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# How to Read the News: A Reflective Essay on Pedagogy

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## Abstract

*How do we want our students to read the news? Do we want them to be skeptical of everything? Do we want them to only trust sources that professors and universities have deemed authoritative? Should we encourage students to read types of news that challenge their beliefs or identities? Do we want them to understand the retrospective bias, the media bias toward the negative and spectacular, and other biases of journalism? Most importantly, how do we communicate all the answers to these questions in a way that an eighteen-year-old freshman would understand? This essay starts from a position of weakness. Despite many years of formal education and many more hours of personal reading, I no longer know how to teach students how to read the news. From this position of weakness, however, perhaps a simple, wise approach to getting students to read the news can be found.*

## 1. Overcoming Education to Communicate Something Simple

Most teachers have heard, are aware of, or have experienced the old stereotype: he or she is so educated that they can no longer even make a simple sentence. I am afraid that that stereotype now applies to me. Something I once considered simple, now seems so complicated, so fraught with danger that I can no longer explain it simply.

Hello, students. I will now explain to you how to read a newspaper. I will tell you which newspapers and news sources are acceptable, how long you should read, how to take notes, and how to benefit from the news. Except I can't.

It has become so complicated in my mind, that I now feel I must write about it. However, even with my thoughts externalized on paper, I

am not confident that I can arrange them into something simple. I will try.

After all, I want my students to read the news.

## 2. The Universal Intent of Universities and Local Identities

During my undergraduate education, one professor explained to me that the role of the university was to socialize students into a larger group of college-educated professionals. College graduates spoke a certain kind of English, shared experiences of doing certain academic rituals (writing papers, cramming for exams, conducting group projects), and had read many of the same books.

The social role of universities is rarely articulated so directly as that. If I were to ask different professors, I am sure I would get answers that range from joining a "global community" to helping students become more complete individuals, perhaps even specific references to the Enlightenment project and liberal humanism. I might get vague answers about the open-ended search for knowledge. However, some universities, such as those with religious affiliations, might also reference God and the search for divine truth.

Thus, even universities, which have aspirations toward the universal, can be steeped in localisms.

Even in liberal humanist domains, there is a sensitivity toward protecting localisms. Whether it is to preserve biodiversity, protect indigenous ways of life, or rescue near-extinct languages, there is a sense in which the local is valued.

Thus, when university instructors tell students that they must read authoritative and credible news sources -- *The Economist*, *The New York Times*, the *BBC* -- and that they must reject their more narrow instruments of news (their local paper, gossip, or social media), are we participating in the domination of the local?

Is the answer to ask students to read with two minds: one focused on the respected instruments of a supposed "universal" university of knowledge; and another rooted in their place, identity, and communities that exist outside their university?

I believe a good starting point is for instructors to realize just how difficult supposed "universal" aspirations can be. Throughout human history, the rule has been the love of one's own and a strong connection to place, a love of one's own language, and attachment to (narrow) shared fantasies (see Friedman, 2008, May 26).

To be human is to inhabit a dense network of biases, fantasies, and magical thinking.

The aspiration to something universal is foolish, fragile, rare -- but also noble and all too human. The aspiration to reach beyond the local, to understand and feel compassion for others, is older than the university itself. The noble goal needs people willing to try, fraught though the adventure may be -- and those willing to protect the sanctity of this adventure.

Thus, a principle emerges:

**Reading the news in a broader way is an intellectual adventure similar to the "hero's journey."**

## 3. The Hero's Journey: The Perils of Leaving the Local

The hero's journey in its simplest form is this: a hero or protagonist goes on an adventure, often a journey to a strange land with unique challenges, and returns to his homeland transformed by this journey.

When I was in high school, I was on my high school's football team. One exciting aspect of being on the football team is that something about you might end up in the city newspaper, even your picture on the front page of the sports section.

In some respects, we all start off with a natural bias toward the local: toward our family, our local community, our country. Interests in faraway lands, universal concepts, and other assemblages such as those provided by higher learning are, as George Friedman (2008, May 26) labels them, "acquired loves" that often conflict with loves rooted in our early upbringings.

It is germane then to point out that when many students go to college they often take a physical journey, sometimes away from their home, their family, and many of the features that provided them comfort. In some cases, the transition to a university can feel like entering an alien culture, full of strange customs and conventions, many of which test their ideals, beliefs, and identities.

In the best-case scenario, the hero returns to his or her homeland changed for the better. He or she has brought their homeland into the world and taken some of the world back to their homeland. Not all journeys, however, have perfect endings. For some, the cultural shock of university is just too hard, to say nothing of the workload.

At the moment I write these words (September 2021), the world is brimming with local revivalisms -- anti-globalization movements, religious reawakenings, flat-earth and other anti-science movements, and desires for local autonomy. Many of these movements were born from the terrors of globalization, the speed of technological revolutions, and the everyday travails of close contacts with foreign ideas and people. One of the motivations for this essay is the realization that selling the merits of periodicals like *The New York Times* or *The Economist* may not be as easy as it was when I was a student (class of 2004). Even then, it was not easy. To this day, I still remember my experiences working part-time in a coffee shop (2001-2003), where my more religiously rigid colleagues and customers took exception to the course materials I would study on my breaks. Within the confines of my university, as a reader of *The New York Times*, I was part of the majority. However, thirty-eight miles away at my part-time job, I was almost a pariah.

When thinking about how to introduce students to the news, it is important to realize that few of them will be permanent residents in academia. Toe-holds in academia might make them smarter and more

enlightened, but may also alienate them from their local communities. This may be a positive result when these local communities have the characteristics of knowledge cults, but the negative effects in terms of alienation from their communities are also real.

Compassion, open-mindedness, and generalizable knowledge -- moves toward the universal -- are never without risk. Nevertheless, the idea of the "hero's journey" provides some guidance for the relationship between the local and the wider world.

**Reading the news from a broader perspective helps us to understand our local circumstances better.**

There may, however, be a reverse principle implied in the above statement.

In order for the reading of a newspaper (or other text) to be a true hero's journey, the reader has to be challenged in some way. If there is no challenge, or if all the hero's biases are simply reaffirmed, then no journey has taken place. In the case of students who have only read in a very narrow way (or not at all), this means encouraging them to read more credible and thoughtful forms of the news. However, for professors accustomed to reading credible news sources with a more global reach, this may mean journeying into the unfamiliar lands of localisms.

**University professors, who have become accustomed to certain kinds of news, must make efforts to understand difficult localisms or univeralisms that have become as arcane as localisms.**

## 4. Safe Intellectual Traveling through Navigation: Situating Knowledge

If the simple act of reading a newspaper is a journey, then perhaps we also need to provide our students with navigational skills.

The travel from the local to the "universal" is in reality the journey to a place of multiple partial perspectives, a proliferating number of locals, some of which have disguised their biases through what Donna Haraway calls "the god trick" (1988, p. 581). This trick, whether it is through the

passive voice of the hard sciences or the dry technical prose of a research paper, hides the very real human agendas, biases, mistakes, and localisms that are brought to the academic project.

The news, even those hallowed outlets that reach for objectivity in reporting and double-down on fact-checking and integrity, are also in reality partial perspectives. To use Haraway's verbiage, they are always "a view from somewhere" (1988, p. 590). In some cases, unearthing the biases of particular outlets may take very little intellectual work: regional outlets are sure to have very regional ways of viewing things; many news outlets advertise their political allegiances openly and even use them as selling points. The simple act of situating these sources may be easy. However, even in these cases, knowing a little bit more about the ownership and sponsorship of the outlets could be helpful. Even with outlets that are more benignly viewed by academics -- for example, *The New York Times* or *The Economist* -- it might be useful to situate these sources, examining their histories and why they are revered by academics.

Thus, a principle emerges:

**Ask students to do some "situating" research. What regional bias does the news source have? What political biases does the news source have? Who owns the paper or outlet? What things can and cannot be said in this news source?**

However, students should also be asked to situate themselves. Students may already be too deeply immersed in their local community's shared myths and worldviews to allow for an honest intellectual journey. In these situations, the rejection or even the suspension of belief in certain views might make their status within a group, their sense of self, or even their physical safety vulnerable. However, a little bit of self-awareness might go a long way toward helping these students journey outside their comfort zone. Getting students to write reflectively about their own situatedness might also do a great deal of good.

**Describe your background (regional, national, religious, social, or otherwise). Based on this background, what news do you naturally**

**want to read? What kinds of news do you naturally neglect or is your mind closed off to? (What does your situated self not like to read?)**

Narrating a story or two about your own experiences overcoming tribal barriers within the university might help students take their own quest towards self-discovery. Perhaps it might be necessary to demonstrate that the university world has its own biases: the goal of objectivity (even when it can only pull together multiple partial perspectives); the bias toward rigor in thinking (even when it neglects the short-term usefulness of folk wisdom or rejects the communal value of shared myths); a bias against tribal thinking or narrow worldviews (even when those narrow views might be necessary for group unity).

For Haraway, the point is not to create an epistemological space where everything is subjective, or all things are a matter of opinion. Neither is it for students to put all their faith in any one or several sources of "objective" authority. "Relativism and totalization are both 'god tricks' promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully" (Haraway, 1988, p. 584). Rather, it is to find a better version of the objective by recognizing and honestly analyzing the partiality of our perspectives and the perspectives of others in time, space, and the fragile space of our bodies. When we know ourselves and others, journeys toward the objective become more achievable.

In Haraway's own words: "The moral is simple: only partial perspective offers objective vision" (1988, p. 583).

## 5. More Tools for Safe Navigation: Going Further into the Art of News-Reading

At this point, hopefully, the students have had some practice examining themselves and their sources. Now that students have some basic navigational tools under their belt, it is possible to add more tools for understanding how to read the news.

In particular, I believe students should understand these concepts and learn these skills.

***The Retrospective Bias.*** The idea behind this bias is simple: humans understand things better in hindsight than they do in real-time. (Sports fans in your class will be familiar with the term "Monday morning quarterbacking.") History, the social sciences, and even reporting in the news, including the analysis of op-ed writers, employ a kind of magic: they take all the messy details of reality and tame them with a satisfying story. However, this story is only clear in retrospect; rarely in real-time. This is a theme that is frequently explored in the works of Nassim Nicholas Taleb, especially his seminal book *The Black Swan* (see Taleb, 2007, p. 8-14).

It is important for all news readers to keep this in mind: as humans, we are story-generating machines. We can take almost any complex phenomenon and tame it with a story. However, humans have trouble predicting events that involve other people. Thus, all readers of the news should be cautious of pundits offering certainty or analysis of events happening in real-time.

***The Bias towards Negative, Sensational, and Recent Events.*** Most of us have heard the adage: *If it bleeds, it leads*. This simple phrase captures the bias of news toward negative and sensational events. Because negative events tend to be the ones most featured in the news, it is important that students also realize the many positive (yet boring) trends that are occurring in the world. In addition, it may go without saying, but the news usually focuses on things that are recent, neglecting long-term trends, especially those that may be gradual or boring. Thus, books such as *Factfullness* (Rosling et al., 2018), which employs simple statistics of long-term trends, can help balance the negativity, sensational, and recency biases of the news.

***The Bias of Small Samples.*** Though it may not be practical to give all students a quick seminar on sampling or basic statistics, we can at the very least teach them one basic concept: *Be wary of small samples and single cases.* Much of the news they consume over their lifetime will consist of sensational stories, cases that are most likely outliers, or instances of something that may not be easy to categorize. In some cases, a news source might even cherry-pick the kind of news they offer to fit their brand. A simple principle can be taught to our students: Be careful of generalizing based on a single story or even a handful of stories.

As Richard Heuer writes, “People do not have much intuitive feel for how large a sample has to be before they can draw valid conclusions from it. The so-called law of small numbers means that, intuitively, we make the mistake of treating small samples as though they were large ones. This has been shown to be true even for mathematical psychologists with extensive training in statistics” (1999, p. 121). The powerful sway of the small sample bias means that teachers may even need to teach and reteach this point to graduate students.

***The Bias of Free Information.*** Yuval Noah Harari (2019) makes the point that if someone wants the best quality news, they often have to pay for it. Thanks to university libraries, students should have access to quality newspapers and weekly news periodicals. However, students should still be aware of the bias of free news. When a source is free, that means the reader is the product. As Harari writes, “Your attention is first captured by sensational headlines, and then sold to advertisers or politicians” (2019, p. 283). As students leave the university, they need to be aware that if they want high-quality information, they will probably need to pay for it.

***Useful Skill - Triangulating Sources and Information.*** Just as researchers are taught to use *triangulation* to overcome weaknesses and biases from any one source of information, students should be taught the basic skills of triangulating when consuming news. If a particular piece of information seems suspect, students should be encouraged to take the added step of checking other sources to make sure the information is true.

However, students must also be taught how to identify *circular referencing*. If a group of sources tends to quote each other, a reader needs to get outside this group to get high-quality confirmation. If the student is doing research, then they will have to get as close to the original source as possible to get confirmation.

***News as a Tool for Wider Learning.*** Students should also be taught that reading the news opens pathways for broader learning. In some classes, it may be appropriate for students to keep a journal and write their thoughts on the news. In most classes, even graduate classes, it is important to remind students to use a dictionary to look up new words,

an atlas or online map to find unknown locations, and resources such as the online Encyclopedia Britannica to look up additional information.

## 6. Are You Stretching? -- A Return to the Hero's Journey

Perhaps the most pernicious bias of all is the inflexibility of our own mindsets. Once our minds have settled on a particular view of the world, we tend to situate new information into that existing view. Over time, it takes an increasing amount of information to overturn that mindset. This insight, developed by Richard Heuer (1999, p. 7-16) in his research on intelligence analysts, might apply even more to students who have stepped into our classrooms with mindsets that are rooted in their local communities and identities.

Perhaps the most important question each reader of the news needs to ask themselves is this: Am I stretching? It is a habit of the mind for our most closely held beliefs to harden over time. Practicing true skepticism, testing our most deeply held assumptions, is tricky. Thus, when choosing which news to read, or even which books to read, we should periodically attempt to stretch our muscles by reading material that challenges our established beliefs.

## 7. The Trick of Clarity in Teaching

I find that the clarity and certainty that I often (try to) project in my classes is a trick, perhaps not too dissimilar from the "god trick" that Donna Haraway warns of. It bellies the deep uncertainty I have tried to display in this essay. It makes a mockery of the complexities and ambiguities that come with trying to know the world in a serious way.

And yet, I feel that this mask of confidence is necessary.

If it is a trick, it is a small and necessary one in a world where professors must compete for attention against less reserved and more skilled tricksters, conspiracy theorists, partisan pundits, and confidence-men (and women).

In the end, I try to make all my private deliberations on the subject as simple as a daily laundry list. And yet, I find that students yearn for directions that are even simpler (while still being useful and smart).

So here are two checklists: one for more capable college-level students and one for less. They are tools I hope to use often. I hope they are simple enough, while retaining enough wisdom to make students smarter.

**The Checklist for Students: High-Level Students**

1. All forms of news are partial perspectives. However, does that mean they are all equal?
    a. How do you judge whether a source of news is good or not?
    b. Think of one issue you have a strong opinion about. What evidence would persuade you to change your mind?
2. Ask yourself:
    a. Am I ready to read outside my comfort zone?
    b. Am I comfortable living between absolute relativism and absolute objectivity?
    c. Am I ready to live in a world of partial objectivity with common standards of knowledge that are negotiated?
3. Try to understand your position as a reader.
    a. What biases do you bring to the reading process?
    b. Do any regional, political, economic, social, or other biases impact how you read the news?
4. Try to understand your sources.
    a. What regional bias does this source have?
    b. What political biases does the source have?
    c. Who owns the paper or outlet? What things can and cannot be said in the paper? What are the motives of the writer?
5. Describe these biases.
    a. The retrospective bias
    b. The bias towards negativity
    c. The bias towards the sensational

   d. The recency bias
   e. The bias of small samples
   f. The bias of free information
6. Can you practice these skills?
   a. Triangulating information (be careful that news sources are not engaged in circular referencing)
   b. Using a dictionary, encyclopedia, atlas, online maps
   c. Using a journal to record ideas

**Remember**: Have fun and write about what you read. Treat your time reading the news as an intellectual vacation. Applaud yourself for having the courage to take a genuine intellectual adventure.

**The Checklist for Students: Lower-Level Students**

1. Why is it important to read a newspaper? (Try to summarize your answer in one paragraph)
2. Do you have any biases when it comes to the news? Write about them.
3. What biases might your news source have? (Regional bias? Political bias? Content bias? Others?) Write about them.
4. What kinds of news do you currently read? (Are these sources authoritative by your university's standards?)
5. What news sources does your teacher think are authoritative? Why? (Do an interview and some research if necessary.)
6. If you find a piece of information that seems questionable, where can you confirm this information? (Write three sources).
7. Are you using a dictionary, encyclopedia, atlas or online maps as you read?

**Remember**: Have fun and write about what you read. Treat your time reading the news as an intellectual journey. Applaud yourself for having the courage to take a genuine intellectual adventure.

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