

# **‘De-Americanizing’ News Literacy**

## **Using Local Media Examples to Teach Critical Thinking to Students in Different Socio-cultural Environments**

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### **Abstract**

This commentary explains how a curriculum using news media to teach critical thinking that was developed at an American university is being adapted for non-American university settings, particularly in Asia. The authors explain the importance of focusing on key course concepts and of finding and applying local media examples to illustrate those concepts and, most importantly, to keep the students actively engaged. Early results indicate that this approach can succeed, though it does require a great deal of effort developing examples that clearly illustrate the course concepts and, at the same time, are fresh and relevant to the students.

### **Keywords**

De-Americanization, news literacy, cultural literacy, journalism curriculum, Asian journalism

Fall semester classes had ended a few days earlier when a Mainland Chinese student came into Richard Hornik's office at the University of Hong Kong's Journalism and Media Studies Centre (JMSC). He had asked for feedback on the course. The student replied, 'It was simple but very interesting.' He was stunned. Simple?

Teaching undergraduates how to sort out reliable information from the tsunami of data washing over us all every day hardly seemed simple back at Stony Brook University (SBU), much less here at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) where the vast majority of students were either from Hong Kong or Mainland China, with a large representation from South Korea. The student went on to say

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that most of the course involved common-sense concepts but ones that people of her age rarely thought about. By keeping it simple and making the course interesting, they stayed engaged long enough to learn to apply those common-sense principles of critical thinking to the world around them—precisely the goal of the news literacy curriculum developed at Stony Brook over the past seven years.

Hornik's assignment as a visiting lecturer in the 2012 Fall semester at HKU was to adapt that curriculum to an Asian setting. The vehicle for that effort was the introductory journalism course offered by JMSC, 'Principles of Journalism and the News Media'. This initiative was the brainchild of a meeting between Stony Brook journalism school Dean, Howard Schneider, former editor of *Newsday* and primary developer of the news literacy curriculum, and JMSC founding director, Ying Chan, a former reporter for the *New York Daily News*. Hornik was chosen because he had taught news literacy at Stony Brook over the previous five years and had spent over seven years in Beijing and Hong Kong as a journalist for *TIME* magazine and *AsiaWeek*. The Stony Brook model of news literacy uses heavily illustrated lectures, followed by hands-on exercises, to help students understand how journalism works and why information is such a powerful force for good and ill in modern societies. The goal is for them to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to identify reliable, actionable information in the hyper-speed environment of the digital era. In addition to developing the curriculum for use at Stony Brook using a US\$ 1.8 million grant from the Knight Foundation, the School of Journalism, in 2008, used a US\$ 200,000 grant from the Ford Foundation to create a Center for News Literacy in order to export its curriculum to other universities. In the past five years, over 50 universities in the United States (US) have adopted some, or all, of the curriculum. None, however, have been able to match the scale achieved at Stony Brook where, in the 2014 Fall semester, the initial goal of teaching the course to 10,000 students has been reached.

Adapting the course to an Asian audience meant stripping out as many of the American references and examples as possible, by no means a simple task given that the course was created and had evolved in an American academic setting. Lessons about the First Amendment and the role of the press in the US had to go, as did many of the illustrative examples that were assembled over the past seven years.<sup>1</sup> Further complicating the effort was the fact that this was JMSC's introductory journalism course, which had been in their curriculum for many years, so it could not be completely altered. In the previous semester, the course had been taught by JMSC faculty member, Masato Kajimoto, a former CNN online reporter who received his doctorate in sociology from HKU. Even before the arrangement between Stony Brook and HKU, he had introduced key news literacy concepts into the course. Kajimoto had seen Howard Schneider's lecture on news literacy two years before on YouTube when he was working on how to provide his students with more than the traditional introduction to what journalists do and how the news media function. The majority of his students, regardless of their majors, were casual news consumers who arbitrarily decided what is good

journalism on rather flimsy impressions they had about news outlets, journalists and news presentation. After going through Schneider's video and exploring the Stony Brook news literacy website, Kajimoto found several elements he wanted his students to explore and therefore, he incorporated the concepts into the syllabus.

That made it far easier to populate the course with other key concepts from the Stony Brook model curriculum. It turned out the Mainland China student was right. The course had indeed been simplified because there was no other way to cover in depth the essential elements of the course, while making room for the experiential elements that an introductory journalism course requires. The new HKU model divided the course into five basic parts:

1. **The Power of Information:** Why students should care about being able to determine the reliability of the information they receive.
2. **What is News?** An analytical framework to sort out the difference between information that has been verified by an independent and accountable source from that which merely entertains, promotes or avoids filters.
3. **Truth and Verification:** How do journalists (and other reliable providers) ensure the accuracy of the information they publish?
4. **Balance, Fairness and Bias:** Looking out not only for the prejudices of information providers but also those we carry within ourselves.
5. **New Challenges for Consumers:** How to navigate new media, particularly social media, and the importance of taking responsibility for the information we pass along to others.

At the same time, it was essential to achieve the same fundamental student learning outcomes, identified by Fleming (2014) in her study of news literacy, so that they could:

1. Recognize the difference between journalism and other kinds of information, and between journalists and other information purveyors.
2. In the context of journalism, recognize the difference between news and opinion.
3. In the context of news stories, analyze the difference between assertion and verification, and between evidence and inference.
4. Evaluate and deconstruct news reports based on the quality of evidence presented and the reliability of sources; understand and apply these principles across all news media platforms.
5. Distinguish between news media bias and audience bias.

Underlying these skills, the course presents and reinforces four key concepts:

1. Appreciation of the power of reliable information and the importance of a free flow of information in a democratic society.

2. Understanding why news matters and why becoming a more discerning news consumer can change individual lives and the life of the country.
3. Understanding how journalists work and make decisions, and why they make mistakes.
4. Understanding how the digital revolution and the structural changes in the news media can affect news consumers; understand our new responsibilities as publishers as well as consumers.

Restructuring the course and editing the existing lectures turned out to be the easy part. Far more challenging was coming up, each week, with 10–15 local examples needed to illustrate the often-abstract concepts used in the course. Some weeks entailed 20 hours or more of research, and not just for the lectures. The course relies heavily on classroom and homework exercises that force the student to apply the principles of the course as soon as they are introduced in class, and those activities require local materials. For example, in order to provide an understanding of why some stories get more prominence than others, the tutorials were divided into groups of four or five ‘editorial boards’. Each group ran a notional, for-profit campus newspaper with an audience of undergraduates, graduate students or faculty. Each group got the same list of 10 stories—a campus sex scandal, a food riot in the dining hall, an exclusive report about an unannounced concert by Psy of ‘Gangnam Style’ fame—but each chose a different set of the four top stories their paper would carry. All of those stories had to be altered to fit the Asian context, a far more time-consuming task than it might seem.

In the previous five years of teaching news literacy at Stony Brook, Hornik had never worked harder, but the classroom response was energizing. The students were as interested and engaged in news and current events as their American counterparts. Students from Mainland China were just as engaged as their Hong Kong classmates and became a reliable source for new, non-American examples for the course (in fact, one complaint about the course was that there were ‘too many Chinese examples’). They also forced us to devote far more attention than has been the case at Stony Brook to the role of social media in gathering and disseminating news and information. Chinese netizens, using indigenous versions of Twitter and Facebook, have in the past year forced China’s government-controlled news media to alter coverage of events. In the past few years, these new citizen journalists have uncovered dozens of cases of corruption, forcing the government to act belatedly.

Finding and integrating interesting examples—particularly videos—was essential to keeping the attention of the students long enough for them to grasp and accept those basic elements. Of the 79 students who completed a two-page evaluation of the course, only one said that it was not worthwhile and would not recommend it to others. Allowing for a certain self-selection bias, it still indicates that at least 60 per cent of the students would recommend it to others. Positive word-of-mouth publicity on campus has meant that the course regularly attracts over 100 students a semester, many of whom are not journalism majors or minors.

Kajimoto's work has refined our understanding of what it takes to convey Stony Brook's news literacy concepts under non-American settings, focusing on three basic factors:

1. The concepts need to be interpreted, not just translated, into the local vernacular so that students can fully grasp the ideas and relate them to their everyday life.
2. The local media ecology must be taken into account and explained along with the concepts as news consumption patterns and journalistic practices vary from country to country.
3. The news events that illustrate the concepts should resonate with the students, which often means that the examples should be 'fresh' local stories or very significant international stories.

Two years after it was first taught at JMSC, this elective-to-all course enrolled about 130 students in Fall and 80 students in Spring semesters; typically, first-year and second-year students from eight to 12 different countries, representing disciplines from the arts to history and finance to engineering. Finding the appropriate illustrative cases to discuss concepts like 'information neighbourhoods' and 'VIA' (Fleming 2014; Klurfeld & Schneider 2014) in the lectures and tutorials for such a diverse group of students has always been difficult and time consuming. However, one of the most effective ways to foster future generation of discerning news audience was to demonstrate how the professor himself or herself has become a smart news consumer by applying the news literacy concepts in daily life. When discussing 'the power of information' in Hong Kong, for instance, it is inevitable to touch on the nationwide censorship in Mainland China and the life-threatening environment for some journalists in the Philippines (Sedghi 2014), as they exemplify the fear of those in power that news stories could potentially empower people and destabilize their control. But for most students who just came out of high school, that approach to the topic is not enough for them to tangibly feel that a piece of information could move a society into action.

Fortunately, social media has become a rich source of more easily relatable examples. For example, a photo of a restaurant in Beijing posted on Facebook went viral in mid-February 2013. The picture showed a sign on the restaurant's window facing the street that stated that the eatery does not welcome the Japanese, Filipinos, Vietnamese and dogs. The picture with the controversial statement instantly received lots of comments.<sup>2</sup> Before long, the story made news in Vietnam and was quickly picked up by major news organizations around the world, including BBC, which added another dimension to the strained relationship between China and Vietnam and prompted the two governments to discuss the issue ('Beijing Restaurant Sign...' 2013; BBC 2013; Yin 2013). The post on Facebook enabled Kajimoto to discuss in class how anybody with a smartphone—in other words, almost all of the students—could instantly act as a journalist and exercise the power by disseminating information.

A November 2013 news event provided ways to demonstrate how ‘sources’ in a news story should be evaluated. Local media reported that a 6-month-old baby was ‘snatched’ from a stroller in the street while the mother was talking to a woman who asked for direction. The shocking story of a blatant street kidnapping made the front pages in Hong Kong, prompting public discussions, especially among concerned parents and schools, on beefing up the safety measures to protect their children (see, for example, Kao et al. 2013). A Facebook campaign to raise awareness of the abduction was reported to have garnered more than 36,000 supporters, while many parents went out to buy global positioning system (GPS) tracking devices for their children. It was another testimonial to how people act and react to the news, making decisions based on the information found in the reports.

But at the same time, the story seemed very sketchy. When scrutinizing the reports with the analytical tools to evaluate the sources developed by Stony Brook—namely, I’M VAIN model<sup>3</sup>—none of the sources quoted in the news stories was informed nor authoritative enough to know anything about the incident. The mother in question was not directly interviewed; the statement by the police simply said the investigation was taking place with no details. There was no evidence to even remotely suggest that there had been some witnesses who saw what happened. In the lecture, Kajimoto decided to voice his scepticism to show the students the thought process smart news consumers should go through before taking any action: while this could be a real tragedy, with no reliable information at hand, we should not overreact. Within a week, it turned out that the Hong Kong mother in question had indeed fabricated the whole story and the baby had been dead (Chan 2013).

To introduce the blurring lines of ‘information neighbourhoods’, another key concept in the news literacy curriculum, Kajimoto distributed news articles about HKU in local newspapers published in 2011. The articles (for example, Lo 2011) reported that the university had attracted a record number of international applicants that year and quoted a university official as saying that the ‘high-quality education’ and ‘good career opportunity’ were the reasons. He then gave the students the press release the university handed out to the media (‘HKU International Student...’ 2011) and told them that the university also held a press conference in which the spokesperson as well as two student representatives spoke to invited journalists. Noticing that, first, the release and news reports were nearly identical in nature; second, the photos the local media had printed were actually given by the university; and third, the quotes were not interviews but speeches at a press event, the students were challenged to decide whether these reports were the result of ‘journalism’ or ‘promotion’. Some students later said that this little exercise was an eye-opener for them. They said they did not know that many news reports were produced in this fashion without journalists going through the basic process of independent verification. This example worked well because the news was very relevant to the students and it took place on campus.

There are, in fact, many news reports with not-so-reliable information, when examined closely using the lens provided by news literacy.<sup>4</sup> Popularly shared stories like 'eye-ball licking craze' in Japan (Elliott 2013) or the 'televised sunrise on a giant screen near Tiananmen Square in polluted Beijing' (Guilford 2014) could demonstrate to the students that news literacy is something that every one of us should acquire. It is not a series of American concepts one would study in a college course, but a collection of practical tools anyone can, and should, apply in one's own language, culture and media environment. When teaching non-journalism students, it is also important to go beyond journalism and demonstrate that fact-checking skills are crucial in many other fields such as marketing and public relations that more students are interested in. The world's biggest sporting event, the FIFA World Cup, has provided many examples that demonstrate this: Delta Airlines posted a picture of a giraffe that was supposed to represent Ghana on its corporate Twitter account, although giraffes do not actually live in Ghana (Koziol 2014; Stableford 2014); and Samsung wished a good luck to the US team with a smartphone poster that featured a player who was not on the team (Dilger 2014; Feeney 2014). Both incidents were embarrassing gaffes for the internationally well-known companies and were a great reminder to the students.

It should also be noted, however, that in our experience, this kind of course should be taught, or at least co-taught, by someone with substantial journalistic experience in the local media industry. Practical industry knowledge is essential to interpret and internalize the concepts before they are introduced to the students. Working environment, competition, available resources, socio-cultural attitude towards journalists, infrastructure and other factors must be taken into account in one way or another when deconstructing news stories. The macro-view approaches with media theories that traditional scholars tend to adopt are not always useful when discussing the validity of each single piece of information and a source in a news report. With the micro-level analytical tools developed by Stony Brook's Center for News Literacy, experienced journalists' proficiency in day-to-day news operation and their insight seem to help the students better understand the concepts.

In Hong Kong, our effort to integrate news literacy into our curriculum by localizing, or rather universalizing, the concepts has borne fruit. The enrolment in the aforementioned course has steadily increased, thanks to positive word-of-mouth recommendations as an elective. Kajimoto has been asked to conduct workshops at educators' conferences, at local and international high schools and recently, even at a parent-teacher association (PTA) meeting for the parents. The strong interest in our teaching material indicates that not only journalism educators but also high school instructors and parents see the necessity to do something more to equip the younger generation with the critical thinking concepts that would surely benefit their future.

The benefits of de-Americanizing the course have extended far beyond Hong Kong. In the past year, through workshops in Hong Kong, Beijing, Stony Brook, and most recently Poznan, Poland, the Center for News Literacy has assisted in



course development with five universities: Communication University of China (Beijing); Xiamen University; University of Social Sciences and Humanities (Ho Chi Minh City); Higher School of Economics (Moscow); and Adam Mickiewicz University (Poznan).

Because we have stripped the course as developed in the US to its basics, we have made it possible for academics from a variety of socio-cultural backgrounds to take the approach of the Stony Brook model, internalize it and then adapt and adopt those elements that are appropriate to their educational environments. The initial indications are that this approach is making it possible for overseas partners to then spread the curriculum in their countries and regions. Perhaps the most important challenge facing the effort to spread the Stony Brook model for teaching news literacy in Asia (and Europe) is the lack of rigorous assessment tools to determine the actual impact on the students. Even at Stony Brook, assessment has been problematic in spite of major efforts, including two, independently conducted longitudinal studies and pre- and post-surveys of students. As was recently reported in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (Beyerstein 2014), although students who took the course demonstrated greater engagement in news consumption and civic engagement (such as registering to vote), the long-term impact on their critical thinking skills remains difficult to measure:

When analysts at Stony Brook tried to go beyond self-reported data by testing students' news-literacy skills, the differences between the news-literacy students and the control group were less clear-cut. Students were given sample news stories and asked to rate them on fairness and the strength of evidence presented. What the students didn't know was that they were randomly assigned one of two versions of each story. The stories were identical except for one critical detail—the credentials of a source, for instance. The differences between the groups were negligible. The creators of the study suggest that the questions may have been too easy to differentiate between the two groups. In other words, maybe any undergraduate education bolsters critical thinking enough that students get that an academic expert is, all else being equal, a more credible source on the likely effects of a methadone clinic than a random neighborhood resident. (Beyerstein 2014)

Recognizing this assessment deficiency, we have, in consultation with colleagues at the Communication University of China and Adam Mickiewicz University, begun to create a common questionnaire to be given to all students before and after the course, with additional questions specific to each institution. Other universities that adopt elements of news literacy will be encouraged to use similar questionnaires, and all results will be shared through Stony Brook's recently created Digital Resource Center.<sup>5</sup>

We would also like to encourage further research into the ways the Stony Brook model of news literacy is being adapted by different cultures as well as how these concepts could be taught using more culturally relevant concepts. For example, it would be interesting to explore if news literacy concepts could be useful in developing 'mindful journalism', a concept first broached



by Mark Pearson (2013). Pearson asks if Buddhist principles might inform modern journalistic ethics. And the idea of mindfulness is, in fact, related to one of the key lessons of news literacy: that in the digital era, we are all now publishers, and so must carefully consider whether or not to 'like' or 'retweet' material that may be false or otherwise harmful to others. From the beginning, it has been our contention not that we have found the only way or the best way to teach critical appreciation of news and information, but rather that the Stony Brook model can provide some useful methods for engaging students to help them develop their critical thinking abilities. This is a challenge facing educators everywhere, and we look forward to sharing both the successes and failures of everyone engaged in this pursuit.

### Notes

1. Stony Brook's strategy of trying to spread news literacy in the US primarily through other large universities is currently being revised to place a greater emphasis on providing curricula and materials to community colleges, high schools and even elementary schools. The key new element in the strategy is the newly created Digital Resource Center, which will make available, in a searchable database, all of the teaching materials developed by Stony Brook over the past seven years. An in-depth discussion of this development can be found in Klurfeld and Schneider (2014).
2. See <https://www.facebook.com/rose.l.tang/posts/341596399291821>
3. I'M VAIN is a method to evaluate each source quoted in a news story.
  1. Independent sources are better than self-interested sources.
  2. Multiple sources are better than a single source.
  3. Sources who Verify are better than sources who assert.
  4. Authoritative/Informed sources are better than uninformed sources.
  5. Named sources are better than unnamed sources.
4. Kajimoto collects such examples on Facebook page titled, 'Asia Pacific Digital Citizens Project', available at <https://www.facebook.com/APacDCP>
5. See <http://www.centerfornewsliteracy.org/digital-resource-center>

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