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Rachel Wagner is an Assistant Professor of Religion at Ithaca College. She wrote a dissertation on the humanistic function of biblical forms in William Blake's poetry. Her recent interests have centered on religion and popular culture. She has written pieces on Islam and video games, on Harry Potter *and* The Matrix *, and has appeared in a Warner Brothers documentary about the film series.*

Neil Postman prophetically remarked in 1985 in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that "we face the rapid dissolution of the assumptions of an education organized around the slow-moving printed word, and the equally rapid emergence of a new education based on the speed-of-light electronic image." Although Postman was mostly concerned about the effects of television on education, his observation applies equally well to the new forms of multimedia today. Whether we like it or not, most of today's students are much less likely to get their "news" in print or on television, and are more likely to find it in online "newspapers" or other new media such as blogs, streaming video, YouTube, and podcasts. So if we want to meet students where they are, then we owe it to them to think carefully about the new pedagogical challenges that come with responsible analysis of the "news" in the digital twenty-first century. For those of us who grew up in a very different environment, we may find ourselves in the awkward position of teaching these fully wired students about a world that for us is new and at times confusing, but which they simply take for granted.

At Ithaca College, I teach a number of different religious studies courses. No matter the course, I frequently utilize elements of the "news" in the classroom as a way of showing students the relevance of what may otherwise seem distant concepts. When Ted Haggard was indicted by his congregation for sexual misconduct, reports about this incident colored our discussions about how beliefs about biblical interpretation can shape some Christians' assumptions about homosexuality. The international hubbub surrounding Madonna's melodramatic "crucifixion" in concert invited class discussion about gender and pop culture critiques of Christianity, but also

more practical consideration about how stories about religion get reported in news media, and why they do. The "appearance" of the Virgin Mary in chocolate drippings in a candy company in California gave rich dimension to our discussions of modern veneration of Mary. Students generally respond enthusiastically to the integration of pertinent news reports into the traditional discussion of religious experience. However, the integration of online news material into my courses has not been without its headaches.

Perhaps the most obvious issue I have addressed is the problem of defining "news" today and the hidden questions about authorship, authority, and the interpretation of "facts" that the analysis of news implies. In an informal poll in one of my courses, I found that only a handful of students think first of print sources when asked where they read the "news," and predictably most responded that they get their news on the Internet. Although many expressed a vague sense that different news sources have different biases, they could not clearly articulate how one might recognize what these are. My students agreed with me that stories drawn (online or in print) from national papers like the *New York Times* or from broadcasting companies like CNN, PBS, and the BBC should be considered "news," along with print and online versions of mainstream news magazines like *Time*, *U.S. News and World Report*, or *Newsweek*. But these are not the only sources that students consult for their news — they also get it from a host of Web sites, from discussion boards, even from personal e-mail. When asked if a blog could be considered "news," my students expressed some uncertainty, arguing that it depends on the journalistic associations and training of the blogger. Although one student cringed while declaiming the objectivity of Fox News, none of them were certain *why* some news outlets should be viewed as more reliable than others. Whether we like it or not, using news in the classroom embroils us in the best and worst of postmodernist and deconstructionist debates about meaning and authority.

The pop trickle-down form of the postmodern celebration of personal perspective means that some students may confuse the right to express themselves with the need to think critically about the sources they consume. Gone is the modernist assumption, described by literary theorist Terry Eagleton as that perspective which "rises above its object to a point from which it can peer down and disinterestedly examine it." Today's students simply assume that objectivity is never fully achievable. Accordingly, professorial critique of student analysis of news can embroil us in a pop form of quasi-Marxian self-indictment: Instructors have "the power" — thus our assessments of student news selection and responses to it can be viewed as a mere whim of academic hegemony. Foucault harshly critiques the role of "examination" in (modernist) schools, since it "combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish." In a postmodern environment, the mere assessment of student writing can seem

hazardous, a problem exacerbated by the use of the news in student assignments, since issues of authority and "truth" are so much at the surface.

Stewart Hoover's brilliant 1998 exploration of the state of religion reporting, *Religion in the News*, focuses mainly on how reporters select what to say about religion and how one determines what religious expertise looks like — but he also acknowledges the demise of the modernist perspective for scholars of journalism, who have given up "the notion that [journalism] is clearly and unequivocally a search for truth." Most journalism scholars today, he says, openly "concede that a set of conventions influences or determines the selection and interpretation of fact in the press." Thus, teaching students about the nature of the news means teaching them about the tricky relationship between facts and interpretation in a journalist's creation of a news report. Religious studies has long been concerned with the problem of facts and interpretation, so bringing such concerns to the surface in the analysis of the news can have compelling collateral results in discussions about the formation of sacred texts assumed to be the product of "reporting."

Critical analysis of news in the classroom also raises an interdisciplinary problem: Does my PhD in religious studies de facto qualify me as an instructor of journalistic technique, just because the topic in a given news article has to do with religion? I wonder how my colleagues in the School of Communications would feel if I told them that I am teaching students how to understand the rhetorical purposes of different types of journalistic writing. Of course, religious studies is typically an interdisciplinary endeavor, but the question remains how religion professors can be certain that they have attained the appropriate skill-set in another discipline to then instruct students about how to use it.

Nevertheless, I believe that struggling with the problem of perspective in religious journalism can be an effective pedagogical tool. An ongoing, flexible assignment in my "Islam and Media" course is to have students bring in news articles dealing with Islam. The goal is to help them develop the tools with which to assess an author's purpose, to consider how physical arrangement of image and text on the page (or the Web site) may affect interpretation of meaning, and to learn how content analysis can help to identify implicit biases. Because I am a scholar of religious studies, these techniques are all filtered through the examination of how religious belief can affect an author's point of view, and how the journalistic description of religion raises distinctive issues. Precisely by peeling back the assumption of objectivity in journalism, we can reintroduce what Postman calls "perplexity," the difficulty students encounter when they must "remember," "study," and "apply" what they have learned to multiple contexts.

For my Christianity course, I have students complete a series of brief exercises dubbed "Christianity in Culture Citings." For each of these assignments, students must locate five different "citings" of Christianity in the culture around them, and write a brief summary about each, citing it appropriately, and critiquing the role that Christianity plays in the item's formulation or function. Those students who select news items are surprisingly generous in their appraisal of what a legitimate "news" source may be — so generous that the assignment itself has shown me just how many students exhibit a false confidence about their ability to assess the reliability of news sources. In an age where some students may read Daniel Pipes' or Pat Robertson's online opinions as reliable "news," or who may see *The Onion* as a legitimate source of public opinion, it seems imperative that we provide students with the skills to recognize different kinds and qualities of "reporting."

In my "Women and Religion" course, I require that students select and critique a single news story in a bit more detail. For each "newsworthy" assignment, students must consider why the story they select about women and religion has been reported in mainstream media. I ask them questions such as: Why do you think *this* issue made it into mainstream news? What can you learn about the author that might enlighten your understanding of the author's views and intentions in reporting this story? Why might this story about women's role in religion sell papers or draw readers? This assignment has met with mixed success, primarily because I find that students have great difficulty assessing what a "mainstream" news source might be and will just as likely pull material from grassroots magazines, local flyers, and the college paper as from national news outlets. They also struggle with the realization that news is not news from the beginning, but was selected, arranged, and interpreted by somebody with a particular purpose in mind, usually commercially driven.

One could convincingly argue that the pedagogical problem of assessment of sources is nothing new and is merely aggravated today by the accessibility of online resources. However, it seems to me that what is new for our students is the sheer volume of "news" resources available combined with the trickling-down of the worst aspects of postmodern theory into American culture. For students who take the digital world for granted, we cannot responsibly consider the issues relating to the integration of news in the classroom without facing head-on what the term "news" means to them today and giving them the tools to understand how larger debates about meaning and authority affect reporting about religion. We can utilize the best of postmodern perspectivism as an antidote to the worst of postmodern perspectivism when we illustrate for our students, as Postman puts it, that "Some ways of truth-telling are better than others."

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