



Around the World in a Class Session: How an Activity Can Change Students' Outlook and Understanding of Media Effects

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Abstract

This in-class activity introduces students to the concept of the social construction of reality and the framing effects media can have worldwide. The activity starts in small groups, each assigned a country. It continues with a class discussion and culminates with short lectures about each country assigned and/or a guest speaker from one of these countries. This activity helps students understand how much of an impact they can have on society as journalists and/or content creators. It also makes them want to learn more about the countries at hand.

The idea of internationalizing curricula has emerged as a prevalent topic in higher education discussions in the United States over the past few years (e.g., Coche, 2021; Falk *et al.*, 2023; Middleweek *et al.*, 2020). Faced with a rapidly accelerating globalization, campuses across the country incentivize their faculty and staff to provide a more global perspective to students to encourage diversity and inclusion, increase graduates' (inter)cultural competences, improve students' critical thinking skills, and promote global citizenship. Giving journalism and mass communication students opportunities to expand their understanding of our interconnected world is particularly important. Indeed, media industries have been evolving at a fast pace in the 21st century, partly because of (or thanks to) new technologies (e.g., Coche & Haught, 2021) but also because media professions have internationalized quickly (e.g., Middleweek *et al.*, 2020), which means media content can affect people more globally than ever before. Hence, journalism and mass communica-

tion students must be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to find their own path within the intricacies of this globalized media landscape.

The exercise presented below was originally developed to help undergraduate students understand framing theory and the concept of the social construction of reality, or the idea that people make meaning of the world through their unique perceptions of it, based on their own experiences and values (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Scholars agree media play a fundamental role in one's interpretation of the world, particularly if one has no previous experience with or beliefs about a specific topic (Gamson *et al.*, 1992). In a nutshell, the activity described below makes the media-prompted, "invisible" social construction of reality (p. 374) obvious. It is a quick but effective way to encourage students to think more globally all while providing them with a deeper understanding of the effects media content can have on individuals. This three-to-four-step in-class exercise can be done on

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Zoom or in person, and it can be adapted based on level and topic of courses.

Step 1: Group Discussions

To start the exercise, the class should be divided into pairs/groups (ideally five to eight groups depending on class size) so group discussions can happen. Once in groups, students are first asked to put away phones and computers. Only after they have put away their electronic devices should they receive the instructions: each group is assigned a country and has 10-15 minutes to list everything they know about said country. Because students don't have access to the internet, they rely solely on their own knowledge.

Furthermore, the instructor must ensure none of the group members have personal experiences with the assigned country (e.g., having traveled or lived there, a close friend or family member having spent significant time there, etc.). International students are put in groups assigned to a country that is not on the continent they originate from.

Step 2: Informal Presentations

After 10-15 minutes have passed, the entire class gathers so each group can share its list. Reactions as groups shared their findings made students realize many of the elements they listed were inaccurate or unlike some classmates' first-hand experience with the country discussed. They understood they relied mostly on stereotypes, which media, including social media, often relay (Dixon, 2019), along with some personal experiences with Americans whose family descends from the country at hand (e.g., Italian-Americans or Japanese-Americans).

For example, I once used Italy and Bulgaria (Europe), Japan and Vietnam (Asia), Nigeria and Ethiopia (Africa), and Chile and Uruguay (South America) in a course. When sharing, the students first noticed they "knew" far more about Italy or Japan than any of the other countries. Then, they detected the stereotypes in the lists. The Vietnam group's knowledge heavily came from images portrayed in Vietnam war movies and television shows; the Bulgaria group erroneously thought the country was ex-USSR; the Chile group knew the country's capital from a song learned in school; and the Uruguay group merely mentioned Uruguayans speak Spanish and like "tea" (they were referring to *mate*). As for Nigeria and Ethiopia, both groups could talk only about "Africa" as a whole, which prompted one student to reflect on the exercise

in the end-of-semester teaching evaluations:

I very much enjoyed our conversation about how the media we consume shapes the way that we see the world (specifically, places we have never been and people we have never met before). I like to think of myself as someone with a pretty good grasp on the world, but the activity that had us try to explain what we thought of about certain countries we had never visited made me think otherwise. I was given Ethiopia, and all I thought of were the safaris of Africa that I have seen in Disney's Animal Kingdom as well as the Lion King. I also thought of food insecurity because of all the commercials we are shown in the United States asking for donations. Lastly, I thought of many isolated tribes without access to many first world technologies because of what I have seen on news segments about Africa. Even the fact that I can't separate specifically Ethiopia from the rest of Africa says a lot.

Steps 3 and 4: Class Discussions

In the third step, the class unpacks these lists presented by the groups. The students who traveled to or lived in some of these countries tell us about how their experiences differed from what was previously listed. Once all first-hand experiences have been shared, the instructor gives a mini lecture about each country. Finally, if time and resources allow, the fourth step is to have a communication professional from one of the countries Zoom into the classroom to discuss their culture(s) and their profession. For instance, I have invited a Ghanaian journalist or a Mexican broadcaster to react on lists made about their respective country.

Learning outcomes

This activity has been an eye-opening experience for students, regardless of their level. Created for an undergraduate sports-focused course to discuss mass media's construction of sporting heroes (Bell & Coche, 2020), this exercise can be used as a simple ice-breaker activity, without the benefit of a guest speaker, in the beginning of the semester. I have also used it in a graduate-level course focused on communication and technology, which brought a fascinating discussion about digital colonialism (Kwet, 2019) and the US cultural imperialism online. At the end of that semester, a master's student mentioned this activity and the ensuing discussion in their teaching evaluation:

It's a grim outlook, but it rings of truth and permanently changed how I think about tech spread across the world. This new outlook is particularly important when covering issues of technology in journalism. It would be easy to fall into the taught tech hegemony as a reporter from the United States, but this new outlook reminds me that we're obligated to look deeper into topics and fully understand their implications for all groups of people. It's also up to us to help bring attention to possible alternatives like *FreedomBox*.

To conclude, that media can shape one's view of the world is rarely a new concept to mass communication students, but few face how they have been influenced by their own media consumption to the extent this exercise forces them to. This activity awakes students' interest to know more about other cultures (several have said they go into "YouTube holes" after class to know more about one or some of the countries discussed). It helps them:

- Explain what the social construction of reality is;
- Formulate what framing theory is;
- Begin identifying their (future) role in shaping worldviews.

Furthermore, the inclusive and engaging atmosphere the activity creates has empowered international students to speak up. One semester, students from Lebanon, Colombia and Venezuela volunteered to take a few minutes to discuss their own nation and debunk myths. This engaging activity gives students the opportunity to understand they know less than they thought about the world and that, as future media professionals, they will have a greater impact than they might have imagined so far. Finally, as a side note, that students must put away their electronic devices for 10-15 minutes allows many to recognize their phone addiction, which has prompted other lively discussions about media psychology, particularly in the graduate-level course.

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