
News Literacy: making sense of community & world

An honors course for Fall and Spring 2009-10 • W 6:30-9:05 p.m. • Fred Blevens, Ph.D.

Course Description & Overview

Events such as the enactment of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the launch of Fox News, the growth of the Internet and the dramatic decline of traditional newspapers have triggered the most traumatic transformation of the news business since the launch of the Penny Press in the 1830s. The viral spread of media messages demands education and awareness to bring order to the information glut and chaos, while limiting its potential harm.

News Literacy is an honors course designed for students in all disciplines to experience the effects of the media on their lives and the lives of those whose communities have lost their local media to media conglomeration or an economy that no longer can support commercialized news. News Literacy is an interdisciplinary course that benefits students in the arts, sciences, humanities, information technology, and social sciences. It explains how news gets made and why it gets made the way it does. It casts events against the backdrop of the 1st Amendment and the news media's significant influences on history and humankind. It provides tools to translate, negotiate, and understand.

By definition, news literacy is the ability to determine the credibility of news reports and other information, whether delivered through print, television, radio or the Internet. Through experiential methods, students in the second semester of News Literacy will take what they learn into the field, using outreach and service learning components to help people in a selected community understand and use digital media for a new age of news and information gathering and distribution.

Student Learning Outcomes

By the end of the Fall semester, students will:

- Understand the history of commercialized news in America.
- Recognize how journalistic principles and practices affect news messages.
- Recognize how personal experiences shape individual interpretations of news messages.
- Understand how modern journalists report and edit the news.
- Understand the relationship of democracy and the First Amendment to media systems.
- Be able to recognize the difference between news and opinion, evidence and inference.
- Be able to critically evaluate the quality and credibility of information sourcing.
- Be able to recognize the differences in news media bias and audience bias.
- Acquire the tools to become more perceptive and critical news consumers.

Textbook & Readings

The primary text for the course is a CD textbook titled "Detecting Bull: How to Identify Bias and Junk Journalism in Print, Broadcast and on the Wild Web" (2009) by John McManus. This CD is available only from the author at the Web site www.detectingbull.com. There will be additional readings posted throughout the semester by your instructor.

Policies

Attendance

Students are expected to attend every class period and are responsible for obtaining any class notes missed from another student. If you miss a or do not turn in an assignment, you will have NO opportunity to make up the work. The deal here is simple: If I do not penalize you for failing to attend, you cannot expect to make up work you miss because you choose NOT to attend.

Policies, cont'd.

Extenuating Circumstances

Rarely, the unexpected happens and emergency situations may arise causing you to miss graded work. Please contact me **WITHIN 24 HOURS AFTER THE CLASS START TIME** if you encounter such a situation. This is your responsibility. If you can prove the legitimacy of your tardiness, you **MAY** be able to make up work.

Plagiarism/Academic Dishonesty

The Honors College commits itself to enriching the experience of academically gifted students. Such a mission demands the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. Violations of academic honesty, including but not limited to plagiarism, collusion, deception, conflict of interest, and theft are not tolerated and can lead to severe penalties. Disciplinary actions are outlined in your student handbook. I simply do not tolerate dishonesty and will seek to assess the harshest punishment available if you are caught cheating in my course.

Personal Electronics

Use of cell phones, PDAs or MP3 players during class is prohibited. Computers may be used only with instructor permission. Lectures may be recorded, but only with prior approval of the professor. If you are caught using any banned device during a quiz or exam, you will be considered in violation of the university's policy on academic dishonesty.

Civility

The classroom is a place of learning. I will attempt to make that process as enjoyable as possible, but the classroom is not a meeting place for casual conversation or a lounge for taking naps. It is also not a place for rudeness. Displays of disrespect for fellow students or the professor will not be tolerated. If you have a cellular phone, turn it off before you enter the classroom. If you forget and it goes off in class, turn it off immediately and stow it away. If you answer your phone, you must leave the room and may not return for the period.

Special Needs

If you need accommodation based upon a disability under the terms of the Americans With Disabilities Act or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, please discuss your needs with me before the end of the second week of the semester.

Fall Office Hours

MWF, 2-3 p.m.; 4-6 p.m.; other times by appointment. ACII-311B, Biscayne Bay Campus
Phone: 305.919.4430; email: blevensf@fiu.edu

Fall Grading

1,000 possible points with a letter grade based on percentage(900-1000=A; 800-899=B, etc.) Plus-minus assigned at normal point cutoffs. Fall semester evaluation will be based on 9 individual (30 points each) and 9 team (20 points each) Readiness Assurance Tests on ALL READINGS IN ADVANCE (total 450 points); 5 team news literacy assignments (50 points each, 250 total); three 500-word reaction papers (50 points each, 150 total); and a final exam worth 150 points. 50 additional points will be awarded to each student who attends every minute of every class.

Spring Grading

Spring semester grading will be based on three journal reports of five pages (@ 100 points each), final submission of the complete journal (250 points), group evaluation (150 points), and a 15-page critical essay on the two-semester experience (300 points). 50 additional points to each student who attends every minute of every class.

Schedule

FALL SEMESTER 2009

- Aug. 26** Welcome and introduction to the course. Why news literacy matters. Brief history of news. Why the model is failing. The critical perspective. Team assignments.
- Sept. 2** Readiness Assurance Tests (RATs) 1 over Introduction and Chapter 1. The Yes Men and the process of “identity correction.” Explain and discuss the “news blackout” assignment.
- Sept. 9** RATs over Chapter 2. Truth and truthiness. Teams discuss “blackout” assignment reaction and summarize their group’s experience and thoughts in rapid report. Watch Outfoxed. Assign reaction essay for response to Outfoxed and additional reading.
- Sept. 16** RATs over Chapter 3. Reaction essay due. Team news literacy assignment: Different eyes, different views (students agree to watch and read the same news sources for the week and record their observations).
- Sept. 23** RATs over Chapter 4. Teams discuss “different eyes” assignment reaction and summarize their group’s experience and thoughts in rapid report.
- Sept. 30** RATs over Chapter 5. Viewing of movie The Insider. Assign reaction essay for response to The Insider and additional reading.
- Oct. 7** RATs over Chapter 6. Reaction essay due. Chapter 5. Teams discuss institutional pressures case study on corporate media, then summarize their group’s experience and thoughts in rapid report.
- Oct. 14** RATs over Chapter 7. Teams discuss methods of building bias toward the public.
- Oct. 21** RATs over Chapter 8. Team assignment on mapping patterns of bias.
- Oct. 28** **RATs over** Chapter 9; Team assignment on measuring the quality of news.
- Nov. 4** Just because it’s correct doesn’t mean it’s right: Why ethics matter. Watch Ted Koppel interview with Janet Cooke. Assign reaction essay on interview and additional reading.
- Nov.11** Veterans Day holiday. University in recess.
- Nov. 18** How do we move news literacy into the community? Which one is first? Teams begin developing strategies.
- Nov. 25** Teams work on their strategies and class decides how to proceed and execute planning for the next semester.
- Dec. 2** Teams finish their plans, develop timetables and set it up in the community for Spring 2010.
- Dec. 9** **Final exam period: Teams present and critique their operational plans.**

NOTE: Schedule subject to change at instructor discretion.

Schedule

SPRING SEMESTER 2010

- Jan. 6** Review of News Literacy objectives/strategy/timetable for community project. Groups develop volunteer orientation and program schedule for community News Literacy outreach project.
- Jan. 13** **Class teams** meet, orient and train community organizers at off-site location. Groups and volunteers develop recruiting plans for 25-person community cohort to teach citizen News Literacy.
- Jan. 20** Class teams present The Yes Men and the process of “identity correction.” Explain and discuss the “news blackout” assignment.
- Jan. 27** Class teams present truth and truthiness. Community teams discuss “blackout” assignment reaction and summarize their group’s experience and thoughts in rapid report. **Students submit journal summary report from first three weeks.**
- Feb. 3** Class teams present Outfoxed. Community teams discuss the film and summarize their group’s experience and thoughts in rapid report.
- Feb. 10** Class teams present news literacy assignment: Different eyes, different views (community groups agree to watch and read the same news sources for the week and record their observations).
- Feb. 17** Class teams lead community teams in discussion of the different eyes exercise and summarize the group’s experience and thoughts in rapid report.
- Feb. 24** Class teams present the movie The Insider. Class teams lead community teams in discussion of institutional pressures on corporate media, then summarize their group’s experience and thoughts in rapid report. Class teams present and explain Insider exercise for presentation the next week. **Students submit journal summary report from second three weeks.**
- March 3** Class teams lead community teams in preparing alternative news strategies based on The Insider.
- March 10** Class teams lead community teams in assignment on mapping patterns of bias.
- March 17 Spring Break**
- March 24** Class teams lead community teams in assignment on measuring the quality of news. Class teams present and explain quality of news exercise for presentation the next week.
- March 31** Class teams present unit called Just Because It’s Correct Doesn’t Mean It’s Right: Why ethics matter. Watch Ted Koppel interview with Janet Cooke. Class and community teams discuss this case and summarize the group’s experience and thoughts in rapid report. **Students submit journal summary report from third three weeks.**
- April 7** Class teams present the movie Goodnight and Good Luck. Class teams and community teams discuss the film, then summarize their group’s experience and thoughts in rapid report.
- April 14** How do we spread news literacy throughout the community? How do we move into the home? Class and community teams develop strategies.
- April 21** **Students meet on campus to present team journal reports for the semester.**

NOTE: Schedule subject to change at instructor discretion.

Contract

I understand and agree to abide by the grading and policy terms outlined in class and in the syllabus. Turn this form in no later than the beginning of the third class period of the semester. **No grades will be posted for you until you have turned this form into your professor.**

Signature: _____

Print Name: _____

Date: _____