

POV X 3: helping journalism students juxtapose author, actor and audience

Brad Gyori, Bournemouth University

Abstract

Asking journalism students to create stories with a strong point of view means requiring them to do three things at once. Compelling news writing triangulates between the perspectives of author, actor (the person who is the subject of the piece) and audience. This article examines an in-class activity that prompts students to elaborate on a single story from multiple points of view and then reflect on the choices they have made. This mix of creative collaboration and analysis encourages learners to think and act as “reflective practitioners” (Schön, 1983) while trying on a variety of professional identities related to multiple communities of practice (Gee, 2004).

Introduction: The New Remix

The News Remix is an in-class activity designed to promote media literacy amongst university-level journalism students. This approach is intended to help learners think critically about the media texts they read, view and create via an elaborate role-playing exercise.

Educators in the humanities have long relied on an array of lesson plans that foster complex investigation, including social learning strategies (Bingham & Conner 2010), problem-based learning projects (Barell 2010; Gyori 2013) and POV (point of view) writing exercises. In contrast, Journalism Studies and the field of journalism have, traditionally, sought to treat ideological bias as an obstacle to be avoided rather than an object to analyse.

When speaking of mainstream journalists, Richard Keeble (2005) highlights their “stubborn commitment to objectivity and the belief that ‘fact’ can be separated from ‘comment.’” This, he argues, “flies in the face of the postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment dualities.” Thus traditional journalism has many blind spots. “(It) prioritises the intellect over the emotion, mind over body, head over heart, the objective over the subjective.” What’s more, “by suggesting the pursuit of information can be value free, the ideology of

objectivity also serves to marginalise the ethical and political dimensions of the dominant journalistic culture” (2005, 57).

Ironically, this desire to transcend ideology has become one of the most ideologically engrained aspects of the journalistic field. Changes, however, are afoot. The fragmenting influence of digital media and withering gaze of the postmodern critique have conspired to unsettle the doctrine of objectivity, once considered—if not an attainable goal, at least a worthy ideal to champion and pursue (Tuchman 1978). Therefore, teaching journalism in the postmodern digital age may mean abandoning the Quixotic Grail quest for perfect objectivity. Certainly, students should be encouraged to seek empirical evidence and value eyewitness accounts and expert testimony over hearsay and uninformed speculation, but they must also accept that each news story reflects a complex set of interrelated biases. The notion that journalists are never entirely impartial is nothing new. As Herbert (2000) points out, “Language and subjective selection means there can be no such idea as objectivity in news reporting, even though it is often held up as a goal” (p. 65). So how can we retain journalistic integrity while acknowledging the complexity of the modern mediascape? In an age of citizen journalism, narrowcasting news aggregators, micro-bloggers, Wikipedia collaborators and news forum curators, the notion of a single coherent public sphere based on a shared set of values and beliefs seem little more than the utopian myth of a bygone era. If the Grail of perfect objectivity ever *did* exist, it has long since vanished in a haze of digital artefacts and postmodern deconstruction. Given this heady and often bewildering state of affairs, it makes little sense to urge journalism students to leach all points of view from their work. Instead, a more realistic and perhaps productive approach involves challenging them to identify and analyse multiple points of view, the many complementary and competing perspectives nascent in a single news story, hence the news remix.

This in-class activity builds on work done by researchers such as Jenkins & Kelley (2013) *Reading in a Participatory Culture: Remixing Moby-Dick in the English Classroom*, where students actively approach a text in various ways to inform their understanding. The tactics may be somewhat familiar, but the context is new. The news remix is a novel approach because it creates an opportunity for journalism students to assess and participate in the production of meaning while engaging in informed debate. Complicating and, in some respects, subverting the traditional journalistic ethos, this approach challenges students to write with extreme bias. In fact, it requires them to adopt a wide variety of polarized perspectives slipping in and out of these dispositions like Hallowe’en masks. A group of 20-30 participants select a single news story to focus on. They are then divided into four “teams.” Each team is given a worksheet that prompts them to evaluate the story from a specific perspective. Team one considers they ways that different *authors* might define this story. Team two speculates about the motives and views of different individuals or “*actors*” featured in the story. Team three considers how different *audiences* might respond to the story. And team four discusses the types of reporting that might emerge from different configurations of author, actor and audience. The work that emerges from the worksheet prompts tends to range from sarcastic to deeply insightful, as students demonstrate a strong capacity for critical thinking and a sophisticated grasp of media literacy.

Rationale

I first composed and utilised the news remix in early October 2015 whilst teaching Broadcast Journalism to a group of second year students at Bournemouth University in the UK. Assisting me was a five-page worksheet designed to promote ideological shape shifting. If the goal had been the production of carefully crafted world-class journalism, the activity would have been a dismal failure. But the objective was different. I was striving to cultivate meta-cognition. Alexander & Murphy (2000), explain the value of this pedagogical approach:

“Students who think about their own thinking (a practice called meta-cognition by psychologists) learn better than students who do not employ this strategy. Regardless of your discipline, you can foster meta-cognition by encouraging students to monitor their thinking. You can ask students about their thought process as they conduct their work” (cited in Blumberg, 2009, p. 13).

By prompting students to try on different journalistic identities in specific cultural contexts, the News Remix was tying their actions to experiences situated in the material and social world (Gee, 2004). In other words, rather than reject all biases, they were encouraged to adopt and espouse a wide range of them. This meant fluttering like magpies between different ideologies and communities of practice, while considering the implications entailed by each shift of perspective. My hope was that this complex thought-exercise would promote high-level critical thinking and foster deep learning.

Over the last thirty years, much has been written about the value of participatory education (Alexander & Murphy, 2000; Bingham & Conner, 2010; Blumberg, 2009; Collins & Halverson, 2009; Doyle, 2001; Gee, 2007; Goldin & Katz, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2009; Prensky, 2010; Thomas & Brown, 2011; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Weimer, 2002). Certainly, students who have grown up with the Internet crave active learning, and teachers who reply too heavily on lecturing run the risk of becoming mere content-delivery-systems. In contrast, effective participatory educators can, potentially, cultivate meta-cognition. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. As education reform advocate Maryellen Weimer points out, “The effectiveness of these more learner-centred methods depends on faculty being able to step aside and let students take the lead” (p. 73). At the same time, teachers must design challenging activities and then effectively guide the learning process (Gyori, 2013). Teachers who manage participatory projects too inflexibly can become mere drill sergeants, whereas, teachers who disappear into the sidelines, may demote themselves to mere spectators. Designing effective learning activities involves inviting engagement and then guiding it with purpose and focus.

As Thomas & Brown (2011) explain, “The new culture of learning is about the kind of tension that develops when students with an interest or passion that they want to explore are faced with a set of constraints that allow them to act only within given boundaries” (p. 81). This *tension* is the key to challenging them to think more critically.

Design

No one can teach a journalist to find her “voice.” But when teachers think like designers, we can create opportunities for multiple voices to emerge. Such activities are what education reform advocate Marc Prensky (2010, p. 66) calls, “epistemic games.” These are role-playing events that urge students to understand and do things from the point of view of a professional. This approach promotes “disciplinary thinking,” (Bain 2004, p. 115), the ability to reason like a practitioner working within a particular professional domain, grappling with concepts related to that role, while adopting a variety of ideological dispositions.

When creating the News Remix lesson plan, it was necessary to take certain practical considerations into account. Each seminar group had 15-20 students who were then divided into 4 teams. Just as parallel processing computers are able to engage in complex tasks far more efficiently than a single computer working in isolation, splitting the cohort into sub-groups created an opportunity to boost the collective I.Q. Each team was asked to focus on a particular facet of the New Remix activity and this allowed the class as a whole to tackle a fairly complex intellectual task far more efficiently.

As psychologist Keith Sawyer (2007) explains, complex tasks can challenge groups to tap into collective intelligence in highly productive ways. Group activities are most engaging when “there is too much work for one person, or because people with different skills sets are needed” (p. 67, 68). What’s more, collaboration is most effective in situations “where new ideas are complex combinations of prior ideas, where the task is new and unfamiliar to the group members, and where new ideas often depend on visualization and abstraction” (p. 70).

Then there is the issue of scale. Each of the sub-groups, or “teams,” had 4-5 students. This seemed a good size for the task at hand. After all, each had to be big enough to remain consistently productive, but not too big, which might tempt less motivated students to shirk and disengage.

As for timing, achieving the right balance was also paramount. If the teams had too much time or too little work, their focus would wane. If they had a great deal of work and a great deal of time, they would grow fatigued. If they had too much work and too little time they might panic and have trouble accomplishing anything. And finally, if they only had only a little time and a small amount of work, the activity would merely touch on superficial issues.

After some deliberation, I decided that during each seminar session, the four teams would simultaneously focus on 4 different portions of the News Remix worksheet for exactly a half hour. Each of these portions contained 4 prompts, and each prompt had 3 components. Because the teams had quite a bit to accomplish in a relatively short period of time, most chose to divide the work between their members with particular individuals or pairs tackling specific tasks related to each prompt. This provided a bonus lesson in spontaneous delegation, a happy offshoot of what I hoped would prove a rigorous but reasonable design-strategy.

An additional consideration involved the developmental level of the participants due to engage in the activity. As second year journalism students, they were conversant with basic editorial practices but were

still learning how to create work with exclusive content presented in an original form. The activity had to be structured to match the emergent skills located with their “zone of proximal development.” Psychologist L.S. Vygotsky (1978) defines the latter as “those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state” (p. 86). In other words, the activity had to ensure that the average student at that year level could stay in “flow,” the psychological state that Csikszentmihalyi (2002) suggests is most conducive to developmental growth. Maintaining flow involves designing activities that challenge learners without overwhelming them. As James Gee (2007) explains, “The key is finding ways to make hard things life enhancing so that people keep going and don’t fall back on learning only what is simple and easy” (p. 3). As long as students are reaching for new knowledge, they are learning. Education scholar Rob Berger (2003) points out a positive correlation between challenging activities and enhanced student performance, hence the value of “higher expectations in everything: more trust, more responsibility and deeper broader accountability” (p. 151).

Process

There is just one correct way to solve an algebraic equation. A maths teacher’s efficacy can be definitively measured by how many students offer identical answers to the same problem. In contrast, a journalism teacher is an abject failure if all of his students cover the same story in exactly the same way. Certainly, there are journalistic standards to memorize and master, and standards are necessarily derived from a process of *standardization*. This means they can be taught and evaluated with the precision and consistency of mathematic formulae. But we must be careful to avoid placing undue emphasis on fixed outcomes (Quantz, O’Connor & Magolda, 2011, p. 152).

The English have a word for something that is so basic it is completely unexceptional. They call it, “bog standard.” The trouble with formulaic teaching is it can easily become “bog standard teaching.” If the goal is perfect uniformity, it is hard to promote excellence. This is why when journalism instructors are not teaching by formula, we should be teaching by analogy. This involves familiarizing students with examples of effective journalism by modelling productive behaviours and prompting them to analyse both exemplary news stories and poorly constructed cautionary tales. As with any form of apprenticeship, some degree of imitation is required. Students often learn most effectively by “observation, imitation, and guided practice” (Collins & Halverson, 2009, p. 50). However, impactful social learning also involves elements of improvisation and invention (Bingham & Conner, 2010). Because some trial and error experimentation is necessary, students are required to struggle, and teachers should be willing to struggle alongside them. This can feel awkward and messy, but that is a good thing. That is how we know that the deep learning is taking place.

Consider a more elegant alternative: providing students with a long list of facts and then to then conducting a pub quiz style Q&A session, keeping score and finally honouring the team with the best rote memorization skills. This activity would be much easier to organise, conduct, and evaluate, but its pedagogical value would be minimal.

An even worse approach would involve asking teams to spend several minutes working together to come up with a single news headline. Because this approach would yoke them mentally to one simplistic task, it would actually diminish collective intelligence and result in “group-think,” the phenomenon that occurs “when a team of smart people ends up doing something dumber than they would have if they were working alone” (Sawyer, 2007, p. 66).

Meta-learning is messy because there are no simple right or wrong answers. What’s more, it involves collaboration, crosstalk, and negotiation. This means “students are no longer passive recipients of knowledge; they are decision-makers about the nature and structure of their own learning” (Barell, 2010, p. 179). Reflecting on the results of a meta-lesson can require as much time and effort as the initial activity. During these debriefing sessions, instructors are challenged to improvise and invent as much as their students. Because there is no way to predict how students will respond to a particular prompt, the teacher must provide spontaneous feedback remaining receptive to criteria and contexts that he or she is first encountering on the fly.

At the same time, some planning and overt instruction is also invaluable. A robust learning process is a mix of premeditation and spontaneous interaction. Rather than accept the false lecture vs. workshop dichotomy, effective participatory educators understand that even the most interactive, hands-on lesson plan often benefits from a well timed bit of old fashioned top-down lecturing. Lecture does not have to be the enemy of participation. In fact, it can be an indispensable ally, as long as it is delivered strategically. Upon reaching

new levels, video game players receive instruction “just in time and on demand.” Likewise, effective participatory education enhances engagement by providing vital information at key moments throughout the learning process (Gee, 2007). During the News Remix activity this involved moving around the room and clarifying key terms and questions for students when they were uncertain how to proceed. There was no need for a long lecture in advance of this process, just a brief clarification of the central goal: telling a single news story from multiple perspectives and then considering the journalistic implications of this process.

Results

Four seminar groups of second year journalism students participated in the News Remix activity. At the outset, each class was asked to suggest a current news story to focus on. It needed to be sufficiently complex to afford multiple interpretive strategies. Allowing the students to determine their own news agenda provided an additional incentive to engage with the assignment. Terry Doyle (2001) explains:

“Whenever possible, we should be giving students choices in what topic they explore as they learn our course materials. The reasons are clear. Choice helps improve interest in the topic. Enhanced interest means enhanced engagement. Enhanced engagement likely means a better outcome. In addition, when students choose the topic, they take responsibility for their decision. They cannot blame the teacher for assigning a boring topic” (p. 83).

Two of the seminar groups wanted to focus on how the Syrian refugee crisis was affecting UK immigration policy. The other two selected a story about (then) Prime Minister David Cameron, an alleged fraternity prank and severed pig’s head, and a report about Wikileaks whistle blower Edward Snowden joining Twitter and acquiring a million followers in less than 24 hours.

As previously stated, each seminar group of 20 was divided into 4 teams of 4-5 students each. Each of these teams was then asked to approach the same news story from a different perspective. For instance, the “team 1” groups were tasked with inventing 3 authors with radically divergent perspectives working in media contexts spanning a wide variety of domains. All of the participants seemed comfortable acting as homodiegetic reporters, active participants in the events they were describing as opposed to detached omniscient narrators. One of these groups categorized its authors in terms of political affiliation: left, right and centre. Another team defined its authors in terms of political engagement: rabid, moderate and indifferent. Still another team invented authors in 3 different geographical locales. The team 1 groups were also required to create headlines written by their fictitious authors. The resulting blurbs ranged from whimsical to reactionary to heart-rending:

“David #Hameron – Allegations of a pigstress”

“Keep Our Jobs. Keep Our Safety. Keep Them Out!”

“I Can’t Lose Another Child,” begs Syrian Mother

Team 1 was also tasked with describing a photographic image that each author might link to his or her version of the story. These also varied in tone from farcical to xenophobic to hopeful, i.e. an illustration of David Cameron in bed with a pig, a picture of a jihadist with a knife staring into camera, or the image of a happy, cheering refugee child safely entering Germany.

Finally, team 1 was asked to consider the rhetorical strategies employed by these authors, specifically whether they were basing their arguments on logic, reputation, or emotion (AKA logos, ethos, or pathos). Some struggled differentiating between these approaches, for instance, confusing a logical argument with one based on perceived credibility. When the entire class reviewed team 1’s analysis, teachable moments such as this emerged, making it possible to explicate key concepts and clarify how they should be applied. An open-ended discussion about any news story might yield similar insights, but because the News Remix compelled students to focus on particular aspects of the same story in specific ways for an extended length of time, it fostered complex and sustained analysis, two hallmarks of deep learning. As one of America’s first education-reformers, John Dewey (1938) states, “Intelligent activity is distinguished from aimless activity by the fact that it involves selection of means—analysis—out of the variety of conditions that are present, and their arrangement—synthesis—to reach an intended aim or purpose” (p. 84).

For the “team 2” groups, intelligent activity meant focusing on 3 different narrative “actors.” Specifically, they considered how placing different individuals at the centre of the same story might influence its focus, framing and impact. The protagonists these teams selected were differentiated in a variety of ways, by profession (business man, journalist, politician), political position (PM, Lord, MP) and type/degree of

notoriety (celebrity, politician, layperson). When tasked with locating quotes expressing the unique views of each individual, these teams went online and located a variety of actual soundbites. Some expressed deeply personal views such as this quote from a Syrian father:

"I don't want anything else from this world. Everything I was dreaming of is gone. I want to bury my children and sit beside them until I die."

Others were comparatively dispassionate and pragmatic, such as this quote from a Member of Parliament.

"Bournemouth is the wrong place for the 155 refugees to stay. It could damage tourism."

The Team 2 groups were also compelled to consider the influence of personal psychological drives, specifically how conscious and unconscious motives might shape dramatic conflicts and narrative stakes. This involved them taking intuitive leaps that could not necessarily be supported by empirical facts, but it also allowed them to contemplate the motivational wants and needs of specific individuals. As for conscious motives, they suggested things such as career advancement, freedom of the press and raising awareness. Delving deeper to speculate about unconscious motives, they focused on the influence of spite, greed, compassion and vanity. Viewing a single news story from so many different perspectives compelled the student teams to question their own biases and explore many different subject positions. This involved a process of cultural "negotiation: the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms" (Jenkins et al., p. 97)

For the "team 3" groups, negotiation meant inventing 3 disparate audiences and then considering how these demographics might react to and engage with the same news story. Audiences were broken down according to geography, age and political views. The team 3 groups also composed user comments written by members of these imagined audiences. These tended to express varying degrees of sympathy, practicality and fear. Additionally, they identified a wide range of news sources trusted by their audiences, including magazines, blogs, newspapers, radio, TV, web forums and social media.

Finally, the team 3 groups considered how particular aspects of the story might challenge or affirm the social norms that served to define their proposed audiences. Some team members struggled with this prompt. They wondered if it was prejudicial to suggest particular demographics typically think and behave in predictable ways. For instance, is it fair to say that senior citizens are generally more suspicious of immigrants than young people? This led to a discussion of stereotyping and the challenges of defining collective identity. Some of the social norms that the teams tied to their audiences were: nationalism, economic security, tolerance of diversity and opposition to censorship.

The "team 4" groups had the most challenging task of all. They were expected to create and analyse three different configurations of author, actor and audience. For instance, they were asked to consider the journalistic implications of an "aligned configuration" where all three shared the same basic ideological assumptions. Most expressed concerns that this would result in deeply biased, simplistic reportage. Reviewing this response along with the rest of the class, I asked, "But what if the author, actor and audience all agreed that racial discrimination is unjust? Would that necessarily be bad journalism, or propaganda?" This led to a reconsideration of the aligned configuration and an acceptance that it might not automatically result in dogmatic posturing.

The next combination considered by the team 4 groups was a "polarized configuration" wherein author, actor and audience were at ideological loggerheads, expressing radically opposed views. Most of the teams were concerned that this lack of consensus could promote unproductive ideological clashes. During the class discussion, however, some students pointed out the value of productive dissent and debate.

The team 4 groups were also asked to envisage a "complex configuration" wherein a more nuanced analysis defies easy categorisation. In this scenario,

author, actor, and audience partly agree and partly disagree about particular points related to the news story in question. When considering the journalistic implications of the complex configuration, many of the team 4 members suggested that covering a story with this degree of subtlety and sophistication would be extremely difficult, yet it would also yield the most carefully considered and credible journalism.

Discussion

Structuring in-class activities that allow students to collaborate in this manner is more important than ever. As Goldin & Katz (2008) explain, the labour market increasingly values "the highly analytical individual

who can think abstractly” (p. 353). Unfortunately, as Arum & Roksa point out, the current emphasis on standardized testing and rote learning in many schools has undermined development of these essential 21st century skills. If educators want students to be competitive in today’s design-driven economies, we need to find new and productive ways to consciously cultivate meta-cognition.

Decades ago, when media scholar David Buckingham first began teaching, student production was “seen to be at odds with the radical political mission of media education” (p. 125). In time, however, Buckingham decided it was possible to design learning activities that “involve a dialectical relationship between doing and analysing – or, to put it in media education terminology, between ‘practice’ and ‘theory.’” (p. 133). In a similar sense, Sir Ken Robinson rejects the notion that production and critique are rigidly opposed. In fact, he places them under the same pedagogical umbrella, naming them “the two modes of creativity,” specifically, “playing with ideas” and “making judgments about them,” AKA “generative thinking and evaluative thinking” (p. 134). By designing activities that require students to simultaneously compose and reflect, we are helping them to master what Donald Schön (1983) calls, “reflection-in-action” (p. 133). Schön elaborates:

[A creative professional] “does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation. He does not separate thinking from doing, ratiocinating his way to a decision, which he must later convert to action. Because his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into his inquiry” (p. 68).

While engaging in the News Remix activity, journalism students were encouraged to learn by doing and also to reflect on this unfolding process in real time. The combination of action and reflection made it possible for them to generalise from their immediate experience to future situations. Thus, by engaging in a short but focused in-class activity, they developed new modes of invention and inquiry. They also found opportunities to expose and examine hidden biases while acquiring conceptual tools that will help them become more productive, creative and analytical journalists in the years to come.

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News Remix

Goal: to consider how a single news story is influenced by multiple points of view. Because there are many types of authors, actors and audiences, there are many ways to tell the tale.

STEP 1: Identify a topical news story. Discuss key details.

STEP 2: Student-teams download worksheets complete their portion of activity. They will look at the story from the perspectives of different authors, actors, audiences or combinations of all three.

(30 minutes)

STEP 3: Class discusses results. (30 minutes)

Team 1: AUTHOR (rhetoric)

- Invent 3 authors. Name them here and briefly describe their perspectives on the story and personal biases. Consider perspectives from different geographic regions and different types of news sources, including professional, alternative and amateur.

- Invent a headline for each author that expresses his or her perspective.

- Identify a key image that each author might focus on.

- Define each author's primary mode of persuasion: logical, testimonial, or emotional (logos, ethos, pathos).

Team 2. ACTOR (psychology)

- Identify three different central characters based on actual figures involved the story. Name these "actors" here and briefly describe their personalities.

- Locate actual quotes (taken from online sources) that best express each actor's perspective.

- What does this person want (conscious motive)?

- What does this actor need (unconscious motive)?

Team 3. AUDIENCE (sociology)

- Imagine 3 target audiences with different perspectives and briefly describe their response to the story.

- Invent a web comment from a member of each target audience.

- Suggest which news source(s) each audience trusts.

- What social “norm(s)” is each target audience most interested in protecting or challenging?

Team 4. POV X 3 (journalism)

- Aligned Configuration - Describe a version of the story where the author, agonist and audience share the same perspective and biases. Consider the journalistic implications of this approach.

- Polarized Configuration - Describe a version of the story where the author, agonist and audience have opposing perspectives and biases. Consider the journalistic implications of this approach.

- Complex Configuration - Describe a version of the story where the author, agonist and audience partly agree and partly disagree about particular points. Be specific. Consider the journalistic implications of this approach.

- Compare and contrast the relative strengths and weakness of the three approaches outlined above.