

Precarious Pedagogies: Responding to Current Events in Media Studies Classrooms

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Designing an introductory level media studies course can be extremely frustrating. How is it possible to cover history, critical analysis, reception and possibly even production aspects of a global, multiplatform media landscape, all in just fifteen weeks of instruction? Additionally, how do we, as professors and course designers, meet the challenge of unpacking, possibly controversial, current events in a manner that illustrates course concepts and aligns with program learning outcomes? I propose using an approach to course design that frames subject matter within converging media industries, contextualizes current events in relation to historical precedents and empowers students to explore the nuances of real-time incidents.

Be it Comcast, Warner Media or The Walt Disney Co, media consolidation and convergence provide an opportunity to offer an extremely wide boundary or frame around the once, siloed media platforms that we study in survey courses. For example, it can be advantageous to steer assignments and topics of discussion into semester-long, an industrial case study. An intro level media studies class that focuses on a specific corporation helps keep both the students and the instructors on task when a discussion of a current event could easily derail an otherwise organized syllabus. A survey course may call for a unit on public relations and also a unit on social media. A course organized around The Walt Disney Company could explore how Rosanne's controversial twitter presence was initially ignored, but then ultimately compelled Disney/ABC to cancel her show. This is not to say that a topic be excluded should it not intersect with a chosen conglomerate of study. Rather, it is becoming increasingly unlikely that a current event will not impact an organization that has so many subsidiaries and properties and brand management goals. Using a theme-oriented approach can offer a touchstone to course material while also allow for an analysis on how a current event impacts an object of study, even if the semester case study focuses on one specific television show. For instance, a course centered around *The Walking Dead* could incorporate a discussion of the #METOO movement in relation to allegations made against the paratext *Talking Dead's* host Chris Hardwick. Building a theme-oriented frame around a course provides a tether to learning objectives while still allowing for deeper investigations of unforeseen current events.

In addition to framing a course around a given theme to better manage the study of current events, contextualizing and historicizing such events can offer a more thorough exploration of a given topic of interest. Connecting a current event to a similar instance in media history enables instructors to create an opportunity to explore both the breadth and depth of a topic. This approach may also help to temper emotions that a particular current event may evoke. Prompting students to make these connections on their own can be particularly effective. For example, studying historical instances when the press

and the government have been at odds may enable students to better understand how the term “fake news” is employed into today’s political discourse. Mindfully guiding students into a discussion of a current event via a historical precedent could assist instructors and faculty in leading defensible conversations about controversial subject matter. In other words, it is an instructor’s best interest to tie any class discussion or formative/summative assessment directly to a pre-arranged core competency or learning outcome especially when the subject matter maybe potentially divisive. Finally, allowing students to have a role in selecting current events that will be addressed in class can create a sense of empowerment while helping to increase the likelihood that a diverse array of perspectives is considered. Providing students with parameters used to choose a news item and analytical tools to appropriately connect content to learning outcomes can help manage the expectations of the types topics that are appropriate to address in the course. A technique that has proven useful in this approach is to have students select a trade press story about a specific corporation and ask them to connect the story to an assigned lesson. If students are meeting the course objectives they should be able to explain how the current event they want to discuss applies to the material they’re expected to master.

Combining each of the techniques mentioned above may serve to better navigate difficult, or potentially volatile topics of discussion. Using learning outcomes as an anchor to frame and contextualize sensitive subjects while creating a sense of agency for students who want to address a specific current event will hopefully mitigate unfortunate occurrences in the classroom.