

The shape of the coronavirus news story: Learning resources

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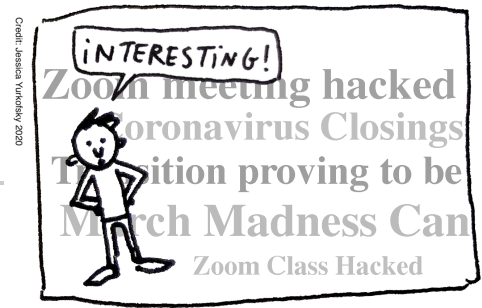
Purpose and intended use of this resource

Project Information Literacy’s 2020 series, “[Covid-19: The first 100 days of news coverage](#),” offers a wide variety of information literacy and news literacy lessons. In this guide for librarians and other educators, we provide activities and discussion prompts that support learning in virtual or physical classes based on the first report, “[The shape of the coronavirus news story](#).”

The ideas and prompts below for different steps of inquiry were designed to build news literacy and strengthen information agency using the PIL report as a platform for discussions, activities, and assignments. They can be adapted to work across a variety of online or in-person synchronous or asynchronous learning situations. In addition, with Barbara Fister, PIL’s former Scholar in Residence and an information literacy expert in her own right, we have developed a set of Learning Activity slides with full instructions that are ready to integrate into online materials.

Reminder: Many faculty, staff and students are likely to have been adversely impacted by Covid-19, and may not wish to engage with the topic for academic work. The learning ideas can easily be adapted to other topics.

1. Explore: Context questions



Explore

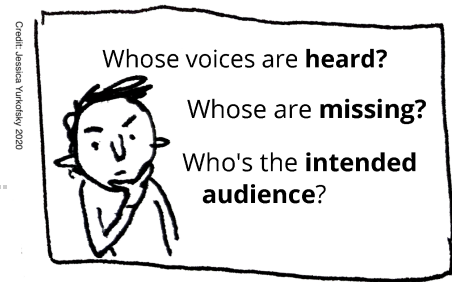
DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Before reading or assigning the PIL report, consider the following questions:

- What news stories do you remember from the start of the coronavirus pandemic?
- Were the news stories local?
- Were they related to business, sports, entertainment, politics, or education?
- What made them memorable?
- How did you find out about stories (from friends, social media, TV, etc.)?
- How did you decide what was credible in the stories or what was not?
- What has changed since the early days of the coronavirus coverage when authorities thought Covid-19 was “just a flu”?

LEARNING ACTIVITY SLIDES: ANALYZING YOUR EXPERIENCE

2. Interrogate: Using Figure 1



Interrogate

DISCUSSION/WRITING PROMPTS

- When do you remember first hearing about Covid-19?
- What surprises you about the results in the news graph plotted in [Figure 1](#)?
- Pick a day from the graph, click it, and scan the headlines that pop up.
 - What can you tell about the news sources (*Washington Post*, *USA Today*, etc.) and their reporting priorities, given the news topics that were covered?
 - Based on the headlines, who is the intended audience for each news outlet? What are their interests?
- Compare stories from two different dates, one near the start and one near the end of the 100 days.
 - What changed (consider tone, audience, advice, perception)?
- Compare two stories on the same date from two different news organizations:
 - Who is likely to be attracted to a certain story, based on the headline?
 - How does the article provide context for those new to the topic, and what does it assume readers know already?
 - Whose voices and concerns are in the article, i.e., officials, witnesses, people immediately affected, and whose are not (consider race, class, age, gender identity and expression, ethnicity, education, etc.)?
 - What extra information would make the articles more useful/interesting to this subset of readers?
- How does the intended audience shape each story, and what effect can stories have on these audience subsets?

GOING DEEPER

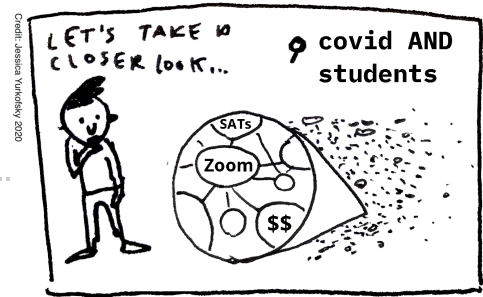
- What do differences in content show about differences in priorities over time or across sources?
- Who is granted authority?
- How is science integrated into reporting?
- How is misinformation handled?
How is the information political/politicized?
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ACTIVITIES

- Generate graphs similar to [Figure 1](#) using the open access platform for media analysis that we used for our datasets in the PIL reports: [Media Cloud Explorer](#) (users will need to register to use this open access resource). Try a search with a query like “(coronavirus OR covid) students.”
- Compare coverage from different sources, different countries/regions, or different time periods to see what stories were common nationally vs. important locally, or look at stories from a particular date to check for multiple perspectives on the same issue.

LEARNING ACTIVITY SLIDES: ANALYZING THE SHAPE OF NEWS

3. Refine: Using Figure 2



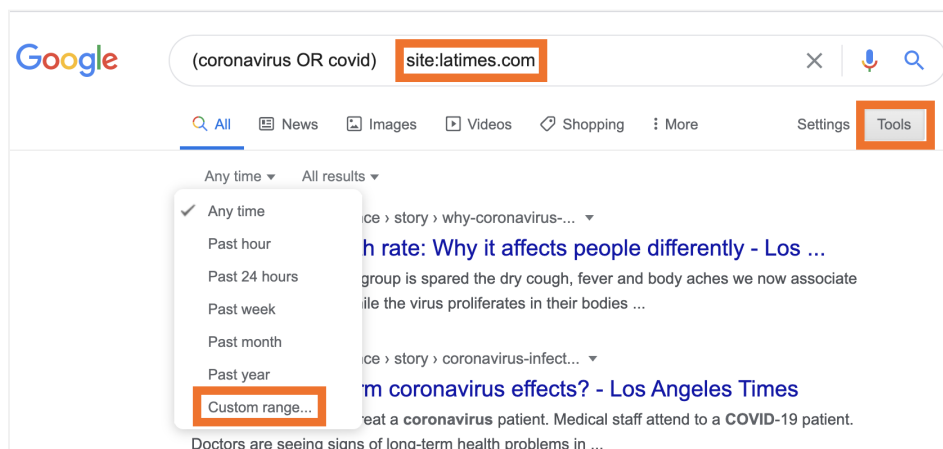
Refine

DISCUSSION/WRITING PROMPTS

- What surprises you about [Figure 2](#), the heat map of top news outlets contributing the most news to the coronavirus story?

ACTIVITIES

- Compare coverage in the same source for two different dates about an aspect of Covid-19 that changed, such as mask wearing, treatments, effect on children, etc.
- Compare coverage of Covid-19 for a set time period:
 - Between two metropolitan dailies, like *The Seattle Times* or *Los Angeles Times*
 - Between metropolitan and national coverage, like *The New York Times* or *Washington Post*
 - Between a digital-only source, like *Business Insider* or *HuffPost*, and a traditional source like *The Wall Street Journal* or *CNN*
 - Between right- and left-leaning sources (e.g., *CNN* and *Fox News*)
 - Between one of the top 12 outlets and a source for a particular audience such as *The Root*, *La Opinión*, or *Indian Country Today*.
- **Tip:** To do these activities, use library news databases or Google. To make Google search for a specific news source on a specific date:
 - Use **site:** to restrict searches to a particular news source
 - Use **Tools** to click on **Anytime** and then select **Custom range...**, and use the same day for start and end



LEARNING ACTIVITY SLIDES: COMPARING NEWS SOURCES AND COVERAGE

4. Focus: Using the narrative



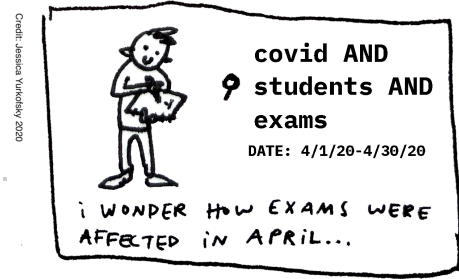
Focus

DISCUSSION/WRITING PROMPTS

- Which of the stories in the timeline narrative do you remember?
- How and why did the coronavirus story first get noticed by U.S. news outlets?
- Why did certain narratives, like the one around Dr. Li Wenliang, get so much attention from the American press?
- How did certain narratives, such as Covid-19 deaths in nursing homes, develop and gain momentum over time?
- How have changes and challenges in the business of news affected coverage of Covid-19?
- Research and create a similar narrative timeline for a month of coverage around Covid-19 or another topic to see how stories change over time and with different agendas and priorities.

LEARNING ACTIVITY SLIDES: FOCUS ON NARRATIVE

5. Research: Using the report



Research

DISCUSSION/WRITING PROMPTS

Develop a researchable question based on what you have observed about how the media coverage affected our understanding of the coronavirus story:

- Are there groups of people that have been left out of the coronavirus coverage, and if so, who are they and what concerns of theirs are not being addressed by the media?
- Choose a well-known “authority figure” (e.g., President Donald Trump, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Governor Andrew Cuomo) who frequently appeared in the U.S. coronavirus coverage. How has this public official’s reaction to the Covid-19 outbreak been portrayed by top news outlets?
- How were Covid-19 related deaths covered, and which demographic groups merited attention from which news outlets?
- When the media talks to health professionals, whose voices are heard?
- When the WHO declared a pandemic, how did news outlets explain what that meant, and who did they quote as experts?
- How did news sites provide instructions for hand-washing and what assumptions did they make?
- How did coverage of Rudy Gobert change between the microphone-licking incident and his testing positive for coronavirus?

GOING DEEPER

Develop a researchable question based on how the media managed our attention as a collective society:

- Choose a major outlet from [Figure 2](#), and explore how the source covered students’ concerns with coronavirus during March 2020. Did they get it right?
- How has the news media covered coronavirus outbreaks on Native American communities?
- How do coronavirus headlines from March reflect a war/battle metaphor?
- How did coronavirus coverage in a metropolitan news outlet, like *The Seattle Times* or *Los Angeles Times*, differ from a national news source, like *The New York Times* or *Washington Post*, or a digital-only source, like *Business Insider* or *HuffPost*, on a given day?
- From the headlines of January 2020 coronavirus stories in a business news source like *The Wall Street Journal*, what concerns were most frequently covered?
- In May (2020), major news outlets reported evidence of coronavirus having a greater impact on racialized people. How was this covered in metropolitan news outlets, like *The Seattle Times* or *Los Angeles Times*?
- How did coverage by college journalists compare to mainstream media? (Use [Poynter’s tool](#) to see coverage in student publications)

LEARNING ACTIVITY SLIDES: CONDUCTING YOUR OWN RESEARCH STUDY