

NEWS TALKS

Curricular Assignment



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Following the news gives us information, ideas, and inspiration. From learning what is happening, to why events unfolded as they did, you might wonder how are people responding and how did a certain story evolve over time? Reading the newspaper provides insight into questions of local politics, state happenings, national news, and global affairs.

The newspaper and other news sources provide a basis from which to learn what your elected officials are doing, how people respond to those actions, and how recent events impact us, the more than 330 million people living in the United States together. Understandably, researchers are worried, then, about declining newspaper readership, reasoning that:

In the absence of a local news organization, social media and internet sites often have become the default media for reading, viewing and sharing news—as well as rumor and gossip—exacerbating political, social and economic divisions in a polarized nation (Abernathy, 2020, p. 10).

Though newspaper circulation and readership are admittedly on the decline, newspapers remain a vital resource for local stories, providing residents with more crucial information than other news outlets.

A Duke [University] study of 100 mid-sized communities in 2016 found that newspapers accounted for 60 percent of stories produced in a typical week that addressed a critical information need. By comparison, only 15 percent of the stories produced by other outlets – television, radio, and online news sites – were both locally produced and met a critical information need. (Abernathy, 2020, p. 93)

When you have information about your community and its concerns, you have a foundation for conversation or news talks, which in turns provides a gateway to thinking about and taking action both alone and with others. Reading the newspaper increases your civic knowledge, enhances your ability to talk clearly about issues of the day, and deepens your understanding of how people evaluate the complexity, importance, and value of events, sometimes differently, in accordance with different ethical values.

In sum, local news remains a vital link to freedom of expression and civic engagement:

The coronavirus pandemic has reminded us, yet again, of the vital importance of local news. Interest in and appreciation for local news has surged in recent months, as residents in cities and rural communities have searched for accurate, reliable and comprehensive information about what is occurring in their own neighborhood. Yet, at this very moment, local news organizations, large and small, for-profit and nonprofit, are confronting a dire economic threat to their existence. Even in their

drastically diminished state, surviving local newspapers still remain a vital source of local news and information. A recent study found that local newspapers produce more than half of all original local stories that address a critical information need – such as education, the environment and the health and safety of our community. This suggests the importance of public policy and philanthropic efforts that support the viability of strong local newspapers, as well as digital-only news outlets, ethnic media and public broadcasting. In order to replenish and revive the local news ecosystem, and address the information needs of underserved communities, there needs to be both a significant increase in funding and a recommitment to journalism’s civic mission. (Abernathy, 2020, p. 53)

With this activity, you’ll increase your *knowledge* by considering:

1. What values undergird and influence news and opinion pieces?
2. How do newspapers and news outlets best serve our communities?

You’ll have the opportunity to learn *skills* by considering:

1. What ways, orally and in writing, can you respond to a story over time?
2. How to shape a message that meets the requirements for writing a letter to the editor?

You can consider your own values and that of others by asking:

1. Whose perspectives are highlighted in a story and why?
2. What other views could be considered to better understand the whole story?
3. What would you say about this news issue in line with your values?

Putting what you learn into *action* means asking:

1. What groups or people could you work with to advance a community initiative featured in the news?
2. Who could you talk to about the news to deepen your understanding and theirs?

The Activity

1. Read the newspaper during the course term and select articles to discuss in class (the number of required articles will be determined by your instructor).
2. Prepare a short 2-3 page paper for each article that includes an introduction, review of the article and issue, brief but significant application of two course readings to the article or issue, and your take-away, position, or lingering questions as a conclusion. The paper(s) will be the basis of small group discussions in class.

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3. Write one letter to the editor in response to a newspaper article. Be sure to adhere to the requirements as set forth by your local newspaper for submission.

Reflection Instructions

1. Discuss your newspaper article with others in a small group of up to 5 people.
2. As you present your newspaper issue, be sure to inform others sufficiently about the issue, and demonstrate how communication ethics is expressed in everyday news events.
3. Where else could you look for information or who else could you talk to, to expand what you learned in the newspaper?

For Instructors

Rationale

Newspapers provide information, depth, and resources for people to effectively participate in political processes, particularly at the local level (Schuefele et al. 2002)¹. Newspaper readers benefit in multiple ways: they feel a greater connection with their community (McLeod, et al., 1999)², they increase their formal associations (Rothenbuhler et al., 1996)³, and they volunteer more often (Putnam, 2001)⁴. Despite the myriad benefits, newspaper readership is on the decline and with it, important civic consequences.

Objectives

1. Articulate how reporting serves communities by providing information, connecting people, and acting as a watchdog to government action.
2. Practice both talking about and writing about news concerns, highlighting ethical issues and values.
3. Compose a letter to the editor.
4. Critically examine reporting styles to determine whose perspectives are featured and what other views could and should be considered.
5. Determine what local groups have a stake in the issue(s) featured in the news.

Materials Required

Students will need access to a daily newspaper. Consider that many daily papers limit online content.

Discussion Questions

Most often, questions will emerge from the students' discussions with one another in small groups to amplify key issues and/or connect to other issues previously discussed in class. General discussion questions might also include:

1. What was it about that issue that captured your attention and interest?
2. What organizations in the community do you think support (or critique) the issue?

¹ Scheufele, D. A., Shanahan, J. and Kim, S-H. (2002). Who cares about local politics? Media influences on local political involvement, issue awareness, and attitude strength. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79 (2), 427-444.

² McLeod, J. M., Scheufele D. A. and Moy, P. (1999). Community, communication, and participation: The role of mass media and interpersonal discussion of local political participation. *Political Communication*, 16 (3), 315-336.

³ Rothenbuhler, E.W., Mullen, L. J., DeLaurell, R., and Ryu, C. R. (1996). Communication, community attachment, and involvement. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 73 (2), 445-466.

⁴ Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

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3. How have these concerns, programs, or issues been addressed in other communities or in other times, historically?
4. What policies and practices stand in the way of moving toward better solutions?
5. Who benefits most from and who pays the most costs of the issue you're discussing, and how so?
6. What information or perspective was not considered fully in reporting?

Duration

Each small group discussion will require approximately 25 minutes, with students first using 3 minutes each to present their newspaper article then leaving 10 minutes for questions and discussion.

Class Size

This activity can be adapted for small, large, and online instruction.

Special Considerations/Alternatives

- This assignment can be modified as an opportunity to for each student to present their article to the entire class (to promote public speaking) with an optional full sentence outline prepared by the student.
- To encourage regular reading, instructors can suggest students create a mini portfolio of 6 articles/news issues spaced out throughout the term, possible according to distinct topical areas such as: culture and the arts; government decision making; schools and education; public safety; immigration and diversity; gender/sexuality; finance and economics.
- This assignment can be modified as a one-day class session where students bring in a newspaper, select the article, prepare an outline, and discuss in small groups.

Suggested Readings

- The local, daily newspaper.
- Local, weekly newspapers.
- Abernathy, P. M. (2020). News deserts and ghost newspapers: Will local news survive? Available at <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/news-deserts-and-ghost-newspapers-will-local-news-survive/>
- Jovanovic, S., DeGooyer, D., and Reno, D. (2011). News talks: Critical service-learning for social change. *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas*, 27 (1), 7-21.
- Knight Foundation & Gallup (2019). Putting a price tag on local news. Available at: <https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Putting-a-Price-Tag-on-Local-News-final-updated.pdf>