

## **Global Village? What Global Village?**

--How to engage journalism students from rural America in world news

Jiafei Yin, PhD  
Professor  
Journalism Department  
Central Michigan University

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## **Introduction**

With increasing globalization in every aspect of world affairs and institutions, and the unrivaled global power of America, it would be expected that college students in America, especially journalism students, are paying close attention to world news. Unfortunately, that is not the case, particularly for college students from rural America.

This journalism professor teaches an international and cross-cultural communication course to undergraduate students mostly from rural America. Many of the students in the class are journalism majors, who enroll either because it is a University Program course or because it is required for their major. Based on more than ten years' experience of teaching the course, this instructor has found that it is quite a challenge to engage students from rural America in world news. To many of them, the rest of the world seems so far away and unrelated to their personal lives. Most of them have never heard about the "global village" or what it refers to.

Ironically this disengagement from the world occurs despite the emergence of the most powerful global media platform—the Internet. With the new media, it has never been easier to access news and information from around the world, most of it in English. Every major news organization in the world has an online presence. Alternative news sources, such as Al Jazeera, have never been more readily available. Sites like The Young Turks and MyAfghan provide specially tailored information to a world audience. The global village is only a click of a button away as the cliché goes.

Why are young Americans tuned out? Why has the fascinating world failed to engage them? And most importantly, how can we as journalism educators try to convince them of the importance of world news and make the world more relevant to them while

mainstream media organizations in America keep downsizing world news in the name of catering to the American audience?

This paper tries to answer these questions by reviewing literature on these topics and analyzing rich qualitative data gathered from class assignments, such as in-depth news interest surveys of the students and the people in their lives, and comparative content analysis of world news coverage.

This research topic is important because America's global power not only affects Americans, but also people around the world. And globalization is a fact of life and will impact the professional and daily lives of our students whether they realize it or not and regardless of which part of America they come from. As educators we have the responsibility to educate them so that they will not be left behind. The topic is even more important for journalism students because the world needs well-trained journalists who understand the complexities of covering world news. Quality international journalism facilitates understandings across cultures and helps reduce hostilities.

## **Literature review**

### **Media performance**

The American public's lack of interest in hard news and world news is a well-documented research and survey topic. However, some argue that the audience is not the only issue as the media produce "the idiot culture" (Bernstein, 1992) and has become "global blinders." (Cunningham, 2001) Bernstein's indictment of the media was poignant. According to him, the American society as reflected in the American media was "illusionary and delusionary—disfigured, unreal, disconnected from the true context of our lives," as media coverage was distorted by celebrity and the worship of celebrity,

reducing news to gossip. And the political and social discourse in America was turned into a sewer, he said. He lamented that the media did not serve the readers and viewers anymore—they pandered to them. Thus, for the first time in American history, “the weird and the stupid and the coarse are becoming our cultural norm, even our cultural ideal”—the creation of a “sleazoid infotainment” culture, the idiot culture. He saw media’s misuse of the First Amendment as defending the freedom for producing trash. He wrote, “...there is hardly a major media company in America that has not dipped its toe into the social and political equivalent of the porn business in the last fifteen years.”

Nine years after Bernstein’s scathing criticism of the media, little seemed to have changed in the way media conducted their business. In “Global binders,” Cunningham (2001) analyzed the decline of the coverage of international news after the end of the Cold War. A world that was less threatening to America was less newsy, he said. He gave the example of one reporter, Nina Burleigh, who had difficulty selling a story about widespread reverence for Bin Laden in 1998 even when Bin Laden was on the FBI’s most wanted list. According to Cunningham, the media were fast retreating from foreign news and driven by “a navel-gazing nation” and profit-driven owners. As a result, “The foreign news blackout means that the rest of the world knows far more about America than we know about ourselves, let alone what we know about them,” Cunningham quoted Burleigh as saying. Burleigh called it the “triumph of ignorance,” which resulted from the concentration of media ownership and cost cutting in pursuit of profit margins, according to Cunningham.

And even when America was fighting the war in Iraq, the situation had not improved much. In “Are U.S. newsmakers still ignoring international news?” McLeary

(2007) observed that war coverage was down in 2007 and taken together, only ten percent of the total news broadcast and print in the first six months of the year dealt with non-U.S. related international news six years after 9/11, which was supposed to have woken up Americans to international news. American media's retreat from the world continued as many mainstream news organizations turned their backs on foreign news by cutting down on coverage, closing down overseas bureaus despite increasing globalization and global war on terror, according to Jodi Enda (2011).

### **News interest**

Mapping twenty years of Americans' interest in news spanning 1986-2006, the Pew Center found that public's interest in foreign news that was not directly related to the U.S. was toward the bottom of the list with only 16 percent of the viewers following "very closely" (Brainard, 2007). Not only the coverage of international news, but the public's interest in breaking news seemed to be fading as well, bringing down with it the ratings of CNN's news shows (Carter, 2011).

A 2007 survey conducted by the Harvard University found that U.S. teenagers had little interest in news—60 percent of them paying little attention to daily news (Herbst-Bayliss, 2007). In contrast, the media and public's fascination with celebrities and the morbid was unabated if not more intense judging by the saturated coverage and images of troubled pop star Britney Spears and the murder trial involving Casey Anthony, who was charged with the murder of her own daughter. Anthony was turned into a celebrity by the media with such headlines as "Casey Anthony seeking \$1.5 million for interview, but will networks bite?" (Stableford, 2011) The list could go on.

### **Research methodology**

This paper adopted the qualitative research method of critically analyzing qualitative data accumulated more than ten years of teaching an international and cross-cultural communication course to undergraduate students from rural America. Data included in-class surveys of students' news interest and class assignments. One assignment instructed students to conduct self analysis of news interest, particularly interest in world news, and also to interview the people in their lives, including their roommates, friends, siblings, parents, relatives and even their co-workers and bosses, for their levels of interest in world news and explanations of the levels of the interest. Another class assignment required students to do a comparative content analysis of world news covered by U.S. news sources and foreign news sources. For almost all of the students in the class, it was the first time they were asked to do such news comparisons from different sources. In many of the papers turned in, students were surprised with their own findings, which opened their eyes to the extent of the lack of interest in world news in America and how diverse international news coverage could be depending on the sources. The rich and fascinating qualitative data revealed not only the main reasons why young Americans had tuned out of world news, but also more in-depth information explaining the reasons presented.

### **Data and results**

At the beginning of every semester, students were asked why they signed up for the class. A majority of the responses were that the class was an option to fulfill requirements either in their degree programs or in their journalism major. A small number would say they enrolled because they were interested in the subject. Every semester an in-class survey was given, asking students to rank-order categories of news,

including local, regional, national, world, political, economic, sports, entertainment, science/culture, and health news. The categories that tended to garner the most interest were local and sports news while world news rarely made it among the top three news categories. More often than not, world news was ranked as a number four following local, sports, and national news. Entertainment news was often ranked at the bottom despite news media's increasing coverage of soft news.

To gain more insight on the topic, students were given a reporting assignment, for which they were asked to do a self analysis of news interest and investigate the news interest of five people around them on campus, at workplace or home. Most students admitted their own low interest in world news. However, what shocked them the most were the answers they received from the people close to them and the realization that how rarely world news events, even major ones, came up as conversation topics at social gatherings among students. And the irony did not escape the students that how poorly informed their peers were of world events despite the readily available mobile communication devices and the fact that they were communicating with each other all the time.

In their essays, students were often surprised and embarrassed by the findings from interviews with their friends and roommates who showed very little interest in or knowledge about world news. One student quoted her roommate as saying that all she cared about was celebrity news. The reasons cited the most for low interest in world news were that the news was boring and irrelevant to their lives, and that the students were too occupied with their own life. Findings from interviewing siblings were very similar to those from interviewing students' peers.

When interviewing their bosses or co-workers, students learned that the importance of world news was readily recognized, but this group still tuned out because they had no time.

The most interesting findings were from interviewing students' parents, who are the first teachers in their children's lives. Some of the parents barely paid any attention to world news; others paid more attention, especially those who had business ties overseas. What was most revealing and perhaps inspiring was that for the small number of students who rated their own interest in world news as high, they attributed their high level of interest to family rituals where everyone watched news during dinnertime. Once it has become a habit, it stays with them for the rest of their life.

On the other hand, some students were shocked to find that while their parents emphasized the importance of news and made them keep up with it, their parents did not follow their own advice. In one case, a student interviewed his father, who was a reporter for the local newspaper. The student was surprised to find that his father also tuned out of world news because he was a beat reporter. So he cared about only what happened on his beat. The student wondered who would be interested in world news if journalists were not even interested.

In contrast, students found that international students, students who studied or traveled abroad, students with siblings or friends stationing overseas with the U.S. military, or with relatives who had overseas business ties, tended to seek out world news. Some students also discovered an age difference, where they found their grandparents watching more world news.

National surveys and studies showed that declining news interest among young Americans was a trend rather than isolated cases or anecdotal examples. The survey conducted by the Harvard University found that 60 percent of the American teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17 paid little attention to daily news, particularly war and politics (Herbst-Bayliss, 2007). Low interest in world news sometimes led to embarrassing errors in news quizzes and in the school newspaper run by students.

The themes that repeatedly emerged from students' interviews were that students turned away because they had no time and were too busy with their own life, and because world news tended to be boring, repetitive, depressing, difficult to understand, sometimes hard to find, and did not affect them. In students' essays, they described well the myriad of distractions in today's media environment. One student wrote, "Online you have Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Netflix, random images of kittens—all seemingly more entertaining than reading a bunch of words about a different country whose values you don't understand. And with news organizations all screaming, "Pick me!" at once, it is sometimes hard to choose what to look at when online."

Other quotes revealed deeper-rooted beliefs and attitudes. One student was quoted as saying, "Outside of things that I am forced to look up for a class, or whatever, I really don't pay attention to the news at all. It just doesn't really affect me." Another student explained the lack of interest by saying, "I pay more attention to my own life right here, right now. Why do I need to pay attention to what is going on in China or Iran?"

In further analysis, students shed more light on why young people were turned off by world news. They cited bias in the news, which has done major damage to the

credibility of news media organizations and resulted in the loss of public trust. They gave the most obvious example of MSNBC, which leans toward liberal views and supports mostly the agenda of the Democratic Party, and Fox News, which mostly promotes conservative views and supports the agenda of the Republican Party. When the news media started to take sides, students began to wonder if the media could still report the truth.

Students also criticized American news media's "catering to American audience" approach. They found that it was harder to find world news than local and national news when media organizations focused on the coverage of American news while downsizing world news. In comparative news analysis of major world events, such as the war on terror, the Iranian and North Korean nuclear crises, and the Euro crisis, students who found better coverage by foreign media outlets tended to agree that foreign media outlets provided a wider view of world events than American media outlets. These students found that while American media focused on American positions and how the events would impact America, foreign media often covered all the countries that were likely to be affected and presented views from all the parties involved. While American media zeroed in on that American angle, thus narrowing down the view of the American audience, foreign media provided a more global background. However, while *Al Jazeera* and *Dawn* from Pakistan were often favorably compared with American media outlets, Iranian news sources were often perceived as one-sided. In students' essays leading U.S. news sources including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* often received high marks for quality reporting despite observed emphasis on US officials as news sources.

Many students also reported feeling powerless about the constant bombardment of negative and depressing news from around the world. When they did not feel they could make a difference, they tuned out.

However, in students' essays, they also saw some promising signs of a new trend. While the younger generation seldom subscribed to newspapers, they were increasingly receiving and sharing news from online sources, particularly through the social media. With readily available information through mobile communication devices, students discovered the youth mentality that "I do not follow news; news follows me." A study by the Media Management Center at the Northwestern University made similar findings (Medill School, 2009), concluding that teens seldom sought out news, but news followed them when they opened up their computers or were checking e-mails. The teens said they would read the news "if it catches my eye."

### **Discussions and conclusions**

While numerous studies have shown that young people are less interested in world news, the rich qualitative data presented in the previous section seem to indicate, however, that perhaps it is the way world news is covered and the lack of coverage that is turning the young people away. Even though most young people say they are too busy with their own life to follow world news, a Kaiser report found that they spent an average of seven hours and 38 minutes a day on the media, including television, video games and computers (Rubin, 2010), which was about 53 hours a week on the media with around-the-clock access and mobile devices. The report said that media were a full-time job plus overtime for children aged 8 to 18. So "being busy" or "having no time" is obviously not the real reason for tuning out world news given the fact that young people spend so much

time on the media. They are looking for things that “catch their eye.” Unfortunately world news, as it is covered now, has failed to engage them.

A closer examination of the list of reasons why young people were not interested in world news—boring, repetitive, depressing, difficult to understand, not affecting them, and powerless about it—showed that this list was a complete opposite of the list of why people use the media under the Uses and Gratification Theory—“to relax, to be entertained, to forget about work or other things, to have something to do with friends, to learn things about myself and others, to pass the time (particularly when bored), to feel excited, to feel less lonely, to satisfy a habit, to let others know I care about their feelings, and to get someone to do something for me.” (Perse & Courtright, 1993; Greenberg, 1974). And students’ descriptions and analysis of their experience with world news seem to indicate that every time they read or watch world news, most of which are negative, they experience pain, a deterrent to more consumption of world news, according to Theories of Learning (Bower & Hilgard, 1980), which posit that all human behavior is learned through a system of reward and punishment.

Another reason cited in students’ essays for low interest in world news was that it was hard to find, much harder than finding local news. Studies have shown that it is more than just an excuse. In “retreating from the world,” Jodi Enda (2011) presented a strong case of the mainstream news media in America substantially cutting down on foreign news coverage. And she was far from being the only one in documenting the decline of world news reporting. In “bureau of missing bureaus,” Lucinda Fleeson (2003) also discussed the effect on the future of foreign news on television when many television

networks closed their foreign bureaus. When foreign news does not “catch their eye,” something else in the fascinating online world will.

Given the challenges facing the news industry, journalism schools and educators can take initiatives in trying to get students interested in world news. It is important, first of all, to get students motivated about checking out world news, and then to sustain the interest, and finally to teach the students to generate interesting world news stories on their own to draw in their peers.

Jon Stewart, an American comedian, has been very successful in engaging his young viewers in news through comedy. A 2007 survey by the Pew Research Center found that his audience scored the best on news among audience of all the major U.S. news outlets. The key to getting students motivated is to shorten the distance between our students and the world and make the world relevant to them through personal connections such as study abroad, international roommates, or relatives doing business overseas or stationing overseas with the military, and through issues students care about, such as jobs, the local economy, and the environment, which are all global issues. Comparative news analysis by students can stimulate students’ curiosity about the foreign media as well. Once the students see their connections to the world and their intellectual curiosity aroused, they will be more likely to check out world news and the world media. Journalism schools can also make some outreach efforts to help get students interested in world news when they are young. Once a habit is formed, it will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

To sustain that interest, it is advisable that students start with less complicated stories that do not require extensive background information to understand, which might

intimidate and overwhelm them at the beginning. Starting with questions about countries, people, issues, or problems, and then guiding the students to find answers instead of giving a reading assignment might be better motivators. Let students take the initiative and try to turn reading world news a positive and rewarding experience. World news can be negative because of the negative bias in the definition of news, but the experience of reading it does not have to be negative. Students can also be encouraged to browse international news media outlets to experience the diversity in world news coverage.

And students do not have to be only passive receivers of world news; they can be reporters of world news as well given the access to international sources online and increasing international student enrollments on college campuses. They can make up for the shortfall left by the professional media. They can expand the definition of news and come up with innovative ways of reporting so that foreign news does not always have to be that depressing and negative. Instead, world news can be encouraging and even inspiring. East and West, north and south, wherever there are people, there have to be stories of triumphs of the human spirit over adversities, not just stories of wars, disasters, and disease. Wherever there are civilizations, there are effective indigenous recipes for curing diseases, some of which are common to all. Unique cultures provide rich materials for fascinating cultural features. If done right, the educational value of such international news reporting can never be overestimated.

Some enterprising centers and projects specialized in world news reporting have already pointed the way, such as John Schidlovsky's International Reporting Project, Philip Balboni's GlobalPost, and Jon Sawyer's Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting (Enda, 2011). The more students are informed and involved, the more engaged they

would become. Journalism students are the carriers of tomorrow's news around the world. Once they are asked to take an in-depth examination of a problem, there is no shortage of the creative ideas they can come up with to tackle the issue when they are motivated and tuned in.

“...The United States had succeeded in its great, historical mission—globalizing the world....we forgot to globalize ourselves.” (Zakaria, 2008) But if we do a good job of educating and engaging our students, they will be the ones to carry on the torch of enlightening themselves as well as the world along the way.

The preliminary findings of this paper can pave the way for further research on the topic.

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