



May-2014

# “Too Embarrassed to Ask”: The Pros and Cons of Foreign Affairs Explainers in *The Washington Post*

Jessica Birthisel

Bridgewater State University, [jessica.birthisel@bridgew.edu](mailto:jessica.birthisel@bridgew.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Birthisel, Jessica (2014). “Too Embarrassed to Ask”: The Pros and Cons of Foreign Affairs Explainers in *The Washington Post*. *Bridgewater Review*, 33(1), 15-17.

Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol33/iss1/7](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol33/iss1/7)

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

---

# “Too embarrassed to ask”: The pros and cons of foreign-affairs explainers in *The Washington Post*

Jessica Birthisel

It is not a pleasant word, but one we must face, for it has become a major part of online media production and consumption: *listicle*. A portmanteau that combines “list” and “article,” the listicle is one of the latest fads in journalism that uses a list as a method of presenting content information that would otherwise be worthy of a full narrative.

If you are not familiar with the technical definition of the listicle, you have no doubt experienced it in your day-to-day media consumption. From *Cosmopolitan*'s endless iterations of “101 ways to please your man” to BuzzFeed's pervasive pop culture compilations like “18 Cartoons From The '90s You Probably Forgot Existed,” listicles shape current creations of media content, particularly online content. They assume that readers want information in quick hits, lists, slideshows, memes and sound bites instead of long articles. Their sensational headlines drive traffic to a site, generating more money from advertising, and they build on the belief that today's readers prefer mindless fluff and trivia over hard news and heavy stories. Additionally, the listicle performs a common journalistic role, the explainer, which is sometimes presented as the story behind the story, or a brief that provides the context that readers need to understand a developing story or trend.

In an interesting twist on the listicle fad, *The Washington Post* recently launched a new series that applies the popular format to breaking foreign-affairs news, a type of coverage not known for its trendiness. Starting in November 2012, the *Post* began a

recurring feature in its “World” section of WashingtonPost.com offering answers to questions “you were too embarrassed to ask” about foreign-affairs topics. Its first piece was titled “9 questions about Israel-Gaza you were too embarrassed to ask.” Questions in the piece ranged from “What is the Gaza strip?” to “Who is Hamas?” to “Why don't Israel and Palestine just become independent countries?” to “What's going to happen?”

Referenced in hundreds of Tweets and thousands of Facebook posts, this listicle approach proved popular, and the *Post* has replicated it eight more times, focusing on escalating foreign affairs situations in Mali, the Central African Republic, Chechnya and Dagestan, Egypt, Syria, Iran, South Sudan, and, as this article is being written, Ukraine.

Each installment follows a similar style: a formulaic headline promising nine questions about a country or conflict, followed by a simple map of the region

and a brief introduction. This introduction (usually prefaced with sympathetic language such as “we understand that it can take a lot of time and energy to keep up with international news”) includes a promise that the basic questions are answered in such a way “that anyone can understand them.” The questions are answered in short and numbered paragraphs. The language is simple, conversational and directly addresses the reader. For example, the explainer on Mali directs readers to the map at the top of the story with elementary language: “You see that little blue line? That's the Niger River, and it's really important.” The questions build on one another, as if an audience member is having a real-time conversation with the series' author, foreign-affairs blogger Max Fisher. For example, the third question in the listicle on Syria is both a reaction to the previous answer and a follow-up question: “3.) That's horrible. But there are protests lots of places. How did it all go so wrong in Syria? And please, just give me the short version.”

Experienced journalists have mixed reactions to the listicle. Undoubtedly, there are some advantages to the approach, but at what cost? One possible advantage is that it provides foreign-affairs information and context in a quick, accessible and easy-to-share format. Though journalists dream of a world where all citizens are interested in reading lengthy foreign-affairs articles, this does not reflect how most of us really consume news. Traditional foreign affairs reporting is often dense and dry, and written for the people who already know its context and are already convinced of its importance and

---

They build on the belief that today's readers prefer mindless fluff and trivia over hard news and heavy stories.

not in need of basic definitions. Even for the moderately informed reader, pulling up a story on an international conflict can feel more like jumping into a book on page 1,001 rather than beginning on page one. The explainer format starts from scratch, which is an important journalistic function. Is the information oversimplified? Undoubtedly. Is an oversimplified understanding of a major world event preferable to complete ignorance about it? Most likely.

A second advantage is that the listicle highlights the countries at the top of the news agenda *right now*. So many of these international struggles evolve, transition, flare up and cool down, and ultimately seem to be part of a never-ending story about the country, region, parties, or religions involved. Many of these situations experience a low level of coverage all year round, which can make it difficult for audiences to understand just how pressing a given conflict is at any one time. In some ways, these explainers shout to the readers: “Hey! You may have noticed that Ukraine has

WorldViews

## 9 questions about Syria you were too embarrassed to ask

BY MAX FISHER August 29 at 12:50 pm



(Image Credit: Gene Thorp. Reprinted with permission from PARS International)

A final advantage is this: by easing readers’ insecurity about their lack of knowledge, this format can expose them to news stories that they have previously found intimidating or inaccessible. *Listen*, author Max Fisher seems to explain in a comforting tone, *we get it. It’s confusing. People are busy. No one expects you to be an expert on this. Heck,*

people experience when they *think* they should know more than they do about a given topic.

Despite these surface advantages, the listicle is not without its flaws. First, the format segregates audiences and reinforces the fact that more traditional foreign-affairs news coverage caters to those who are already well versed on a topic. One of the challenges journalists face is how much background to include in their stories. What can you presume the reader already knows, and what needs to be explained? This is especially tricky on the foreign-affairs beat, where stories may have been developing for hundreds if not thousands of years. And yet, many traditional news stories rarely bother to situate breaking news into a larger cultural or political context. This is a failure of journalism’s most basic purpose: to clearly and fairly provide the public with information they need to think independently and govern themselves effectively. In this way, the presence of these explainers exposes the limitations of more traditional news coverage of world affairs. What results are two formats on the same story; two incomplete perspectives on an issue rather than one complete perspective, which is a disservice to the reader.

Even for the moderately informed reader, pulling up a story on an international conflict can feel more like jumping into a book on page 1,001 rather than beginning on page one.

jumped to the top of our news agenda. Here’s why!” This can help readers differentiate between truly breaking international news and stories that are simmering on a journalistic back burner.

*no one expects you to be able to find Egypt on a map. Relax. We’re here to help. You’re not alone (as evidenced by the 13,000+ other people who shared this article on Facebook!)* When the *Post* frames its entire presentation of a complex situation in an *it’s-not-your-fault-and-you’re-not-alone* format, it eliminates some of the shame

---

A second disadvantage of the listicle approach is that by providing explainers for some regions and conflicts but not others, there is a risk of an “othering” effect within this format. There is no transparency as to how the *Post* decides about which regions, conflicts, and countries its readers are embarrassingly clueless. The matter was brought to light in writer Teju Cole’s Twitter-based parody of the series, called “9 questions about Britain you were too embarrassed to ask.” Cole’s spoof asked if the U.S. was considering a surgical strike against the United Kingdom because of its alleged sale of chemical components to Syria in September 2013. The parody highlights the sense of “otherness” that pervades the explainer series. The presumption is that American audiences don’t need explainers on the U.K. or other places that are like us in lifestyle, culture, race, religion, or other identifiers of modernity. Given the *exoticness* of the regions that the *Post*’s editors have focused on so far, these explainers seem to prefer and privilege mysterious “others,” possibly creating the illusion of faraway, lawless, and backwards lands and populations of extremism, endless conflict, and strange languages, religions, and skin tones. A more systematic approach to providing context for world affairs would avoid cherry picking global issues in a discriminatory way.

A final disadvantage involves the tone of the *Post*’s series. The explainers come off as judgmental, suggesting that a lack of knowledge is something to be embarrassed about, rather than the exact reason to pick up a newspaper. This is the core critique of the *Post*’s “too-embarrassed-to-ask” listicle approach to foreign affairs. At its heart, it demonizes ignorance. On one extreme, we might expect all Americans to be able to find Egypt on a map; on the other extreme, it is not reasonable to expect all of the *Post*’s readership to have a clear and confident understanding of the complex historical

context of tensions between the Dinka and the Nuer in South Sudan. The slightly snarky tone of these *Post* listicles suggests that the lack of this very specific knowledge is something to be ashamed of. The role of a newspaper is to inform its readers, not to shame them for arriving at an article without a fully developed, historically contextualized sense of what has already happened, what is currently happening, and what will happen next in any given region experiencing conflict. Journalism is meant to inform, and can serve an

Online story packages could be built from an awareness that readers approach foreign-affairs news with widely disparate levels of familiarity. It is possible to create dynamic story packages with diverse entry points into the material, including not only the latest breaking straight-news reporting for those familiar with the situation, but also the inclusion of (judgment-free) explainers in a sidebar. Editors could also include interactive timelines to help illustrate the events that led up to that day’s stories, as well as dynamic maps, photos

---

## This practice creates a divisive and unproductive environment that says “*this* article is for the smart people” and “*this* article is for the rest of you.”

---

especially important pedagogical role at a time when citizens do not feel confident about their knowledge of history, geography, or world affairs.

The instinct behind the *Post*’s series is fair and constructive. Many readers need historical and geographical context in order to fully digest foreign-affairs stories. However, its practice of segregating this context in a stand-alone listicle format, presented in a way that magnifies readers’ insecurities should be rejected. This practice creates a divisive and unproductive environment that says “*this* article is for the smart people” and “*this* article is for the rest of you.” With major newspapers expanding their multimedia and interactive capacities at an astonishing rate, editors need to think about how they can package these foreign-affairs stories in a way that is informative and comprehensive without being insulting.

and biographies of major political players involved in the story. By moving to a model of foreign-affairs coverage that allows users of varying familiarity with a topic to enter the conversation, news establishments like *The Washington Post* would better meet the needs of a truly diverse audience of readers, not merely the already up-to-date and informed.



*Jessica Birthisel is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies.*