



Date : 20/07/2006

Digital News: Key to global literacy and information literacy education

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Meeting:	79 Newspapers
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Simultaneous Interpretation:	No
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*WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 72ND IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
20-24 August 2006, Seoul, Korea
<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla72/index.htm>*

The advent of digital newspaper databases is a boon to the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of Global Studies in the United States. Students and educators now have greater access than ever to instant information about events happening around the world and issues that are important to people in other countries. Using global news in the classroom is an effective way for students to expand and widen their perspective on global issues by incorporating multiple viewpoints into their own understanding of the forces that are shaping the world in the twenty-first century. Today we will discuss some of the benefits of incorporating news as a source of information in the Global Studies curriculum and how doing so can advance media literacy skills. We will also consider some of the challenges of using news as a pedagogical tool.

News and Global Studies

News has many qualities that make it ideal for use in the Global Studies classroom. First, news is accessible. With the advent of digital library databases and commercial Web search tools, news from around the world is more easily available than ever to university students in the United States. Resources like LexisNexis and Global NewsBank provide instant access to news published in newspapers and broadcast in other countries. Even for institutions that cannot afford these resources, websites like Google News, which indexes news articles from websites published around the world, are of great benefit. Electronic access complements the timeliness of

news, which is another of its unique attributes. Students can learn about what happened yesterday, or even find out about today's events happening across the world.

News is intellectually accessible as well. Unlike scholarly communications, there is no specialized vocabulary, and it is often written in an engaging style. Issues and ongoing events are followed, producing a narrative that can be tracked across time.

News is also linguistically accessible. Unfortunately, most United States students are monolingual when they arrive at the university. But that doesn't mean that they have to be cut off from news published in non-English-speaking countries. There are many English-language newspapers and news websites from countries around the world, such as *The Korea Herald* and *The Japan Times*. Library databases like Global NewsBank carry news articles from the BBC monitoring service, which gathers news published and broadcast around the world and translates it into English.

Whether or not the news is translated into English or originally published in a language American students can read, it is critical for Global Studies that students have access to news that is produced in other countries, not just news that is published in the United States about other countries. The little international news that is published in the United States is focused overwhelmingly on natural disasters, war, terrorism, famine, disease, and other devastating events. Taken out of context, such news coverage does not foster identification with other cultures, but rather makes the situation in other countries seem terrible and beyond hope. Relying on the United States alternative media for comprehensive news about other countries is of little help since these news organizations do not have the resources to have reporters on the ground throughout the world.

On the other hand, news articles published in other countries have a unique capacity to foster identification with the problems and issues confronted by people around the world. Many news articles have a human interest component, which can be particularly effective for developing identification with people from other countries. Cultural reporting is another genre of journalism that can foster identification with people throughout the world, since culture – music, dance, literature, film, theatre, and storytelling — is arguably what defines what it is to be human.

Perhaps most importantly, news articles produced in different parts of the world reflect differing perspectives on global issues and problems. Helping students to have a more cosmopolitan sensibility by incorporating divergent perspectives into their understanding of global issues is perhaps the primary goal of Global Studies education in the United States. Drawing on the work of philosopher Martha Nussbaum, Eve Walsh Stoddard and Grant H. Cornwell (2003) articulate how a liberal arts approach to Global Studies can advance the ideal of global citizenship. They not only stress that knowledge is crucial for the ethical global citizen, but they also propose that knowledge is perspectival, stressing the notion that “things look completely different from different locations or different points of view” (Stoddard & Cornwell p.44).

News can allow students to de-center their own ways of seeing the world in order to understand issues and events from different perspectives, including those that have been traditionally marginalized on the global scale. News can expose students to many global

perspectives so they can then analyze, synthesize and integrate them into their own understanding of issues and concepts: Stoddard and Cornwall write, “Geocitizens...need to seek points of view globally; hence, critical thinking becomes the project of triangulating the sources, clearly identifying the contradictions and incommensurabilities, building a reconciled narrative to the extent possible” (Stoddard & Cornwall p.50).

The capacity of electronic databases to allow searching news by topic is perhaps what makes them the most valuable for Global Studies, because searching across international papers for articles on particular topics is a way to pull together a more global view of a particular issue related to a Global Studies course. Students can read several articles on a particular issue, compare and contrast them, and put together an account of the issue that is a synthesis of different perspectives on it. For example, a student group who chose to search for articles on urbanization found out that:

1. A Nigerian news source reported that the Nigerian Congress declared that dealing with urbanization was a major priority. According to Nigerian urban planning scholars, cities must be made more liveable in order to deal with growing urban violence and disease.
2. *The Korea Herald* reported that China’s rapid urbanization and economic development had contributed to pollution in that country and its neighbors, prompting Asian media officials to meet in Beijing to discuss sustainable development in China and the role of media in economic development and environmental protection.
3. A French news agency reported researchers’ warnings that urbanization and transportation have resulted in “biotic homogenization,” meaning that almost all plants and animals will live almost everywhere, but there will be fewer species overall. The world’s dominant species will take over in every area of the world, resulting in much less biodiversity.
4. The *Accra Daily Mail*, a Ghanaian newspaper, reported on U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan’s views that lack of public services such as education, health services, water, and sanitation are main reasons why informal settlements occur in cities, and that convictions and demolitions are not the answer to the problems brought on by urbanization.
5. A Chinese news agency reported that the World Bank provided a \$180 million loan to build infrastructure in China’s rural southwest, where mountainous topography and inadequate water supply have stalled the urbanization process.

In their report, the students noted similar themes that were addressed in the articles: the effects of urbanization on living conditions for the poor and the interplay of environmental problems and urbanization. They also noted some of the different ways in which the problems of urbanization play out in different places around the world.

The fact that the topic “urbanization” is a very broad topic – probably broader than many librarians would like to see in a typical research project – can allow for students to gain a more global understanding of an issue. If the topic is too narrow from the outset, then the students’ pre-conceived ideas about the issue, based upon their perspective as United States residents who have only been exposed to issues through the United States media, can steer the research too narrowly in the direction of framing issues or problems in ways with which they are already familiar.

For example, in the United States, urbanization is rightly seen as a phenomenon that occurred largely in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the current stage of migration being from the cities to the suburbs –which results in trends with narrower terms such as “urban blight” or “urban sprawl.” Yet these are not terms that would reflect the massive farm-to-city migrations now happening in many places throughout the world, notably China.

Thus, the librarian’s impulse to narrow the topic from the outset of the research project can have the effect of placing what we, as Americans, already know or care about an issue in the forefront and minimizing the potential for the assignment to present a more global perspective on the issue. The goal of the exercise is for students to learn how to synthesize several articles on a global topic from around the world, to come to an understanding of the issue that reflects a more cosmopolitan sensibility than they had before the assignment.

Media Literacy

Using news in the Global Studies course is a way for students to become more media literate. This includes an understanding of how and why the United States media fall short in reporting about other countries and thus why it is important to find news from around the world. It also involves the ability to determine where a newspaper article was published – as examples, to search a website to find out where it originates from and to understand that a dateline reflects where the reporter was when he or she reported on the event but not the city where the news organization that produced the story is actually located.

Media literacy and Global Studies goals are both advanced when students can learn to notice which sources are cited in a news article and, beyond that, to think about how the sources cited usually reflect and help to shape the perspective from which an article is written. Students can also learn to consider how larger economic and political factors in a society can shape the news that is produced in a given country. For example, in countries where the government does not formally control the media, informal mechanisms and the structure of the media industries create an environment where the media still rely very heavily on large, powerful institutions such as the government and large corporations for their information.

Advertising is one of the most profound factors shaping how news is produced. One of the drawbacks of using electronic databases is that it can be difficult to see the influence of advertising on news, because the articles have been extracted from their original context in which they were juxtaposed with, and financed by, advertisements. Still, the idea that most news from around the world tends to reflect the perspectives of powerful institutions like governments and corporations that advertise in the media, although a fairly advanced concept, can be introduced in a Global Studies assignment that uses news as an information source.

But we must consider carefully how to direct students to analyze news from other countries. For educators in the United States, it is important to recognize that American students are already critical readers of news, but the critical tools they have been trained to use may not be the best ones in a Global Studies context. Without any direction, students will draw on the critical tools they have derived from having learned United States news values, such as the detachment on the part of the reporter. Related to the norm of detachment is another common conceptual framework for Americans in analyzing the news: the biased/objective binary. Thus,

when they are asked to consider the different perspectives from which different articles are written, students may resort to a term they are more familiar with – bias – and criticize news articles for carrying a biased point of view. This is understandable: the difference between *bias* and *perspective* is very subtle – the main difference being the connotations of the two words. Bias is negative; perspective is not.

The result of thinking in terms of *bias* rather than *perspective* is significant. Students may gather and read news articles from around the world about a topic and rather than attempting to synthesize the articles into some more cosmopolitan understanding of the issue by noticing how it is considered differently in the news articles gathered from around the world, they may tend to criticize each article in turn, depending upon whether they believe it is biased or unbiased. One student group said the articles they read about the Asian Tsunami of 2004 were biased “since they were printed in or around the disaster area” – The Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. The suggestion here is that a reporter must be detached from the event in order to be unbiased and to cover it responsibly.

American students’ seemingly instinctive approach to news criticism – to limit their analysis to the biased/unbiased binary and the ethos of detachment – is challenging in almost any type of media literacy context. However, it is particularly problematic in a Global Studies context, since these news values tend to themselves be reflections of a particularly American ethos of journalism. While many news values and practices are shared by professional journalists throughout the world, the ethics of detachment and objectivity are not the most central journalistic values in every part of the world. Rather than valuing a dispassionate journalistic voice and representing “both sides” of an issue in every article, many journalists throughout the world place the greatest values on autonomy and advocacy. That is, the journalists’ value their ability to act autonomously—free of government control—and they also believe journalists can and should play an advocacy role, relying on the multiplicity of newspapers to make sure all perspectives are aired (Brislin 134-136). As Tom Brislin of the University of Hawaii at Manoa School of Journalism writes, “Many Western European, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Korean news organizations are comfortable with an advocacy model, in effect ‘wearing their politics on their sleeves,’ achieving balance in the aggregate rather than within each organization” (Brislin 135). Therefore, an assignment that uses international news can fall short of its goal of helping students incorporate various perspectives from around the world unless attention is paid to helping students de-center their own ways of thinking about what constitutes responsible journalism.

Conclusion

Global Studies curricula in the United States benefit greatly from digital access to news resources because immediate access to news from many countries, in a context that is searchable by subject, exposes students to information about global events and issues from perspectives of people from other parts of the world. International news sources are particularly important in helping students to develop a global perspective on an issue instead of relying on a framework of how a particular issue is discussed in United States media. We encourage academic libraries to collaborate with Global Studies faculty to develop approaches to teach students how to use digital resources to find news produced in other countries. Our experience doing so resulted in the creation of an online tutorial (available online at <http://www.library.uiuc.edu/village/globalnews/>) that instructs students in seeking out and thinking carefully about global news sources. We invite

you to contact us with any questions or comments about this topic or the instruction we offer to students.

References

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