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## Teaching News Literacy During a Pandemic: Adapting to the Virtual Learning Environment

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# Teaching News Literacy in a Pandemic: Adapting to the Virtual Learning Environment

R. Alan Berry, Jennifer L. Bonnet, & Judith E. Rosenbaum, University of Maine

## Overview

In the fall of 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic shuttered universities and sent much of higher education online, a team of media and information literacy experts at the University of Maine sought meaningful ways to collaboratively teach news literacy from a distance.<sup>1</sup> The result of their efforts was a weeklong virtual program, *Friend, Enemy, or Frenemy? A News Literacy Challenge*, open to anyone with an internet connection and an email address. This approach to remote learning scaffolded multiple literacies (critical media, news, and information) into five days, as participants examined different aspects of news production and consumption. The overall objective of the challenge was to render participants more aware of how the news is constructed and, subsequently, more critical of the news they consume and share.

We aimed for the Challenge to be engaging, fun, and accessible, and it proved popular, with over 700 registrants, including students (middle, high school, college, and graduate), educators, retirees, friend groups, and members of the general public. The program was a dual learning experience, for us and the participants. Evaluations revealed a clear enthusiasm for the program, with most participants saying that the length and format of the Challenge were good, and that they learned something new each day. An open-ended question about participants' experiences with the Challenge revealed an appreciation for the informative content *and* the activities (e.g., "I liked the resources, but I thought the activities were most helpful. It made me think through the concepts more carefully," and "I liked the discussion and being able to see others' responses. I also liked the quizzes. The resources were good and provided information from differing opinions to ensure that people of all views could relate."). We even received unsolicited emails from several educators who were taking the Challenge and planning to use the materials in their courses.

The following lesson plan details how the learning materials were delivered during the five days of the asynchronous experience. Each day, participants received new material around different news media concepts and competencies, along with a formative assessment activity. Participants were expected to review the content and complete the activity at their own pace, either that day or later in the week.

As other educators consider adapting this material for their undergraduate classrooms, we recommend an asynchronous experience, with material distributed either daily or weekly, with one module making up the work for each day or week. Each section is "complete," meaning it is ready to go for any self-directed learning space. Each module includes the content for that day:

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<sup>1</sup> This team has been teaching face-to-face news literacy workshops for the campus community since 2018, and was eager to continue this work, in spite of the pandemic.

links to media examples and case studies, suggestions for discussions for a synchronous class, advice on adapting each module for different virtual learning environments, and a detailed description of an activity with directions on how to carry this out asynchronously and synchronously.

Since we opened up the virtual challenge to learners outside the campus, we intentionally designed the program to be accessible to a general audience. However, we also approached the material through a framework of communication and media studies, with a particular emphasis on media and information literacy skills. Given that approach, we believe the lesson plan would be best adapted for introductory communication or media studies courses at the college level, or as an engaging way to meet media and information literacy requirements within a course. The lesson plan could also be utilized in a high school setting, in language arts or social science classes geared toward exploring the media.

### **Rationale**

This five-day, virtual experience evolved from previous iterations of a 90-minute, on-campus workshop. The unique situation presented by the pandemic, with most teaching and learning having migrated online, forced a reconceptualization of the program design and ways to engage learners. Instead of seeing this as a limitation, we found that moving the workshop online afforded us an opportunity to make improvements. Particularly, we were able to spread engagement over several days, dividing the program into smaller, self-directed units. Remote engagement also allowed us to reach participants outside the campus community, expanding the program's impact and building a more diverse community of voices.

We designed the program using a critical media and information literacy (CMIL) framework, drawing on work by Brayton and Casey (2019), who argue that an equitable convergence of critical media literacy and critical information literacy is necessary in a digital media environment that blurs distinctions between media and information. In this sense, the news is the perfect lens for this approach as it intersects both information and media (Malik, Cortesi, and Gasser 2013). Our focus on the news has additional significance through the news' connection to civic engagement. Many scholars argue that the news and the ability of citizens to access and make sense of the news are essential to a healthy democracy (Vraga et al. 2015; Mihailidis and Viotty 2017; Buschman 2019). In the current media environment, however, the news has become a source of skepticism and ground zero for political and cultural battles. Furthermore, the digital landscape is especially susceptible to the spread of misinformation and disinformation that is often disguised as news (Barton 2019). In recent years, many news literacy programs have emerged as a means of 'inoculating' citizens from the threat of so-called fake news (Brayton and Casey 2019). This kind of protectionist approach is not enough, however. If the goal of news literacy is to "achieve empowered citizens" (Malik, Cortesi, and Gasser 2013, 8), then a CMIL approach is necessary as it merges the lenses (media) and the tools (information) through which we experience and act upon the world (Livingstone, Van Couvering, and Thumin 2008) and, through its critical framework, empowers citizens "to become their own gatekeepers" of news media (Barton 2019, 1033).

Thus, the primary learning outcomes of the weeklong challenge were to engage participants in lessons, activities, and conversations that improved their news literacy, while also developing their critical understanding of the relationship between news media, information, audiences, and power structures. Specifically, participants would:

- Understand the value of news and being well-informed;
- Be able to effectively evaluate and analyze news and information;
- Draw on strategies for identifying misinformation and disinformation;
- Recognize the critical implications of news stories as constructions, and the individual, organizational, and cultural influences on news production;
- Be able to identify the roles played by personal preferences in selecting and assessing news stories.

The challenge culminated with participants demonstrating the ability to create news and to make choices that reflect a deeper, more critical understanding of the media environment.

### **General Timeline**

We designed the workshop to last five days—one school week. While each day builds on the knowledge and activities from the previous day(s), it is possible to teach this five-part workshop over a longer period of time (addressing, for example, one part per week) or in a shorter period of time (over the course of two or three class periods as detailed above). We made the decision to teach the five-part workshop during Global Media Literacy Week (October 26-30, 2020). This event, as well as the subsequent U.S. election, provided an opportune moment to teach people how to approach the news more critically and to connect the news to civic engagement.

Each day, participants encountered a new “challenge”. After we introduced them to an aspect of news production and consumption, as well as additional resources about the topic that they could review on their own, participants applied their newly acquired knowledge to an activity. The separate challenges were built on different media theories, news concepts, and news literacy competencies. The program moved from the broad to the specific, and from comprehension to critical analysis to creation.

Should an educator wish to facilitate a synchronous lecture or discussion, either in person or remote, they should plan to dedicate one class period to each unit. Instructors should allot approximately 45-50 minutes for each module in order to present that day’s lesson, facilitate each activity, and discuss students’ work. If instructors work with 75-minute classes, they should dedicate two class periods for the first four modules, and use a third class period to go through what is currently the fifth day, giving students ample time to design one or more headlines.

An overview of the challenge can be found below:

***Day 1: Does News Matter?***

This module centers on ideas of when and if news matters, addressing the news' potential to affect people's daily lives, inform users of topical issues, and familiarize people with dominant norms and values. The primary objectives of this module are to develop a greater awareness of the purposes and functions of news media and to be able to identify and explain the salient attributes that make a story newsworthy.

***Day 2: Fact or Fiction***

This module explores strategies for evaluating news and information and then asks participants to determine the veracity of several colorful, catchy news stories. The primary objectives of this module are to understand one's own responsibility in accessing and evaluating news and information and to develop and apply strategies for determining the credibility and trustworthiness of media content.

***Day 3: Deconstructing the News***

This module introduces participants to the constructed nature of news media, including the choices, influences, and constraints that affect which stories get told and how those stories are told. The primary objectives of this module are to understand that news media are constructions shaped by many different interests and influences and to be able to identify and critically examine the interests and influences embedded within a news story.

***Day 4: Deconstructing Bias***

This module focuses on two types of bias: the kind that is embedded in the news making process itself (introduced in Day 3), and confirmation bias, which draws on news consumers' personal attitudes and beliefs. The primary objectives of this module are to understand the role of bias in the production and consumption of news media and to develop and apply strategies for recognizing and addressing bias.

***Day 5: Constructing the News***

This module is the grand finale and places participants in the role of news producer. Given a set of facts, participants are challenged to design a headline for a specific news outlet, select an accompanying photo, and describe the choices that went into their decision making. The primary objective of this module is to creatively and analytically apply critical news media and information literacy skills.

[We recognize that the language is drawn from the original challenge for much of this, however, because it is now being adapted to the classroom this paragraph does not seem to match the spirit of a lesson plan, and, especially when it comes to days three and five, are very

interested in this lesson as cumulative. We thus feel this lesson works better without this paragraph.]

The detailed lesson plan below includes a description of how the content and activities were delivered in our virtual challenge, an online, asynchronous learning event. We have, however, included recommendations on how to adapt each day for a hybrid or in-person synchronous setting.

### **Detailed Lesson Plan**

**Day One: Does News Matter?** <https://libguides.library.umaine.edu/newslit/day1>

#### *Overall goal*

The first day of the Challenge aims to render participants aware of the role that the news plays in people's lives.

#### *Learning outcomes*

- Develop an awareness that different news stories serve different purposes;
- Understand the news provides people with information about their daily life, current events, and dominant social norms;
- Identify the purpose(s) of a news story;
- Identify why a news story is newsworthy.

#### *Content*

This day includes a [video](#) recorded by one of the workshop leaders, which can be provided to students as is (or re-recorded) within a self-directed asynchronous or hybrid learning space. The content can also be adapted into a lecture for a synchronous or face-to-face setting. The video touches on the following points:

- News matters because it keeps people updated about things that are important to their daily lives (e.g., weather, new laws, and where to go vote).
- News also informs people about what one might call topical events. This is what most people think about when they think about “the news.” These are breaking news events about crimes, fires, floods, hurricanes, or election results.
- The news plays a role in teaching about what is and is not acceptable behavior. In other words, the news socializes its users into understanding the dominant norms and values in society.
  - News organizations have to make choices about what stories to include. And those choices are based on the premise of getting the highest ratings, clicks, or attention as possible.
  - This means that the news will present stories that are out of the norm or most likely to surprise or shock users, in an attempt to draw in as many people as possible.

- Because the news tends to emphasize stories that are out of the norm, the news often teaches about what is acceptable and what is not. We used several examples to explain this:
  - Murder is newsworthy because it is considered outside of the norm and we condemn killing people;
  - Absentee ballots are a big deal because discussions about voting and people's ability to vote, in spite of an ongoing pandemic, get at the heart of how we perceive American democracy to work. These stories reflect the American cultural value that every citizen should have the ability to vote and every vote should get counted.
  - On a smaller scale, why was it such a big deal when the Chicago Cubs finally won a World Series Championship (Fine, 2016)? Because in the US, we love it when an underdog comes out on top, we revel in stories where the "little guy" wins, and we believe that no matter the odds, hard work will pay off.
- In conclusion, news matters not just because people learn important information about daily life, but also because it socializes people into thinking about the world in a certain way. What this also means though, is that the news, by consistently portraying certain groups in certain ways (e.g., women as moms, people from Mexico or Honduras as immigrants, African Americans as athletes), reinforces existing stereotypes and can influence public perceptions of issues.

In a face-to-face setting, instructors could ascertain that students took away these main points through a Q&A or in-class discussion centering on these points.

### *Activity*

The activity associated with this day utilizes Padlet and asks participants to find and share a news story that represents one or more of the functions introduced above. Participants are asked to explain what purpose(s) they think this story held and explain why they think the story is newsworthy.

In a face-to-face setting, participants can be asked to find a news story, and write a brief (100-word) description that details the function of the story and why the story is newsworthy. Each participant can present their work to the class, and instructors can ask other participants for feedback on each analysis, further deepening students' understanding of the functions of the news.

By having participants apply their understanding of news functions to their own news media consumption, the goal is to render participants more critically aware of why news is considered news, instead of taking the label "news" at face value.

***Day Two: Fact or Fiction?*** <https://libguides.library.umaine.edu/newslit/day2>

*Overall goal*



Day 2 introduces the idea of attention-grabbing headlines as a key strategy in news making. We present headlines that educate and engage an audience with humor, as well those that co-opt the structure of the news to mislead and/or misinform.

### *Learning outcomes*

- Recognize one's own role in determining the reliability of a source;
- Identify strategies for evaluating online content;
- Recognize the superficial nature of headlines alone when determining the validity or trustworthiness of a story (or source).

### *Content*

On Day 2, we present a typical scenario for the current era: The first thing we often see in our social media feeds or in our Google searches is an attention-grabbing headline. But, how reliable is the story behind the headline?

We focus on the news consumers' role in critically evaluating information, using the SIFT method (Caulfield 2019). This acronym points to the following key assessment strategies:

- **Stop**, and consider what you know (or don't) about the website or source of information you've encountered.
- **Investigate** the source. This includes the credentials, expertise, or insight the person or organization has who created this information, as well as their agenda.
- **Find** trusted coverage of the story's content by corroborating or cross-referencing sources wherever possible.
- **Trace** claims, quotes, images, and/or videos back to their original context. This approach often reveals that there is more to a situation than we first thought and can help us gather (and share) a more complete and accurate picture of the issue we're exploring.

To conclude the day, we point participants to our Guide to Fake News and Misinformation (Fogler Library n.d.) that includes tools and techniques for assessing false or misleading information.

In a face-to-face setting, we advise instructors to test students' understanding of the SIFT model by applying it to a range of headlines, from satirical to misleading to surprising to clickbaity, and engaging the class in a discussion about how to utilize SIFT in these instances. Snopes.com and Politifact.com are useful resources for quickly finding problematic headlines and supposed news stories.

### *Activity*

Today's activity is a four-question online quiz, with each question presenting a catchy news headline and asking the participant to determine if the story behind the headline was real or fake. Participants are encouraged to do some online research and use the SIFT method to make their determination. After each quiz submission, participants receive feedback on how to find

and evaluate each headline, and resources and strategies for identifying fake news and misinformation. *Note:* Because a large number of educators took the challenge, we included relevant research, lesson plans, and teaching tools from the Stanford History Education Group (n.d.), a group of academics at the forefront of scholarship on source evaluation and digital literacy.

In a face-to-face setting, the instructor can opt to present each headline to the entire class and ask students to review and respond to each headline in small groups. Alternatively, the instructor can use a free polling software, such as Mentimeter.com or Polleverywhere.com, to have students indicate whether the story behind the headline is fake or real (or somewhere in between). Reflection is key to this approach to learning, so we encourage instructors to engage the class in a large-group discussion regarding the correct answers, as well as the strategies that they can employ to better evaluate the credibility of headlines

The purposes of this activity are to have participants learn how to apply SIFT as a strategy for evaluating news content and sources and to become more capable at using this critical approach when encountering (and sharing) the news.

***Day Three: Deconstructing the News*** <https://libguides.library.umaine.edu/newslit/day3>

#### *Overall goal*

Day 3 introduces the idea that the news is made up of stories. News stories, like all media, are constructions representing the many different choices, influences, and interests that affect which stories get told and how those stories are told. We then challenge participants to find and reflect on a news story that exemplifies the ways in which the news is constructed by people, organizations, and culture.

#### *Learning outcomes*

- Understand the constructed nature of news stories;
- Identify the different influences and interests that shape news media;
- Practice deconstructing news stories and critically examining the choices, influences, and interests that shape a news story.

#### *Content*

We preface Day 3 by questioning the commonly held belief that the news reflects reality and that journalists report the news objectively. The news is made up of stories, produced for particular purposes and for specific audiences, and often for profit. News stories are constructions of reality, determined and influenced by individual people, organizations, and the cultures in which they are produced.

We then break down those three major influences on the construction of news stories, providing context and linked examples that demonstrate the various concepts (please find a list below). These examples not only evince the ways in which news is shaped around specific

agendas, but also the ways in which journalists and news organizations rely on convenience as well as routine, and fall back on traditional hierarchies of power and the representations they have always used to tell those stories. As a result, they often leave out the voices of marginalized populations, fail to hold to account people in positions of influence (like politicians, and even news organizations themselves), ignore the consequences of predominantly white newsrooms on stories about race and racism, and engage in ongoing attempts at drawing in audiences through an emphasis on surface over substance.

The list below covers the three major influences that shape what news stories look like: people, organizations, and culture. Each influence is accompanied by several links (the web addresses can be found in the list of references at the end of this article), which provide examples of how this particular influence shapes the news and how news consumers might learn to recognize this influence. Since these materials are quite detailed, instructors could ask participants to read or listen to one or more of the links for each influence before engaging with this day's materials.

For a synchronous online or face-to-face lecture, instructors may choose to use all or some of these materials to frame the overall discussion, or to facilitate a discussion of each influence. If time permits during the class meeting, instructors could break students into small groups to read through or listen to one or more of these materials and discuss how the example provides insight into the influence of people, organizations and/or culture on news stories.

- People construct the news by selecting which stories get covered (WNYC studios, December 7, 2018); deciding the focus of the story (Hare 2020); and making choices about how the story is told (WNYC studios, November 30, 2018).
  - People who make the news (including producers, reporters, editors, camera people, anchors, and pundits) make choices based on their training, interests, routines, social environments, and their personal bias.
  - Choices are made by everyone in the production of a news story from the reporter deciding who to interview and which questions to ask to the photographer deciding what to include and exclude from their frame.
- Organizations construct the news by setting news policies (WNYC studios, September 4, 2020); hiring the people who make the news (Grieco 2018) and deciding how to attract advertisers and audiences (Pew Research Center 2019).
  - There are many different outlets to get the news from and every news organization has its own policies, agendas, and audiences (Pew Research Center 2020).
  - Some news organizations operate as for-profit businesses, relying on advertisers and subscriptions, while others are not-for-profit or government-funded organizations.
  - The ownership of national and local news organizations in the U.S. has become highly concentrated among a small number of corporations and individuals, resulting in less variety of perspectives and more competition for audiences and advertisers.

- Traditionally, news organizations maintain a separation between their corporate interests and editorial interests, but sometimes those interests conflict.
- News organizations also rely on access to sources of information (WNYC studios, July 13, 2018), including the government, which may also influence the news.
- Culture constructs the news through:
  - How stories are told, such as relying on traditional narratives, such as Us vs. Them (Wilson-Hunt 2018) or Humans vs. Nature, and emotional appeals. Those stories are also shaped by the different media forms (print, audio, video, digital) for which the news is produced.
  - Our cultural traditions, norms, and values, such as our always changing attitudes towards race (Pinsky 2019), gender, and class, our dominant political values (WNYC studios, July 27, 2018), and our need for sensationalism (Greene 2016).

We conclude with links to *On the Media's Breaking News Consumer's Handbook* (WNYC studios n.d.) and the Society for Professional Journalists' code of ethics for further exploration (Society of Professional Journalists 2014).

In a synchronous classroom, we recommend the instructor engage the class in a discussion of one or two recent news stories (or two versions of the same story from different sources) and isolate how the story is shaped through the choices made by the reporters (e.g., camera angles, b-roll, whom to interview, whom not to interview), the organizational culture (e.g., is the news outlet known to have a particular political leaning? Who are the main sponsors/advertisers for the news outlet?), and the overall culture (e.g., what story is being told here? Who is presented as "the good guy" and who is presented as "the bad guy"? How might other cultures present this same story?). This approach can also be used in an asynchronous setting as an additional activity or in preparation for the main activity.

For both modalities, the Center for Media Literacy's (n.d.) five core concepts for understanding media messages and five key questions for deconstructing media messages are valuable tools to share with learners ([a PDF is available online](#)). We recommend instructors share these questions with the participants prior to engaging with the materials for this day.

Five Core Concepts (Center for Media Literacy, n.d.):

1. All media messages are constructed.
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

Five Key Questions (Center for Media Literacy, n.d.):

1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently?

4. What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

### *Activity*

Day 3's activity asks participants to find and share a news story that reflects the ways in which people, organizations, and/or culture construct the news. Participants share their story in a Padlet discussion board, along with short commentary about why they chose their story and how it reflects the influences and constraints explored in the day's content.

In a synchronous online or face-to-face setting, participants can be placed into small groups where they are asked to find a news story and prepare a brief presentation to discuss the various factors that shape the form and content of that particular story.

The learning objective for this outcome is for participants to apply their recently acquired knowledge about news construction to the news they consume. This will ultimately lead participants to adopt a more critical attitude toward all of the news media they engage with, including their preferred news sources.

**Day Four: Deconstructing Bias** <https://libguides.library.umaine.edu/newslit/day4>

### *Overall goal*

Day 4 aims to bridge participants' awareness of the agendas inherent in news stories (as presented in Day 3), with the personal biases that they as news consumers bring to their encounters with the news.

### *Learning outcomes*

- Identify different perspectives that news consumers *and* creators bring to, and shape their relationship with, the news;
- Recognize one's own confirmation bias when encountering and reacting to a story (or headline);
- Develop strategies for acknowledging and addressing bias.

### *Content*

Referring to Day 3, we review the idea that news outlets create content for a particular audience, and that the messages in that content reflect the values of the people and organizations that produce the news. We also focus on the following:

- Messages embedded in news content can be interpreted differently by different viewers/listeners/readers, in large part because news consumers come to the news with their own subjective experiences and assumptions.
- We have a lot of information coming at us all of the time. Our brains have a tendency to process that information as quickly as possible, which is why we sometimes use

shortcuts, like cognitive biases, to make sense of it all. The combination of news messaging by news outlets, our own subjectivity and points of view, and the cognitive biases we hold contribute to how we experience and respond to the news.

We then introduce confirmation bias, one type of cognitive bias that refers to the tendency to more readily accept, and even value, information that matches what we already believe (or dismiss information that is contradictory). Emphasizing that everyone has this tendency, regardless of our political beliefs or education level, we note that in order to address cognitive bias, we must first recognize what it looks like. Before diving into the activity, we point learners to additional insights into confirmation bias from the News Literacy Project (n.d.).

In a synchronous setting, we recommend instructors have students identify their own beliefs about specific current events to identify their positions or perspectives when consuming the news. This can be achieved by presenting students with three different headlines for the same story. Each headline should present a different political leaning or bias (a useful starting point for finding headlines is AllSides.com). Students then choose which headline they agree with the most and are placed into groups with students who favored the other headlines. In their groups the students are asked to discuss their beliefs regarding the story and how their bias plays into their news preference.

### *Activity*

Participants are asked to do the following:

1. Look at these two headlines from 2019 (and feel free to click through to the stories themselves).
  - Cory Booker unveils "bold" plan to curb gun violence, from *CBS News* (Turman 2019)
  - Cory Booker: Americans should be 'thrown in jail' if they won't give up their guns, from *Washington Examiner* (Gage 2019)
2. Answer the following questions in a Padlet discussion board:
  - Why are these two headlines so different if they're on the same topic?
  - How does your own confirmation bias affect your reading of these headlines?

Participants are given further questions to consider:

- When can a point of view in the news be helpful?
- When can a point of view in the news be harmful?

In a face-to-face setting, the first two questions can be answered anonymously using a polling software, such as Mentimeter.com or Polleverywhere.com. Students can then engage in the two additional questions using a think, pair, share model.

The purpose of this activity is to teach participants how to recognize bias inherent in news stories as well as their own bias in interpreting news content.

We provide additional viewing to further illustrate the challenging nature of confirmation bias, and possible tools for addressing potential blind spots.

- Watch *Why Do Our Brains Love Fake News?* (Above the Noise 2017) for more insight into confirmation bias.
- Watch *How News Feed Algorithms Supercharge Confirmation Bias* (Big Think 2018).

**Day Five: Constructing the News** <https://libguides.library.umaine.edu/newslit/day5>

### *Overall goal*

The final day of the challenge aims to synthesize the previous four days through a creative activity in which participants construct and share a headline for a specific news outlet. The day's challenge is wholly dedicated to the activity, which places participants in the role of news producer. The activity addresses racial profiling narratives within the context of a story that may be framed in a variety of ways depending on the particular news outlet and audience.

### *Learning outcomes*

- Construct a news headline appropriate for a particular news outlet;
- Synthesize and apply the various learning outcomes from the previous days, including:
  - Demonstrate an understanding of the functions and purposes of the news and what makes a story newsworthy;
  - Show an awareness of how the news is constructed for a particular audience with a particular worldview;
  - Demonstrate an understanding of the various interpretations of world events;
  - Recognize one's own bias and how this influences their decisions as a news consumer and producer;
  - Be able to weigh the various ethical decisions that reporters face when working on stories about race.

### *Activity*

The challenge for Day 5 tasks participants with constructing a headline for a specific news outlet based on a supplied set of facts. Participants share their headlines in a Padlet discussion board along with a breakdown of the choices they made and why.

Participants may not be familiar with the news outlets you assign them or may not have the tools to determine a news organization's particular characteristics, such as ownership, audience, economics, political bias, the gender and race of editorial and newsroom staff, or the outlet's particular headline style or use of images. Whether your students are familiar with a specific news organization or not, students should spend some time researching their assigned outlet. A good place to start is by visiting the assigned news outlet online, reading through their headlines and stories, and reading the "About" section on the website. Students may also want to look at the bios of some of the news outlet's staff. AllSides (n.d.) can be a useful tool in determining an outlet's relative bias, though students should be aware that media bias guides

like this tend to use a simple left/right binary to categorize news media outlets and may not capture the full spectrum of political perspectives and worldviews represented across news media. Pew Research Center's (n.d.) "State of the News Media" produces yearly research on "data and trends about key sectors in the U.S. news media industry" including many of the characteristics identified above. Media Bias / Fact Check details their methodology (n.d.) for determining the bias of different news outlets, though they admit the task is highly subjective. Participants may want to review Media Bias / Fact Check's methodology for use in their own determinations, particularly the following categories and questions:

- Biased wording/headlines: Does the source use loaded words to convey emotion or to sway the reader? Do headlines match the story?
- Factual/sourcing: Does the source report factually and back up claims with well-sourced evidence?
- Story choices: Does the source report news from both sides or do they only publish one side?
- Political affiliation: How strongly does the source endorse a particular political ideology? In other words, how extreme are their views?

Given the focus of Day 5's activity, students should pay particular attention to the political bias of their assigned outlet and its audience and how the outlet frames issues related to race and the concerns of minority communities, especially through their headlines and choice of images.

Participants are given the following information about a potential news story:

Background: A neighborhood swimming pool has an ID scanner for entry. All residents living at certain addresses in the vicinity of the pool can obtain an ID card from the homeowner's association in the neighborhood and use it to enter the pool. There is no one to monitor the pool's use or ID access.

- White chair of the homeowner's association calls the police when he sees a Black mother and her child swimming at the neighborhood pool.
- Chair of the homeowner's association asks the mother to show her ID card.
- One police officer questions the mother about the man's call and asks her to swipe her ID card to prove her membership in the neighborhood.
- Another police officer separates the child from the mother while the other officer is talking with her.
- Both police officers speak with the chair of the homeowner's association.
- Mother swipes her ID card and it is a valid ID.
- Mother asks the chair of the homeowner's association to apologize. He does not respond.

Participants are then asked to do the following:



1. Review the information about a recent event below<sup>2</sup>—you can do this activity alone, or if you want to collaborate with others who are taking this challenge, feel free to connect with them and do this as a group!
2. Use that information to create a headline for the outlet you are assigned and select a photo to accompany your headline. If you don't know anything about your news outlet, do some brief online searching to get a better sense of it. (Note: Participants were given a group of curated images to select from and they were assigned a news outlet based on their last name: A-C were assigned Fox News; D-F, National Public Radio; G-K, Huffington Post; L-R, The Wall Street Journal; and S-Z, The Onion).
3. Share your headline, your assigned media outlet, and the choices you made in the discussion board below. Include the image number you chose, and why.
4. **Optional Bonus Challenge!** Pick a news outlet that you were *not assigned*, and create a headline based on the same information above. In the discussion board, share the outlet you chose, plus your headline and photo, and discuss why you made the choices you did. This bonus challenge provides an opportunity to consider how you might respond to this exercise when approaching it from a different point of view or agenda.

This activity can be delivered to students as is within an asynchronous or hybrid setting (see the virtual challenge linked above). In a face-to-face setting, the class can be split into small groups which are randomly assigned to one of the news outlets listed above. As a group, they design a headline and choose an image to accompany that headline. After completing the activity, each group then presents their work to the class, explaining the choices they made. The key to this activity is allowing the students the time and space to engage in a deeper conversation around how the news is constructed to serve specific agendas and specific audiences, which often constrains the ability of news stories, and particularly headline-driven news, to present a story objectively or to reflect all of the relevant perspectives and nuances within a story. The students should also reflect on the many choices they made in producing their headline and how the demands of the task and their own bias influenced those choices.

The purpose of this activity is to have participants acknowledge their own perspective on reality and understand how such perspectives influence what the news looks like and how they interpret the news.

As a way to reflect on the final activity, as well as the ways in which news organizations handle stories about race, we recommend instructors engage with students using the following prompts, either in small groups or as individual reflections:

- The Society for Professional Journalists has a code of ethics that all members are expected to adhere to, which includes four key goals: seek truth and report it; minimize harm; act independently; and be accountable and transparent. Look at the headline you just created. Does it reflect these goals? If not, how could you adjust the headline to align with these goals more closely?

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<sup>2</sup> Please note, in the actual challenge, the description of the event was presented below the instructions.

- How do you think people of color will respond to your headline? Why? What might they like to see different? How do you think white people will respond to your headline? Why?
- When you consider that reporters have a duty to serve “the public good,” which headline(s) do this the best? Which did it the least? Why?
- How does the journalistic principle of objectivity align with the notion of “serving the public good” when it comes to stories about race?

In a synchronous online or face-to-face setting, these prompts could be addressed in a class discussion. We recommend instructors have students return to their groups and discuss these prompts with their groups. Only when the groups have had ample time to consider all three questions, should the instructor have students present their ideas to the class as a whole and encourage a discussion about the various opinions.

If this activity is carried out online, the instructor can create a shared google doc and ask participants to respond to these prompts and to each other’s comments. The instructor should also aim to interact with the students in this document themselves.

### *Some Concluding Thoughts*

We conclude Day 5, and the overall challenge, with the following thoughts:

- Dig into the content/substance of a story (move beyond the surface).
- Be aware of your personal biases and the constructed nature of the news, and how both affect your experience(s) with a story.
- Be a thoughtful consumer (and sharer) of all media, including the media you love.
- Use tools and strategies to combat misinformation, like those on our Fake News and Misinformation guide (Fogler Library n.d.). Remember the SIFT Method for evaluating information (Caulfield 2019) (as we learned on Day 2!).
- Consider journalism codes of ethics as guidelines for what to expect from the stories you encounter (as we learned on Day 3!).

### **Teaching Materials**

All materials remain accessible at <http://libguides.library.umaine.edu/newslit>.

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**Judith E. Rosenbaum** is Associate Professor of Media Studies and Chair of the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of Maine. Current research centers on the processes involved in the enjoyment and selection of media content; the role social media play in the lives of individuals as well as on a social level; and media literacy, health literacy, and health communication. She has published in a variety of journals, including *Communication Research*, *Media Psychology*, *Journal of Media Psychology*, *Communication Research Reports*, *Communication Teacher*, and *Digital Health*.

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