



Fostering Critical News Literacy Through Research Blogs in an Undergraduate Research Course

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Abstract

This teaching idea conceptualizes the use of a research blog for a final project in a capstone seminar in advanced news literacy. Students conduct a research project embodying each element of news literacy: 1) understanding the role of news in society; 2) demonstrating the ability to find and recognize news; 3) analyzing news media texts critically; and 4) creating original content. The blog retains the typical sections of a research paper while allowing students to exploit the benefits of media-rich online presentation, such as embedding video clips and interactive elements. This idea could be useful for any course that engages mass communication theory.

Undergraduates in journalism/mass communication programs frequently face a conundrum. In the field of journalism, because education is considered vocational training or a pipeline of well-trained employees for industry, the scholarly literature and theorizing by mass communication researchers is often ignored and considered out of touch or inaccessible (Valencia-Forrester, 2020; Brown & Collins, 2010; Todd, 2009; Reese, 1999; Usher, 2017). This mirrors the indifference that many in industry express toward academic research (Usher, 2017). However, scholarly research can be a major source of innovation in a transforming field that desperately needs innovation and thoughtful practice to better serve a public whose trust in media remains at all-time lows (Jones, 2018; Swift, 2016; Usher, 2017; Aguiar & Fu, 2023).

One of the most common places students major-

ing in journalism and mass communication engage with the scholarly literature is in capstone or senior seminar classes (Bowe, Blom, & Davenport, 2018; Rosenberry & Vicker, 2006). The goal of these classes is to encourage reflective practice, metacognition, and self-efficacy.

Capstone research projects also provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate advanced news literacy skills. The development of news literacy is desirable because it encourages news consumption, civic engagement, and democratic participation (Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2013). By equipping students with the skills to understand and interpret the news, educators are helping both build an appetite for the consumption of quality journalism (Maksl, Craft, Ashley, & Miller, 2017) and the ability to create such journalism. A high level of news literacy is especially

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important for people who hope to work in mass communication, be it in news, visuals, public relations, or attending graduate school.

As the media landscape has grown more complex with the proliferation of user-generated content and the use of artificial intelligence that can create genuine-looking fakes – and as young people disengage from news altogether – the concept of news literacy has taken on greater importance (de los Santos & Smith, 2024). However, research suggests people from many backgrounds – even digital natives and highly educated individuals – have a difficult time discerning credible news sites from propaganda or misinformation (Craft *et al.*, 2016; Wineburg & McGrew, 2017; Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega, 2016). Importantly, ability and access alone do not appear to be sufficient conditions for the development of news literacy – it also requires a useful map (Craft *et al.*, 2016).

Given the difficulty in understanding and applying news literacy, having clear definitions is crucial. Vraga *et al.* (2020) defined news as “any accurate information that facilitates decision-making on both personal and social issues, thus enabling people to more effectively engage with society” (p. 3). They further define news literacy as “knowledge of the personal and social processes by which news is produced, distributed, and consumed, and skills that allow users some control over these processes” (p. 5).

Previous researchers have argued that news literacy is closely related to – but distinct from – concepts like critical thinking, media literacy, information literacy, digital literacy, and civic literacy. Key components of news literacy include understanding the structure of news industries; and how that structure influences content creation (Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2013; Craft, Ashley, & Maksl, 2016; Fleming 2014; Malik, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). It also includes understanding the societal role of news, and in particular the ways messages contain representations and value judgments that can be interpreted a variety of ways to influence audience attitudes, behaviors, and reality perceptions (Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2013; Malik, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). Other key elements of news literacy include enhanced awareness of current affairs; increased motivation to seek out news; enhanced critical thinking skills to evaluate news; and – most importantly for student journalists – the skills to create news (Fleming 2014; Malik, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). Vraga *et al.* (2020) concisely streamlined these ideas, proposing

five interconnected domains of news literacy: context, creation, content, circulation, and consumption. These domains – collectively referred to as the “5Cs” – encompass the elements of news literacy by addressing the production environment, journalistic processes, news characteristics, dissemination methods, and audience engagement factors (Tully & Johnson, 2024). There are distinct theories that deal with each of these elements, which form the nexus between news literacy and mass communication theory.

Description of Activity

Students in a senior level capstone course are asked to conduct a quarter-long research project that embodies each of the noted elements in the development of news literacy: 1) understand the role of news in society; 2) demonstrate the ability to find and recognize news; 3) analyze news media texts critically; and 4) create “news” themselves in the sense that they provide a final public-facing piece of content that put them in conversation with others. Starting in the 2018-19 academic year, the authors moved from a formal research paper to a blog format. Although the blog retains the typical sections (research question, literature review, etc.), it provides students with the opportunity to exploit the benefits that a blog affords – in particular, embedding audio and video clips and creating interactive elements – at the same time it gives students a portfolio piece. The project is scaffolded throughout the 10-week quarter. The assignment includes the following elements:

- 1) Pitch of three topics, narrowed to one, followed by in-class workshopping of RQs;
- 2) Development of appropriate methodology, typically content, framing, rhetorical, textual, or semi-logical analysis.
- 3) Development and presentation of literature review after overview of mass communication theories.
- 4) Analysis of selected subject via identified method;
- 5) Compilation of findings;
- 6) In-class discussions of how to build a blog using best practices of content presentation, navigation, audience accessibility.
- 7) Creation of blog. (Word Press is offered and supported by our university, but students often prefer to use Wix or Squarespace because they are more robust for visuals and design);
- 8) Critique of final project based on provided rubric: site navigation, engagement with audience, in-

corporation of visuals and audio.

The student research blogs are holistically assessed. The grading rubric, which was shared with students at the onset of the assignment, includes the following holistic measures:

- Does the project demonstrate an understanding of news' role in society?
- Does the project demonstrate the ability to find appropriate media texts for analysis?
- Does the student demonstrate critical thinking skills in their evaluation of texts?
- Did this involve successfully applying the appropriate theoretical perspective(s)?
- Did the study fully operationalize the appropriate mass communication methods (typically content analysis, textual analysis, critical discourse analysis, etc.)
- Does the project's final form reflect the ability to create a compelling media product?

The criteria include focus, specificity, and quality of investigation, which were adapted from previous research (Bowe, Kjesrud, & Hemsley, 2020). Each of these dimensions was ranked using a four-point scale (1=Lack of awareness of concept; 2=Beginning to apply concept; 3=Actively applying concept; 4=Mastery of concept). Overall, the goal of this article is to examine the extent to which students operationalize the rich multimedia opportunities of blog format to enhance their work and whether these elements add substantially to student outcomes compared to the traditional research papers.

Discussion

After this new format was implemented, we were heartened by what we have found. Generally, the student blogs are well done, thoughtful, and visually appealing. They show a high level of attainment in the assessment measures. Our students have taken to this format – they understand that it's actually more work, as they have to do the same things but also to post them. However, they expressly note the blog format's value. As one student said, "In applying for a job or internship, I'm not going to hand someone a 15-page stapled paper, but I will give them my URL."

The blog format allows students to approach a daunting project in a way that allows for personal voice and a more casual approach, one in keeping with the way that contemporary students communicate. In that way, it dovetails with their experiences yet affords them a venue to showcase their skills. Thus, this for-

mat allows for the same rigor as a more traditional research paper yet provides students who swim in a visual culture a way to showcase their work in an accessible way.

This activity was introduced in the 2018-19 academic year, and it continues to be used. In the years since it was introduced, it has become clear that its effectiveness is not necessarily tied to the blog format *per se*. Rather, it has served as a call for both faculty and students to think creatively about alternative forms of scholarship beyond a research paper. Recent years have seen a variety of innovative approaches, including game-based interventions, that have improved news literacy skills among students, increasing their desire to build better news consumption habits (de los Santos & Smith, 2024). This assignment is consistent with Casey and Brayton's (2024) call to set aside perfunctory checklist approaches in favor of interactive and collaborative activities that facilitate "more nuanced approaches that complicate notions of power, authority, and knowledge, as well as facilitate student dialogue, engagement, and empowerment" (p. 154).

While some faculty who teach the course continue to use the blog format, others have moved toward research posters. There are also possibilities for students to create videos or podcasts rather than a blog. It is important to note that, while the format of the final assignment varies, there is wide faculty buy-in for the underlying concept of reframing this mass communication theory course as a course in advanced news literacy.

The academic research paper is a particular genre of writing that has strong conventions. Particularly in a professionally oriented journalism undergraduate program, these conventions are not among the most pressing skills to acquire (unlike graduate students, for whom learning those conventions is key). This approach allows students to tailor those conventions to their interests and skills. Most models of media literacy culminate in the ability to create content of one's own.

Leveraging the increased accessibility of multimedia production tools to encourage students to engage with academic works in a variety of formats allows them to demonstrate media literacy both in theory and practice simultaneously. Teaching approaches that include concrete applications of theoretical concepts are especially important in news literacy education, because there is a lack of understanding of how

teaching these concepts translates into changed behavior in everyday life (de los Santos & Smith, 2024).

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