



Teaching Public Relations

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Current Events Testing: A Guide to Helping Public Relations Students Keep Up With the News

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Communication professors in general, and public relations professors in particular, strongly advise students to know what is going on in the world by keeping up with the news. While teachers and professionals recognize the need to monitor the news, students do not always make it a priority. This is particularly true of students and newspapers. Newspaper readership in the United States is steadily declining (Bogart, 1989), particularly among college students and younger Americans (Barnhurst and Wartella, 1991; Baskette, Sissors & Brooks, 1992).

This decline is somewhat paradoxical, because media usage overall is actually increasing (Bogart, 1989; Robinson & Jeffries, 1979). Alternative sources such as cable television and VCRs compete increasingly for leisure time (Bogart, 1989; Timbs, 1993; Lin, 1994). Many students appear to classify all reading as a work-related function, while perceiving video-related media such as television as an entertainment function (Jeffries and Atkin, 1996).

A greater problem may be the relationship between the orientation of the news source and the orientation of the average college student. Age is predictive of newspaper readership (Bogart, 1989): Older people may have a greater stake in society, and therefore a greater interest in the kind of public affairs orientation of the news (Miller, 1987). As Barnhurst and Wartella note:

It is not only that the news largely tells the story of white, middle-class males, but that it depends on a framework or context foreign to the students. News invokes the idea or mythology of the individual as a power in democracy and as a creator of society. Students do not see themselves as citizens participating in democracy; they are more likely to see themselves as consumers seeking pleasures in the way that the entertainment media position audiences (207).

This phenomenon is particularly strong in the area of politics, to which students are becoming less, rather than more, connected. The result is a vicious cycle: Students do not feel empowered enough by society to read a newspaper, but regular newspaper reading might help empower them to participate in the democratic process.

Constant repetition of the "public relations students should be up on the news" mantra is insufficient, since these students may be alienated from world affairs and may find the long-term benefits of news

monitoring difficult to grasp. Learning to follow the news may be daunting for some, at first. A more tangible, measurable system of rewards and punishments for news knowledge is required. One of the most effective methods is to make the news a regular part of examinations.

RATIONALE FOR A CURRENT-EVENTS ORIENTATION

Public relations students benefit from familiarity with current events in three areas: in class, out of class, and after graduation.

The benefits in the classroom are the most immediate and, in some ways, the most rewarding. Including current events in class discussion combats the common complaint that textbook theory has no connection to the "real world." Discussing events in the news leads to applications of ethical tests, as conflict-oriented stories produce a range of ethical issues for candid, vigorous debate. Finally, regularly monitoring the news can help students understand the shape and substance of the news story, which, in turn, can help students improve the writing and analytical skills essential to a career in public relations.

Outside the classroom, students who learn to monitor the news come to think of it less as a requirement for the course and more as a natural habit that transcends the curriculum. In the broadest sense, they spend an increased amount of their non-academic time educating themselves. This frequently leads to news discussions among classmates, roommates, and others that would not have occurred without the stimulation provided by the news. Public relations students may take on higher-level roles in their social circles by introducing topics, providing context for conversations, and generally spurring a more sophisticated debate in situations outside the classroom than they would have if they hadn't monitored the news. A well-informed, news-savvy student comes into class saying, "I talked about the issue from our last class when I got home, and my roommates and I decided that..." Such a process encourages integration of in-class and out-of-class discussion about significant issues.

In the long run, one of the most important benefits of instilling a current-events orientation in class is the potential development of a lifelong habit. Newhagen refers to this as a "pedagogical catalyst to promote habitual news media use" (27). As students come to recognize and enjoy the benefits of monitoring the media during the semester, they tend to retain the routine long after the term ends.

SELECTING NEWS SOURCES FOR CURRENT EVENTS TESTS

Faculty members are older than the vast majority of their students and usually are more attuned to sophisticated news sources than is the general population. This combination makes it tempting to guide or even require students to attend to news sources outside their usual media mix. A teacher may appreciate the Jim Lehrer News Hour and The New York Times while denigrating MTV News and Rolling Stone; the student may perceive the value of these media choices as the reverse.

While wanting students to appreciate sophisticated news sources is admirable, it is not always attainable. It is often more useful to target a middle ground between the higher-level news diet normally selected by the faculty member and the lower-level news diet frequently selected by the student. This middle level includes such mainstream media as weekly newsmagazines (Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report), the major daily newspaper in the local market, nightly news broadcasts by networks and affiliates, CNN and all-news radio. Although the sophistication of the coverage varies among these sources, there is some agreement as to what kinds of stories are important. At the same time, students should be given leeway to make some of their own decisions on news sources, based on personal

preferences and schedules. Still others work in the evening, eliminating the option of watching the regular network newscast. Others lack access to cable or don't have the means to buy a subscription. Some students go beyond traditional news sources, relying on Internet news pages and obscure print sources.

It can be counterproductive to require students to monitor a specific medium. It is reasonable, and empowering, instead to require that students REMAIN CURRENT ON MAINSTREAM ISSUES while allowing them to determine individual media preferences that help them to achieve the goal. As one source is cited over another during discussion of news events, it often becomes obvious to students which media and which sources within a medium provide the most useful information. Furthermore, the more diversity of news sources, the more vigorous and informed the debate.

SELECTING QUESTIONS AND FORMATS FOR CURRENT EVENTS TESTS

Determining which questions to include on a test can be difficult, because perceptions of news values differ dramatically. The following guidelines are designed to assist the instructor in developing current events questions. To assist the students in preparing for the test, the instructor may elect to explain some of these guidelines.

1. Select stories that have run for a considerable amount of time. It is unfair to students to single out one-day stories for questions since even the most avid news fans are occasionally out of touch with the press.
2. Avoid demographic bias. Some news is more important to some groups than others. For example, as a generalization, sports is a subject followed more by men than by women, and should be avoided unless a story dramatically transcends the sports page. The selection of news stories should reflect the diversity of the classroom and the world.
3. Avoid local stories. Out-of-town or foreign students from other areas are at a distinct disadvantage dealing with questions about local mayors, businesses, and the like. Major international stories are better candidates.
4. Include a balance of stories from different subject areas. It is easy, and tempting, to load up the list with questions on politics and government because these stories frequently dominate the news. However, many students intensely dislike politics, and find monitoring the news media to be a very negative experience if they perceive it to mean "know what is going on in politics." Over the course of the term, there are enough significant stories in business, entertainment and other areas to construct a varied set of questions.
5. Be fair in terms of the timing of the questions. If an event took place the week before the test, a question requiring a relatively detailed response is warranted. If an event took place a month before the test, a more generic question is more appropriate.
6. Vary the structure of the question. Don't always ask the student to identify a person, place or thing – there is a variety of approaches to the same basic issue. For example:

Question One: Madeleine Albright is the highest-ranking woman in the history of American politics. What is her title?

Question Two: The highest-ranking female official in the United States is the Secretary of State. Who is she?

Question Three: Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the highest-ranking woman in American politics, met with a key Middle Eastern leader last week.

With whom did she meet, and what was the purpose of their meeting?

3. Give students options for questions. For example, require students to answer four out of five or six out of eight questions. This minimizes the likelihood that a student who missed a few days of news will be penalized.
4. Offer a Bonus Question at the end of the test. A five-point bonus on a 100-point test does not dramatically influence the grade but can have a positive effect on the student's attitude, especially at the conclusion of the exam. Bonus questions can focus on a more obscure or quirky subject than the questions included in the main part of the test.

INCLUSION OF CURRENT EVENTS IN OTHER QUESTIONS

While stand-alone questions focusing on current events help motivate students to monitor the news, they do not always help students relate knowledge to their studies. As Newhagen noted, "The assumption underlying the use of the quizzes is that mere exposure to news media will result in increased knowledge" (207). The instructor can help enhance mastery and relevance of the material by creating questions that incorporate current events and lessons from the textbook.

For example, students in introductory courses are taught the four basic components of the public relations process: problem definition, planning and programming, implementation, and evaluation. The theoretical concepts can be illuminated by an essay question such as:

You are a public relations consultant hired by the administrators of the Mir program. The administrators want to reach the appropriate publics to ensure continued support for the program, particularly in terms of funding. Write a memo to the administrators 1) listing and explaining the four basic components of the public relations process; 2) providing specific steps you would advise the administration to take for each component to help achieve the agency's public relations objectives.

This type of question offers all the advantages already listed for basic questions, while taking the educational experience one step further by having students apply textbook theory to timely events – thus enhancing mastery of both.

Grading responses to the essay questions can be divided: a grade for explaining the components of the process and a grade for recommendations that demonstrate an understanding of the current events situation and provide useful counsel. It is even possible to include bonus points for the essay if students can provide evidence that the recommendations they make are actually implemented. For example, students responding to an essay question about the public relations response of ValuJet following a highly-publicized crash might advise the company to change its name. If the company takes this action during the course of the term, the students should be rewarded for providing ideas that have been implemented.

If this approach is used, the students should be responsible for submitting evidence that the recommendation has been used. This opportunity creates additional incentive for students to follow a particular story and empowers the student when his or her recommendations are used.

CONCLUSION

The instructor who commits to current events discussion in the classroom, and testing on examinations, must make the news an integral part of the curriculum and must carefully construct questions that are both stimulating and fair. An emphasis on the news can enliven the classroom experience, demonstrate the connection between textbook lessons and events occurring in the world, help prepare students for realistic expectations in the public relations business, nurture students' natural curiosity, and, ultimately, help build a better-informed citizenry.

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