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# Commentary: Educating journalism students to do comprehensive reporting

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## Educating journalism students to do comprehensive reporting



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Citizens of every country need the news as information disseminator, interpreter, and public mobilizer. We cannot make sense of continued hunger, disease, and mass murder without knowledge of the (in) action of major governments, their multinational corporations, financial institutions, and representatives in the United Nations. Unfortunately, news coverage is often late, episodic, and inadequate in terms of historical and systemic background. When it addresses crises involving national minorities and foreign others, it is sometimes loaded with ethnocentric, racist, and pornographic descriptions of victims, with heroes mostly from the majority community or the global North.

It is a truism that representations of crises in the news are the only access to distant events for most of us. In the absence of travel experience or first-hand knowledge, the representation is the only reality. Hitler would not exist for most people without the news. But, how many know the factors and forces that allowed the rise of a genocidaire like Hitler in the much-touted form of government called an electoral democracy, someone who was allowed to kill 6 million other humans? Such knowledge makes a difference on how we understand matters of life and death.

The lack of explanation of causes is a longstanding complaint against journalism. Reasons include the pressures of a 24-hour news cycle, issue complexity, ideologically explosive content, and the format, platform or craft focus of news writing. Writing for daily news deadlines permits description of What and Where but only allows limited explanation of the Why and How of an event or issue. Good

reporting needs to be informed by previously published work, especially in a time of shrinking reporting staff. This is the focus of this piece.

Selecting topics and deciding on their treatment is not without controversy. The gates to press reports are guarded by influentials ranging from editors to executives and owners, each with their perceptions of what is appropriate in light of national historical and present day vantage points, as well as organizational interests. If news were a mirror reflection of events, or if objectivity was humanly possible, reporting on an event would be identical in all news media around the world. It is not.

## Going beyond objectivity and neutrality

In 2005, journalist-turned-journalism-professor Dan Gilmor wrote about how the days of objectivity and bias-free writing were numbered:<sup>1</sup>

Maybe it's time to say a fond farewell to an old canon of journalism: objectivity. But it will never be time to kiss off the values and principles that undergird the idea.

Objectivity is a construct of recent times. One reason for its rise in the journalism sphere has been the consolidation of newspapers and television into monopolies and oligopolies in the past half-century. If one voice overwhelms all the others, there is a public interest in playing stories as straight as possible—not favoring one side over the other (or others, to be more precise, as there are rarely just two sides to any issue).

There were good business reasons to be “objective,” too, not least that a newspaper didn't want to make large parts of its community angry. And, no doubt, libel law has played a role, too. If a publication could say it “got both sides,” perhaps a libel plaintiff would have more trouble winning. Again, the idea of objectivity is a worthy one. But we are human. We have biases and backgrounds and a variety of conflicts that we bring to our jobs every day.

I'd like to toss out objectivity as a goal, however, and replace it with four other notions that may add up to the same thing. They are pillars of good journalism: thoroughness, accuracy, fairness and transparency.

The lines separating them are not always clear. They are open to wide interpretation, and are therefore loaded with nuance in themselves. But I think they are a useful way to approach quality journalism. They are, moreover, easier to achieve in an online setting.

Researchers<sup>2</sup> continue to report major differences between actual news coverage of the same event around the world. This could be due to localization in foreign news construction that risks diluting the complexity of the foreign event;

researchers have found an increasing focus on domestic angles and local topics.<sup>3</sup> Decisions about the construction of news in each organization are mostly made within one country in spite of global economic expansion since the Washington consensus (among industrialized nations) and the transmission of news across national borders.

The commercialization of news gathering that occurred in the US after the 1830s development of the penny press has been promoted as if it were natural and normative for all countries since then, without mentioning the US government subsidies that led up to this period. University programs served newspaper businesses by teaching “neutral” writing so no segment of the audience was lost to advertisers in the early 1900s. Writing about every issue had to have two sides, thus creating a false balance and pendulum swings (“on the one hand this, on the other hand that”). Kovach and Rosenstiel’s frequently-used US textbook, *The Elements of Journalism*, points out the need for comprehensive news coverage by drawing a comparison between journalism and cartography: Both require proportionality and completeness in order to be accurate, and thus to facilitate exploration and understanding.<sup>4</sup>

## Comprehensiveness

Comprehensiveness was used to study reporting in a major US study of television and social behavior in the mid-1970s.<sup>5</sup> A decade later, a more extensive method was used to analyze comprehensiveness in science news magazines.<sup>6</sup> Authoritative sources of scientific fact were examined to establish details of the news event and then compared with coverage in popular magazines. John McManus’ *Grade the News Score Card* (GradeTheNews.org) gives two points for “core” subjects like politics, natural disasters, education, economics, and health, and one point for subjects with less or shorter impact like celebrities, sports, and human interest stories. Each story then receives three additional points if it is mostly “big picture” reporting and has the potential to affect more than 10 percent of local residents in a significant way. A story that names sources receives an additional two points. To get journalism users to be news literate, Newstrust.net offers four different review forms focusing on accuracy, balance, context, investigative enterprise, expertise and adequate numbers of sources, public value, responsible authorship, and documentation of methods of evidence gathering.

Going beyond norms for objectivity and bias-free writing that arose in response to US needs, in *Geopolitics of Representation*.<sup>7</sup> I too advocate comprehensiveness as a measure to assess journalism’s presentation of knowledge. This is similar to Eric Loo’s exhortation to students to do “multi-dimensional reporting” (personal communication). Comprehensiveness honors knowledge-based journalism, advocated since 2005 by the Carnegie-Knight *Initiative on the Future of Journalism Education*<sup>8</sup> in the US that is trying to broaden the knowledge base of students at major journalism schools. My advocacy is designed to address the need for complexity and front-end research of existing knowledge prior to going on site to do interviews or observe. Thomas Patterson holds, “Journalists are not trained to think first about how systematic knowledge might inform a news story. They look

first to the scene of action and then to the statements of involved or interested parties. Typically, the question of whether a particular episode might have a fuller explanation is never asked. Stanford's Shanto Iyengar has concluded in his studies that news is overwhelmingly "episodic." Events are usually reported in isolation.<sup>9</sup> Background research is not the glamorous on-camera part of journalism that attracts young intrepid extroverted adolescents to the field.

## Elements of comprehensive reporting

More is considered better in the traditional measure of press attention to a topic. Political scientists<sup>10, 11</sup> have found it was the level of press attention that served to alert the public and politicians, and predicted the strength of the international community's response and not the number of deaths and damage. They measured this "alerting function" of the press by counting the combined number of stories in TV and newspapers. Journalism researchers have taken this further. We have found news reports set the agenda for what to think about, but they also tell readers how much time/weight they should give to this event as against myriad others (priming) and what angle to analyze it from (framing). Given the power of news reports, many organizations have started listing the most important "missed stories" of the previous year at year-end.

I propose newsrooms should pay attention to the following to assess whether they have covered a newsworthy event or issue in a qualitatively useful manner for citizens:

- a. Timing of the first report
- b. Sustained reports until the issue is resolved
- c. Length and depth of reports
- d. Use of news features and background article as against only hard news
- e. Inclusion of causes of the crisis in news reports
- f. Inclusion of names of those responsible for causing the crisis
- g. Inclusion of remedies and who is responsible to act
- h. Inclusion of diverse non-traditional sources close to those in the news event other than government officials, e.g. the victims, non-governmental organizations.

## Research on Comprehensive Reporting: The Darfur Sudan Illustration

Students and colleagues at the University of Colorado in Boulder collaborated with me over five years to measure the timeliness and comprehensiveness of reporting on the world's worst humanitarian crisis in 2005, the mass murders of 50,000 Darfuri villagers and the dislocation of 2 million at the hands of their own government in Khartoum.

Ten news organizations in seven countries with differing historical geopolitical solidarities (global North and South), current national interest in Sudan (high,

medium, low), press ownership (state-private), and intended audiences from distinct political-linguistic constituencies (domestic-foreign) were studied. Articles with substantial Darfur coverage (more than half their paragraphs addressing the Darfur conflict) published between the start of the uprising and when coding began twenty-six months later were analyzed. By studying more than a few articles by a few columnists or news organizations, this study got at the systemic nature of representation over time, what Carey called the total curriculum of journalism.<sup>12</sup> Patterns were observed and a geopolitical model of predictors of differences in foreign news was suggested to illustrate differences in the relationship of contextual power to news representations.

News organizations selected from the global North included the US's New York Times and Washington Post, France's Le Monde, and the UK's Guardian and BBC Web site. News organizations from the global South included China's People's Daily and China Daily, Egypt's Al-Ahram, Qatar's Al Jazeera English-language web site, and South Africa's Mail & Guardian Online. Malaysia and India have oil interests in Sudan, but their privately-owned news organizations were not studied either because their leading news organizations had little coverage on Darfur or did not have chronologically searchable archives in 2005.

We found the timing of substantial-depth coverage of the Darfur uprising in February 2003 varied across news organizations. Al-Ahram in neighboring Egypt and BBC.co.uk with many correspondents around the world covered the Darfur uprising in substantial detail within a month, in March 2003. English. AlJazeera.net did so by April 2003, within two months. China Daily in English covered it in substantial depth six months after the protest. South Africa's Mail & Guardian Online covered it nine months later, in November 2003, followed by the UK-European-US Press who covered it a year later, by February 2004. With the exceptions noted above, the coverage was late again (as in Rwanda), coming after the majority of deaths had occurred. The last news organization in this study to report on Darfur in substantial depth was the Chinese-language People's Daily intended for a domestic audience: Chinese citizens have been at the receiving end of a lot of positive spin on China's supposedly unselfish anti-colonial investments in Africa.

Distinct from reporting on the nature of the problem or remedies advocated by interested parties, all ten news organizations under study addressed the causes of the Darfur crisis least, missing the opportunity for explanatory and potentially preventive journalism. Minimal attention to causes of the conflict was common across news organizations. Discussion of causes of foreign crises requires time and resources to read history and the local press that parachute journalism does not allow. Information provision on prevention of conflict has to be tailored to particular root causes and cannot be generic. Mention of remedies and identification of who was responsible for problem resolution involved strategic

balancing acts by different news organizations. Some news organizations were located in states with friendly relations and national interest in Sudan.

News organizations from the South that write for local political constituencies, Al-Ahram and People's Daily made it clear that remedies were the internal responsibility of the sovereign government of Sudan and not outsiders. Sensitive to giving offence to its source of oil and its trading partner, China's news organizations restricted themselves to remedies rather than diagnose causes or describe the brutal conflict on the ground. Al-Ahram north of the border with Sudan chose to stay away from even voicing an opinion on how its neighbor should remedy their crisis. News intended for foreign audiences or constructed by organizations located in the global North (the Washington Post, Le Monde, the UK Guardian, BBC.co.uk, English.AJaz-eera.net, Mail & Guardian Online, and China Daily) named a combination of domestic and foreign forces including the UN as responsible for resolving the crisis; the New York Times was the only one that focused primarily on the responsibilities of the al-Bashir regime in Khartoum.

Only four news organizations achieved passing grades of 60 percent or higher on the specially constructed index, indicating that journalism educators have a lot of work to do. The Washington Post and the BBC tied for first place with a score of 67 percent of the total possible score of 130. It is clear that the UK license fee and Foreign Office allocations to the BBC World Service provide knowledge of consequence to global public education. The Mail & Guardian Online took third place with a score of 65 percent. The New York Times was in fourth place with 64 percent and Al Jazeera in fifth place with 59 percent. Scores below 60 percent are considered failing grades at many universities. Six out of ten news organizations failed on this measure of comprehensive coverage of the mass murders in Darfur.. Mid-range performers on comprehensiveness were Le Monde in sixth place (57 percent), the famous UK Guardian in seventh place (55 percent), and China Daily in eighth place (48 percent). The Arabic language daily Al-Ahram was in ninth place (36 percent) and People's Daily in tenth place (35 percent). The lowest three performers were news organizations located in the global South, in states with high current national interests in Sudan, and owned by the state. Current national interest in the region being covered was the most influential predictor, not state ownership.

## How to teach comprehensive reporting

Comprehensiveness scores on Darfur reporting by ten news organizations from the North and South showed all news organizations have room for improvement in coverage from the point of view of news as public education. Journalism education needs to improve the comprehensiveness of news if it is to meet its societal obligation. That there is no alternative to journalism for the development of an informed citizenry was my motivation to inquire into the comprehensiveness of news offered by news organizations located in different countries.

But what to teach and how to teach? Some national accrediting councils for university-based journalism curricula limit news reporting skills courses on

editing and reporting to no more than 30 per cent of the total hours required for graduation. How can journalism curricula add to those courses without running into this constraint?

In my mind, research skills are primary in the internet age to enable reporters to do background research on an issue to know the Why of an event. As information search strategies and databases become major parts of information industries, use of these resources are essential and constantly-changing skills that are invaluable for both this researcher and also the reporter. Information search strategies can be taught in conceptual courses preparatory and prior to news reporting and editing courses so these background research skills can be pre-requisites for reporting and editing courses.

The major graded assignment in my course on International Media and Global Crises is research on an event/topic chosen by the individual student. Each student is required to research all possible sources of data on her topic for at least the previous ten years---books, book chapters, scholarly journal articles, trade press articles, master's and doctoral dissertations and publicly available online sources. The final submission to the instructor includes the student's research question, search terms, keywords, search strategies, list of data bases per source, full citations organized in Refworks (or an equivalent bibliography development software program like OneNote), and an annotated bibliography in Word (or equivalent word processing program) for the smaller sub-set of citations that the student found relevant for her research.

The annotated bibliography is divided into the following sub-headings: full citation for fact-checker, abstract-summary, author's research methodology, findings, and quotable quotes. The student uses this annotated bibliography for development of a research paper on relevant news in the scholarly press that has not been reported in the popular and trade press, followed by a pitch to an editor. The pitch is presented in the form of a query letter based on the format required by the publication. Students use guidelines for submission to the weekly magazine *Foreign Policy* most often in this course. They are available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/articles/writersguidelines>. I grade the search strategy table, the Refworks bibliography, the annotated bibliography, the research paper and the pitch letter against the publication's specifications.

I recognize that the news organization that our students will be employed by will dictate timing of the first report on an event, subsequent reports until the issue is resolved, length and depth of reports, and use of news features and background articles as against only hard news. My job as an educator is to alert students in conceptual courses about the inadequacy of reporting that excludes causes of the crisis, names of those responsible for causing the crisis, remedies, who is responsible to act, and diverse non-traditional sources close to those in the news event other than government officials, e.g. the victims, non-governmental organizations. If I can teach them the importance of background research on the cumulative knowledge on a topic to inform their subsequent reporting, I will have



succeeded. I may also have helped identify unreported stories that can stand on their own without the need for expensive foreign trips.

## NOTES

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