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With such a sea of news around us, and vital issues presented every day, it would be a shame to teach our courses — any courses — insulated from our turbulent world. The news is not just an assortment of clippings. It exists in a context.

How We Choose the News

We choose the news we listen to and read, often on the basis of our own political, moral, and cultural commitments and beliefs. I read the New York Times religiously, and listen to NPR. I do not follow any blogs, conservative or liberal (except for Juan Cole). I do not listen to AM radio, which means that I am fairly ignorant of a tremendous volume of commentary whose perspective is far different from my own. I live in something of a cocoon of liberalism. Well, I do watch *The Colbert Report*. That has to count for something. I would imagine that most of us live in some sort of news cocoon, unaware of the arguments that sway much of society.

Given limitations of time, that is understandable; but pedagogically, it is dangerous to be ignorant of sizeable public discourse that weighs in on just about every issue that we might be addressing in class. How we access those views is a gnawing question. That we should access those perspectives is self-evident. It is also, given the academic privilege assigned to primary sources, not adequate to depend on other people's creeds about what "those people" are saying.

This is one place where the students can give us some help. Can we ask them to find news sources representing different portions of the political spectrum on an issue? Can they then outline the argument of that stance?

One task for those who teach courses on Islam is to probe beneath the rhetoric about radical Islam to lift out threads of legitimate complaint and logical argument in an otherwise repellant fabric. Should we do no less with the discordant arguments we hear in our own media? Just as Islamist movements cannot be dismissed as simply “crazy,” neither should the ultra-right or ultra-left movements in this country or the West be so dismissed.

It may be helpful to ask students where they get their news from—friends? RSS feeds? Blogs?

The Daily Show

? Online newsletters? Would it be too painful to ask students to listen listen to an hour of Rush Limbaugh? One of John Hagee’s sermons from Cornerstone Church in San Antonio? Ann Coulter?

Democracy Now

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Counterpunch

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In Diana Eck’s “World Religions” class at Harvard, students have been asked to find and report on a Web site for each religion covered. Part of the challenge here is to assess the agenda of the Web site. Often Web sites critical of a religion will be subtly disguised as one providing reliable information. At other times, they will represent a particular sect or alternative understanding. It may take more knowledge than students have to recognize the slant, but the exercise is useful nevertheless.

How We Read the News

This is probably the issue we most naturally turn to as we use the news in class. We read critically, examining the particular vocabulary used, the absences in the report, its placement as the lead story or buried in the middle, the nature of the headline, which views are privileged and how, and so on. This is where training in critical reading can be fostered. We encourage our students to read critically, not only the news, but the texts we use in the course, and the materials they use to write their papers.

Perhaps the most difficult part of reading critically is noticing the absences. Not only is it important to identify different points of view, but also sociocultural placement. For instance, does the news represent the intelligentsia vs. the working class? What criteria were used in the selection of interviewees? Were they rural or urban, male or female, old or young? In other words, who speaks to the media? Whose voice gets heard, and whose voice is absent? What kind of difference does that make in telling the story?

I have made the news an integral dimension of my teaching. I include not only the news in the front section, but articles from the travel section and the arts and culture pages. To discuss religion in a comparative context, it is useful to share an article about a Muslim woman making a new life for herself in the U.S. Army with Hindus building a temple in Texas. It is equally useful for discussion to read an article from the travel section on visits to “India’s sacred caves.” This is not only relevant to an interest in Indian religious practice, present and past, but it is also an opportunity to discuss how we “do” tourism, what we notice, what our stance is relative to the practitioners of a religion, or the heritage of a religion — in fact, what the stance of modern practitioners is to their own historic religious sites.

How They Report the News

A recent meeting of the Islamic Society of North America featured a panel of Muslims who worked in the media. One young woman who was a reporter for a Chicago newspaper said that just because she was a Muslim, she was assumed to be the resident expert on Islam in her office. She said that, understandably, reporters cover broad beats, investigating areas in which they seldom have much background knowledge and experience. They are under deadline pressures, so they grab the first person they can that looks credible and authentic, scribble a few quotable sentences, and since they don’t have time to survey the larger Muslim community, *that* is what becomes the authoritative news report. Reporters are not experts. They seek experts on short notice, whomever someone says is an expert — which is why it is vitally important that religion scholars provide reporters with good information and authoritative commentary.

The young journalist argued that it was more important to have Muslims — and by extension Buddhists, Hindus, Africans, people of different religions and cultures — in the newsroom to offer insider perspectives. The panelist pleaded for more Muslims to reject the temptation to become yet another Muslim engineer or doctor (the most common professions of Muslims in the United States after “student”), and get into a host of professions that shape public perspectives on Islam. Using the news in class is a way of encouraging students to become shapers of the news, rather than complainers about its bias.

It is also helpful, depending on the nature of the class, to invite reporters to come to class and talk about the way they go about fashioning a story. They are, after all, taken as public authorities. Students can ask them questions such as: What sources do they use? What kinds of questions do they ask? And perhaps most important, how is the story they write shaped by the policies of the business they work for and the particular public they serve?

How We Generate News

Finally, there is the issue of how much involvement academics have in shaping news reporting. We religion scholars are generally absent. Most of us talk too long, see everything as complex and nuanced, and get back to reporters three days after they leave a message on our answering machines. We do not and may not want to know how to write for the media. Nor do we care to train our students on how to do this. But if academics are going to complain about the media bias, then we ought to be a part of correcting that bias. A senior administrator told me that the only thing worse than having me write editorials was not having me write them!

What if we were to ask our students to write an editorial instead of a short paper? Editorials are a special breed of writing. They have to be written for a wide and diverse audience. They have to be short. It is a rigorous discipline to learn to say what you have to say in 750 words. It is much easier to write 2,000 words. It is equally difficult to write a good letter to the editor, one that is informative, does not “flame,” and truly helps further the public conversation.

Then there is the question of whether to encourage students to send their editorial to the local paper. One has to consider the situation in which this might put the student. One possibility is to have an editorial written by the class as a whole, or perhaps two editorials reflecting different points of view. One might explore with a local paper beforehand if they would be willing to publish the students' editorials.

In sum, I have found that there is no better way to have students ponder how their studies relate to the events of the day than to integrate media articles on a regular basis for them to review and analyze. Not only do they develop a commitment to enhancing public discourse, but they also learn how to include disparate voices that are productive for understanding religion.