Customizing the news literacy course in different class settings

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One big challenge for me as a news literacy instructor is to tailor lessons to different class settings. Fortunately, I have had opportunities to design news literacy courses for different class sizes, from small groups to big classes, and for different time durations, from a 3-session training course to 10-week and 15-week courses, as well as for students of different cultures, from Vietnamese students to Chinese and American students. In this paper, I first review my experience designing and teaching news literacy and then discuss several theoretical issues such as media bias, audience bias and how to cope with cognitive dissonance.

Problems and solutions in designing and teaching news literacy for different class settings

Again, the key challenge is always how to fit the standard 15-week course taught at Stony Brook University into shorter ones. Normally, I would place the most important lessons into the schedule first and then select the less important ones to fill up the course schedule.

In Vietnam
1. In 2015, I was assigned to give a 2-hour lesson for 100 freshmen. I chose to talk about *the importance of being able to classify information neighborhoods and 7 strategies to become a smart news reader*. Showing students Stony Brook University's information taxonomy, I focused on the difference in goals and methods of various categories of information and gave local examples to teach students how to detect blurred lines between different information neighborhoods. Next, I carefully explained to them 7 strategies to be more critical when consuming the news. These strategies are as follows:

> 1. Classify the information: news or other types of information, and if there are blurred lines.
> 2. Evaluate information sources using the I'M VA/IN formula, with emphasis on independent sources, multiple accounts for the same information, sources who verify, authoritative/informed sources and named sources.
> 3. Pay attention to follow-up stories and suspend hasty judgments.
> 4. Consider the credibility of the story based on the VIA formula (see if the information is verified, independently collected, and accounted for by reliable organizations or individuals).
> 5. Listen to the other sides, not only the one that's consistent with our beliefs.

6. Do not automatically associate high social media rankings with more reliability and credibility.

7. Share news and information in a responsible way.

Several months later, our faculty member Loan Ngo designed a three-fold mini manual listing these 7 strategies along with some infographics explaining key concepts of the SBU news literacy course (Figure 1). We distributed these mini manuals to 60 students at Trung Vuong High School. We insisted that they read our manuals for more clarifications, because we knew that within two hours, students could not process everything we had taught them. The two-hour workshop gave them just enough time to know that they must be more careful when consuming news and information on social media platforms. Due to the short time, we did not have much feedback from students, except that the school asked us to send them more copies of our manual so they can distribute it to more students.
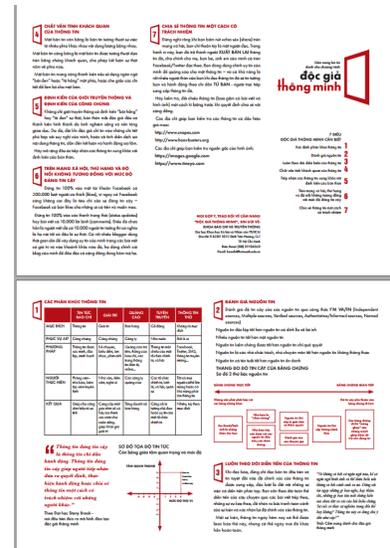

Figure 1. The abridged manual for smart readers

2. Next, I was assigned to design a 3-session workshop for 30 students at a High School for the Gifted. Students all specialized in Literature, and had special interest in journalism. Many students from this class intend to enroll in our department in the future. Therefore, I created a program including:

Session 1: Why News Literacy Matters and Information Neighborhoods
Students were given a 45-minute lecture on the subjects and joined two in-class activities, including Activity 1: Identify information neighborhoods and Activity 2: You Be The Editor.

Session 2: Fairness, Balance and Bias
Students were given a 45-minute lecture on the subjects and asked to re-evaluate the role of Robin Hood from multiple accounts.

Session 3: Source Verification and News Deconstruction
Students were given a 45-minute lecture on the subjects and asked to choose a news story to deconstruct. Before doing news deconstruction, students were also given a talk on controversial video production techniques which may alter the facts.

These students were very good at critical thinking, so they quickly adopted what we taught them and even could argue against a mainstream media which unfairly reported about the mass fish death in April, 2016. Regarding this news incident, mainstream media kept quiet about Formosa, the Taiwan steel plant that discharged toxic waste water into the sea, and diverted the

public's attention toward a different cause of mass fish death: ecotoxicology of red tide. But students who listened to online accounts highly suspected the company was the culprit behind the disaster.

3. At the same time, I was assigned to teach an *English for Journalism* course for 30 freshmen with a focus on News Literacy. This course was about 30 hours, or 10 3-hour lessons. I divided the course into two parts: online training and project-based training. For the first part, I asked students to take *Making Sense of the News* on EdX, a course taught by Dr. Masato Kajimoto,

Figure 2. Has Snow White Told the Truth?

in five weeks. Their online scores were used as midterm grades. For the second part, I gave students two project charges: (1) choosing a news story and working on a news deconstruction project; or (2) choosing a fairy tale and retelling it from the other side. Via their final presentations, I was able to evaluate how much they understood news literacy concepts and how well they used critical thinking skills. As a result, I had one group that scored very well in their news deconstruction project of Mass Fish Death (Figure 4); and another group that successfully crafted new accounts of fairy tales, taking into consideration balance, fairness

Figure 4. The media coverage of mass fish death

and bias (Figure 3). But many groups still struggled with selecting a news story for deconstruction and/or understanding key news literacy concepts. I took the chance to reiterate the definitions of these complicated concepts, understanding that it's a hard course for Vietnamese students who are not really good at English.

In America

1. During the Fall 2016, I was assigned to teach the J2050 News and Information course for approximately 50 students at Ohio University. This was a big challenge for me because the course was offered three times per week. I had to divide each of SBU's original lessons into three parts, and had to add relevant materials and activities to fill up the one-hour class time.

At that time, I decided to weave several ideas and concepts from the 2016 UNESCO Mindful Communication for ASEAN Integration in Bangkok into the J2050 course. Students were excited with Mindfulness concepts after watching several videos about mindful techniques like CBS's 60 Minutes Special on Mindfulness hosted by Anderson Cooper or OWN's Thich Nhat Hanh on Compassionate Listening hosted by Oprah Winfrey. The general idea was to help students suspend hasty judgments towards news stories by taking into consideration multiple
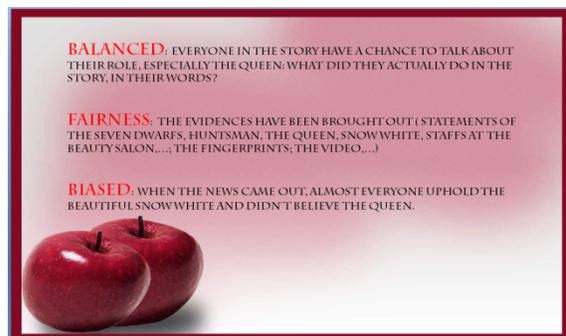
perspectives including their own perception, as well as developing their informed judgments at the right time. Specifically, I found the ideas of "deep listening" or "compassionate listening", and "middle-path journalism" very helpful in explaining such concepts as fairness, balance and bias.

> *Deep or Compassionate Listening:* According to Thich Nhat Hanh, deep listening "helps us to recognize the existence of wrong perceptions in the other person and wrong perceptions in us." Thich Nhat Hanh defines deep listening as being able to listen with "only one purpose: to help him or her to empty his heart," without interrupting or arguing or giving advice (which can be done later). The practice of deep listening is essential to journalism, because it increases the chance of reporting the news fairly and accurately. It's also important to news consumers who want to control their biases when judging news stories.

> Middle Path or Noble Eightfold Path: Dorji Wangchuk, a Bhutanese media researcher, and Sugath Senarath, a media professor, advocate for the 4 Cs in practicing mindful journalism: contentment, community, compassion and commitments, or later, they called it human-centered journalism. However, their approach is not as widely accepted as the normal understanding of the Middle Path, a Buddhist concept, which not only requires practitioners to avoid extremes but also to help them practice "right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration." Among the 8 *right*s, *right view* and *right speech* should be applied to news consumption and news sharing. Practicing the "*right*s" shows respect for the Truth and the desire to uphold the Truth.

 In general, both "deep listening" and "middle-path journalism" practices are essential to developing critical thinking skills. Therefore, I spent a lot of time helping students learn to consider multiple perspectives and develop fair and balanced news judgments. To my surprise, American students saw the connection between Mindfulness concepts and Fairness/Balance/Bias concepts better than Chinese and Middle Eastern students. Many students showed that they can control their biases better than before taking the course. Actually, breathe in, breath out, pay attention to the flow of thoughts—these techniques are essential to helping students develop a critical mindset.

Besides Mindfulness, I also integrated news framing theory to explain why sometimes the media fail to report in a fair and balanced way. Due to the time limit, I gave just a short lecture on the three definitions of news frames, as follows:

> News Framing Theory offers "a way of describing how messages, based on certain patterns of emphasis and exclusion, can structure the thinking of the people who encounter them" (Mc Leod & Shah, 2015).

> The theory implies that news organizations influence "the perceptions of audiences by suggesting that they should attend to what is within the frame and ignore

what is outside it" (Bateson, 1972).

News frames "are a part of culture, they guide how the elite construct information, they affect journalists' information selection, they are manifest in media texts, and they influence cognitions and attitudes of audience members" (Matthes, 2012).

At the end of the lecture, I emphasized that the purpose of teaching news framing theory is not to discredit the media but rather to explain why smart readers should always check across multiple media platforms.

Thanks to the controversial 2016 US presidential election, I have plenty of examples about news frames and media effects to show students and create exam questions. For the first midterm exam, I had students work on two groups of questions: (1) identify fake news and inaccurate news; (2) evaluate controversial news stories from multiple perspectives. While they did well on the first group of questions, many of them were too eager to take sides in the second group of questions.

However, their biases were reduced significantly and their answers became more critical in the second midterm exam, which I created using the SBU final exam format. I asked students to watch two controversial news videos (one about Mexican immigration in response to President Trump's "border wall" statement and the other about racist statements against Michelle Obama) and read a controversial story about George Soros produced by Russia Today. Students then evaluated sources to decide the credibility of these stories. Finally, I asked students to consider if these stories were reported in a fair manner. More than half of the class was able to judge the reliability of sources, taking into consideration media bias and their own bias.

For the final exam, I asked groups of students to choose a news story and do a thorough deconstruction project, including:

1. Run a VIA analysis to detect blurred lines between journalism and other categories of information.

2. Run an I'MVA/IN analysis to evaluate sources, and do fact-checking.

3. Check the Balance/Fairness/Bias to determine the credibility of the story.

I had two groups that were more critical than the others. Some groups still had misunderstandings about fairness and balance and some groups misunderstood the M in IMVAIN (they thought that if the story has more sources, it must more reliable). Suffice to say, when students submitted the stories, I found that some of them could not distinguish between a news report and an op-ed piece, probably because there were not many pure news stories during the presidential campaign.

2. In the Spring 2017, I was assigned to teach Mass Media Writing Principles. As an objective of the course, I stressed the importance of being fair and balanced. Again, I introduced

the SBU way of explaining fairness, balance and bias to caution students about the process of collecting and presenting information. I did so because in the textbook (2015), James G. Stovall, the author, explained these concepts very differently, as follows:

> "One of the basic tenets of American journalism is fairness. Readers expect journalists to try to give all people involved in a news story a chance to tell their sides and offer their opinions. If a news source makes an accusation about another person, standard journalism practice demands that the accused person be given a chance to answer in the same story. Journalists should not take sides in a controversy and should take care not even to appear to take sides.
> Writing and editing a balanced story mean more than just making sure a controversial situation or issue is covered fairly. In a larger sense, balance means that journalists should understand the relative importance of the events they cover and should not write stories that overplay or underplay that importance. Journalists are often charged with blowing things out of proportion, and sometimes the charge is valid. Journalists should make sure that they are not being used by news sources and being put in the position of creating news rather than letting it occur and then covering it" (p. 35).

Stovall's definition of "fairness" was closer to SBU's definition of "balance" but his definition of "balance" was nothing like SBU's definition of "fairness." I do believe SBU's way of defining fairness was more meaningful and critical because it considered more than just two sides of the story and paid special attention to the evidence.

For the lab assignment students discussed the "United Fallout" case which happened on Sunday, April 9, 2017. Students who took J2050 with me in the Fall were able to collect information from multiple media outlets and gave fair judgments for involved parties based on the evidence, while students who did not take J2050 just simply voiced their support for either United Airlines or Dr. David Dao.

Theory-related issues and strategies to become smart news consumers

After two years, I have become more and more interested in creating exam questions and in-class activities from local news stories as well as building strategies to cope with two kinds of bias: media bias and audience bias. In the previous part, I mentioned some exam questions and in-class activities. In this part, I will discuss several theories and how I used them to develop strategies to cope with bias.

1. Media bias. The media cannot avoid being biased because all of their stories are constructed and filtered through journalists' perceptions and background, or the existing

"frames." Based on News Framing theory, I have taught students 6 types of media bias, as follows:

1. Bias by omission
2. Bias by selection of sources
3. Bias by story selection
4. Bias by placement
5. Bias by labeling
6. Bias by spin

Therefore, the key strategies to cope with media bias were to read more about what are edited out of the "frames," and to assemble and compare "frames" to see the bigger picture. Besides, identifying logical fallacies in media content is also a strategy to counter media bias. Op-ed writers, and even news writers, often used such logical fallacies as Straw Man, Black or White, Appeal to Authority, and Appeal to Emotion to convince readers. Therefore, smart readers should be able to point out these types of logical fallacies in the media's arguments.

2. Audience bias. Even the smartest readers could not avoid their own bias due to what American psychologist Leon Festinger coined "cognitive dissonance" in 1957 and German psychologists coined "principles of gestalt" in early 20th century. While Festinger believed that human beings are motivated to avoid information contradictory to their existing perception so that they can reduce their mental discomfort, German psychologists suggested that human beings have the tendency to simplify complex things according to patterns already installed in their mind. The former theory was supported by studies showing that people even rejected the truth if it was not what they thought it was. The latter theory has been used more often in visual communication to help designers guide viewers' eyes better, but I believe it is also useful in the field of news literacy because it helps explain why some people quickly jump into false conclusions about certain complex or ambiguous news situations. Probably, their brains have never encountered these situations and must use similar patterns to explain them. Audience bias is something far more difficult to cope with compared to media bias

It was lucky that I found Mindfulness techniques such as "deep listening" and "middle-path" as good strategies to deal with audience bias. By practicing these techniques, readers can suspend their hasty judgments, and open their minds to accept contradictory information as well as different ideas and opinions.

Conclusion

First, news literacy means the ability to make informed news decisions based upon the verification of facts, the evaluation of sources, and the counterbalance of media and audience bias. Therefore, no matter what size of classes, I always highlight these lessons. If not, students will be confused and not be able to make fair news judgments.

Second, I have found that it's almost impossible for students to master news literacy skills if they just take a 2-hour workshop. Therefore, I always encourage them to access free materials posted on the Center for News Literacy website, so that they can continue learning on their own.

Third, it is more effective to offer a full news literacy course, but it's harder to keep students engaged and excited over a long time without creative activities and interesting examples. Therefore, I always find updated local examples for each lesson, create new activities such as retelling folk tales and co-evaluating news stories via TopHat. Also, I'll allow students who are not yet critical in the exams to write make-up papers to enhance their skills and sharpen their thoughts.

Fourth, there is a need to expand theoretical frameworks when teaching news literacy because SBU Model was first developed based upon journalists' experience and lack of the audience's experience. To upgrade the course, I used "news framing" theory to explain why sometimes the media fail, and cognitive dissonance and gestalt principles to explain why the audience does not always make wise news decision. Finally, I used Buddhism-based mindfulness theories to develop strategies to cope with both media and audience bias.

In short, my teaching experiments during the past three years are quite useful in making students aware of the battle between qualified news versus fake news and unqualified news. I helped them identify three popular reasons leading to their wrong perceptions: media failures (inaccurate reporting and media bias), technological bias (via the use of algorithm to rank news stories) and their own bias, which they can practice to control. But then, my concern is that students will be sometimes put in front of complicated social issues. Not single controversial news articles to deconstruct, but a whole new social issue which doesn't have a clear answer what should we judge and react to bring in a better society. For instance, between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, whom should we believe and vote for? Or in Vietnam, what's the real cause of mass fish death and who should be held accounted for? It requires much life experience and more critical thinking skills than we can offer in an academic course.

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