characters they play.¹⁵

VNRs and Other News Sources

Today’s news creation often involves the use of video news releases (VNRs), PR pieces created by outside organizations (e.g., advertisers, lobbyists, government groups) and provided free of charge to cash-strapped news organizations for use in stories. Television news outlets—especially local news stations—increasingly use excerpts from VNRs. Though there are discussions about changing the rules, stations are not now required to label or identify the source of these clips, leaving the impression that the content reflects the more “objective” viewpoint of the news station rather than the biases of a promotional piece.¹⁶

Humorous Media Content as a Source of News

Adolescents and young adults are increasingly likely to turn to late-night comedy shows for news, especially regarding political candidates and issues.¹⁷

While editorial cartoons have long been important sources of humorous and pointed commentary about news and politics and satirical publications like the *Onion* have a rich history of spoofing news, digital media technologies now allow all sorts of individuals and organizations to do the same, and in a fairly sophisticated way. When students don't distinguish among journalism, satire, comedy, and commentary, they can easily become misinformed. For example, in 2008, the *New Yorker* ran a cover portraying presidential candidate Barack Obama as a Muslim (complete with a picture of Osama bin Laden on the wall and flag burning in the fireplace). While the cover's title—*noted only inside the magazine*—was "The Politics of Fear," some who were unfamiliar with the magazine's long history of using satirical covers thought the magazine was confirming that Obama was indeed a Muslim.

REFLECTION: YOUR OWN NEWS SOURCES

Where do you get *your* news, and why? How do you know those sources are reliable? Do you regularly go to more than one source? Would anything lead you to reconsider the sources you typically turn to for news?

Resources for Teaching News Literacy

Two wonderful resources for news analysis are Newspapers in Education (whose website at <http://nieonline.com> includes lesson plans and other resources for educators) and the Newseum (whose website at <http://newseum.org> includes more than 800 front pages of newspapers from around the world every day). Also, <http://gradethenews.org> offers a printable scorecard for evaluating news on several quality measures, and the book *Detecting Bull: How to Identify Bias and Junk Journalism in Print, Broadcast, and on the Wild Web* by the site's founder John McManus (2009) is also an excellent resource for learning to think more deeply about news.¹⁸

Lesson Ideas

There are many ways to combine coursework with news literacy, often by selecting news stories whose content directly relates to your curriculum.

Customizing or Extending the Key Questions

Start with any news report related to what you are teaching and apply the Key Questions to a discussion of its content.

- **Authorship**—Is this story from a wire service? Did the reporter actually investigate the story, or did she or he receive the information from another source? Where was the journalist (e.g., at the event or reporting from a regional bureau or remote location)? Who played a role in deciding how the story was edited; what headline and images accompanied it; and where it appeared in the newspaper, news program, or website?

- **Content**—How does this compare to what you have learned in class or from other sources?
- **Credibility**—Which parts of this story are factual, and how do I know? How is it rated by fact-checking web resources like <http://factcheck.org> or <http://newstrust.net>?
- **Response**—What perspectives are expressed in comments posted to online news stories or letters to the editors? (See, for example, the final lesson in Project Look Sharp's *Media Constructions of Martin Luther King, Jr.* kit.)
- **Economics**—Whom do the reporters and photographers/videographers work for? Where does the money come from that paid for this story?
- **Purpose**—What are the links between Purpose (e.g., to support a political position or to generate revenue for corporate owners) and Content (including Techniques used to attract attention)?
- **Techniques**—Might the photographs included in this story have been digitally altered, and why? What is it about the way that this looks that makes me think it is news? To increase Awareness of the formal features of news, ask students to draw a picture of a typical TV news report. You may be amazed at how similar their pictures will be: a single commentator (often male), seated, only head and shoulders showing, with a screen or graphic shown in the upper right corner and a "crawl" along the bottom of the page. Recognizing the techniques that quickly establish that "this is a news story" can help students recognize when an advertisement or other persuasive message is co-opting those techniques to imply credibility about its claims.¹⁹ This occurs frequently in newspapers, and papers are bound by ethics requirements to label such "stories" as advertisements (although they don't always do so).
- **Context and Content** questions can also help students better understand the structure of the news media by
 - identifying different types of news articles (feature stories, commentary, investigative stories, international news feeds, human interest stories, etc.).
 - comparing the way news is reported in different media formats (newspapers, newsmagazines, radio, TV, the Internet) and distinguishing between news and opinion (editorials, blogs, letters to the editor, etc.) or fact-checked news and reports coming live (or nearly live) from observers' (or participants') phones, Twitter accounts, or social-networking sites.
 - discussing the importance of photographs and captions and the role that headlines and magazine covers play in framing a news story.

Exploring International News Sources

These basic Key Questions can also help students recognize and reflect on the fact that in the United States we receive almost all of our news from US sources. This might seem obvious, but it's not true for much of the world—people in most other countries read and hear televised and print news stories from a much

broader range of international sources. This relates again to the issue of gatekeepers and the "lens" through which we view other countries and their people. One way teachers can increase students' understanding of the impact of this issue is to have them read and/or watch news from other countries. Before the Internet, this would have been a daunting task—but now it's fairly easy to access English-language versions of newspapers and televised stories from dozens of countries around the world. Leading students through an analysis and discussion of which stories are covered—and how they are covered—on the same day in different countries can be eye opening.

Analyzing Headlines and Magazine Covers

Headlines and magazine covers are useful for discussing Key Questions of Authorship, Purpose, and Credibility. Magazine covers are considered advertising for the magazine, so they are not subject to the same accuracy and ethical guidelines that apply to articles and photographs inside the magazine.²⁰ Headlines are typically written by the copy editor rather than the writer of the news article, and are designed to briefly inform and attract attention to the article. Because of this, sometimes headlines are misleading or just plain wrong. Consider the newspaper article shown in Figure 5.2; since IQ is always based on a written test, unless these are exceptionally smart mice, the use of the term

Figure 5.2 IQ in Mice?

The Ithaca Journal Thursday, September 2, 1999
SCIENCE

Scientists genetically raise IQs of mice

The Associated Press

Scientists have genetically engineered beary mice nicknamed "Doo-gie," pointing the way for research that could lead to human babies with higher IQs as well as drugs to treat Alzheimer's disease and stroke.

Inserting an extra gene, researchers produced a strain of mice that excelled in a range of tasks, like recognizing a Lego piece they'd seen on a tray before learning the location of a hidden underwater platform and recognizing cues that they were about to receive a mild shock.

The improved learning and memory came from increased production of a brain protein called NR2B. The mice carried the enhanced abilities into adulthood, when learning ability and memory naturally taper off, and passed their heightened learning abilities on to their offspring.

"This points to the possibility that enhancement of learning and memory or even IQ is feasible through genetic means, through genetic engineering," said Joe Z. Tsien, the assistant professor of molecular biology at Princeton University who led the research team.

The findings, published in today's issue of *Nature*, indicate a common mechanism lies at the root of all

learning, identify the protein NR2B as a key to brain function, and could lead to a drug to treat memory disorders, such as Alzheimer's, by increasing NR2B levels, Tsien added.


Production of NR2B protein normally decreases with age, correlating with the loss of memory and learning ability commonly experienced by older people, Tsien said.

The new mouse work represents a breakthrough in understanding how the brain functions at the molecular level, said Dr. Robert Malenka, a psychiatrist and behavioral sciences specialist at Stanford University School of Medicine.

"To jump from this very elegant work in a mouse model to humans is a very, very big jump," said Malenka, who was not involved in the research. "Nevertheless, it is a jump we can make and will make eventually. When we jump to humans, it will probably be a lot more complicated."

One complication is the risk that any drug that would increase NR2B levels could also increase the risk of stroke, because both stroke and learning are related to the same neurological switches in the brain, Malenka added.

Dr. Ron McKay of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders



The Associated Press

Princeton University assistant professor of molecular biology Joe Tsien holds a 'smart' mouse in a lab Wednesday in Princeton, N.J. By inserting an extra gene to trigger increased production of a brain protein, scientists were able to produce mice that excelled in a range of tasks.

'What we are looking at is the baby steps toward a world in which we can design our descendants.'

— Arthur Caplan, Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania

and Stroke said drug companies are already investigating manipulation of NR2B levels to treat strokes. Any research that illuminates how NR2B works in the brain would be valuable in that work, he said. The prospect of genetically engineering smarter babies

risen big ethical questions.

"What we are looking at is the baby steps toward a world in which we can design our descendants," said Arthur Caplan, director of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania Health System.

Could this headline be accurate? How is IQ measured? Why would the copy editor choose to use "raise IQ" in the headline instead of "improve memory"? Why did the newspaper include this photo? Might it unintentionally reinforce stereotypes?

Source: Ithaca Journal, September 2, 1999.

IQ is incorrect. The article describes research that demonstrates ways to increase *memory* ability in mice; why might the copy editor have chosen to use “*IQ*” instead of “*memory*” in the headline?

Analyzing headlines in online news reports is particularly intriguing because they are usually written specifically to draw the attention of search engines rather than to accurately describe stories (Carr, 2010). Students might compare and contrast the same story reported in the print and online versions of a particular newspaper or use <http://newseum.org> to compare the use of the same photographs with different headlines on the same day in different newspapers. And with the rise of Twitter, analyzing the tweets that news media send to draw readers to a story—in comparison to the headlines created with the same purpose—can highlight the power of certain words and phrases to convey drama and importance when space and time are *really* short.

Supporting Student-Produced News

Creating student newspapers, magazines, documentaries, or radio programs, while time consuming, provides wonderful opportunities to develop and demonstrate all of the capabilities that define media literacy. Have students reflect on—and even report on—the decisions they continuously make regarding which stories to cover, whom to interview, what to edit out, and which techniques to use. This can generate powerful insights into effective communication and the ways in which decisions can distort or bias information.

News publications or programs also provide natural opportunities for interdisciplinary cooperation (e.g., science students reporting on science-related matters, art students providing photography and graphic support, civics classes covering political issues, etc.). And journalism provides enough variables to adapt to nearly any subject area and skill level. For example, in history classes, students can demonstrate both an understanding of the various components of news and the time period, people, and place they are studying by creating a newspaper for, say, ancient Egypt, the Aztecs, or colonial America. An English teacher may opt to have students create podcasts rather than video because radio news requires more descriptive language than narration for a video.

Teachers can also scaffold experiences by engaging students in short projects (e.g., creating a still ad for a magazine) before moving on to more complex productions that involve decisions about wording, tone of voice, sound effects, music, research, fact-checking, and editing.

Before students begin to create their own news stories, it is a good idea to engage them in activities that help them work through some of the challenges that journalists typically encounter. For example, at the high school level, to increase Awareness about how editing influences news content, take a printed news story (or the transcript of a radio or TV story—something that is no more than a single printed page and is related to your curriculum works best) and put students in the role of editor. Tell them they need to cut the story in half to fit it into available airtime (or column space). It is important that you give no other instructions so that students are completely free to determine how they will make their cuts. Divide the class into small groups of four to five and let them work for about ten minutes (things happen quickly in news). In the follow-up discussion,

focus on what criteria each group used to make their cuts. The actual edits they made are less important than what individual group members said to convince their classmates to make a particular cut or save a sentence. Wrap up the discussion by noting that since no story can include all of the available information or full quotes from every interviewee, news stories are always edited, and there are many possible (and valid) criteria for making editing decisions. Knowing something about the source or perspective of a news story can help students see how editing criteria might have influenced what they are seeing or hearing.

Another related lesson idea involves noticing the language choices to see how they change the impression of the story. Discuss the differences among common verbs like *said*, *claimed*, *pointed out*, *admitted*, *asserted*, or *argued*, etc. Ask students to notice the use of euphemisms, labels, "code words," and generalizations (i.e., attributing a statement or action to an entire group instead of specific individuals, such as "the black community is up in arms . . ."),²¹ and discuss how they impact the reader's understanding of the issues and events being reported.

Students can also begin to get a feel for real-world journalism by posting comments on an Internet news blog or submitting letters to the editor and monitoring the responses. All of these suggestions help students develop a better sense of how professionally produced news stories are created and edited, building awareness and reflection on issues of credibility, bias, ethics, and epistemology.

Discussing Current Events

In an effort to get students interested in current events by reading newspapers, teachers often have students do something like this: find three newspaper articles about current events (local, national, and international), summarize each one on a note card, and then present them to the rest of the class. When Cyndy's daughter was asked to do that, she always found the shortest articles possible and copied the information without really thinking about it, and neither she nor the other students remembered much about the events afterwards. So while the goal was an admirable one, the assignment didn't really work to meet it.

A media literacy tweak to the same assignment might be to have each student find three newspaper articles all about the same current event (from different newspapers), summarize the event by drawing on information in all three articles (including information inferred from the headlines and accompanying photographs), present the information about the event to the class, and comment on the similarities and differences among the sources in the ways they reported on the event.^{CP1.4,2.2} This takes the same amount of class time but offers a much deeper experience for the students because they've had to use analytical and synthesis skills. This approach has the added benefit of serving as a parallel task in preparation for answering the document-based questions frequently found on social studies assessments.

Another way to incorporate media literacy into both news and current events is to have students apply the Key Questions to news stories designed especially for children, such as those found in *Time for Kids*, *Weekly Reader*, and on *Nick News*. Older students could also compare stories in those news outlets to stories on the same topic in local or national newspapers, identifying similarities and differences in the way the stories were reported.