Will they ever read the papers?

Roger Patching

Frequent current affairs testing increases student news awareness

One of the last things the then Editor of ABC News in Queensland, Mr. Graham Irvine, said on my last day there in February, 1979, was something like, "If you do nothing else, make sure your students know what's going on before they graduate. They need to know who's who and what's what before they start".

The same message has been echoed by news editors and chiefs of staff ever since. Graduates often admit that while as students they loathed almost-weekly current affairs tests, they were among the most useful practical tests they did. It is surprising how many will now freely admit to reading at least two daily newspapers, listening to at least two morning radio or television news bulletins before heading for work each day. As students most felt Roger's "two and two" formula (at least two newspapers and two electronic news bulletins before going to lectures) to be "over the top" and to be "taken with a grain of salt".

But armed with strong support from media employers and a host of former students, I have persevered for a decade and a half with a range of tests aimed at forcing students to keep up-to-date on current affairs. An indication of the importance JEA members place on knowledge of current affairs came at the annual conference in Newcastle. "Understanding of local, national, international affairs" headed the list of competencies under the heading of public affairs that members saw as essential for their graduates (1).
In the core practical broadcast journalism subjects in the second year of Sturt's BA (Communication), current affairs tests of one type or another account for 10 percent of the grade. We hope that by their final year students have realised the importance of current affairs knowledge and don't need any further marks-based prodding. Also, by the third year, they're involved in the daily news and current affairs gathering activities of the campus-based public radio station, 2MCE-FM, and need to read at least the local paper each day for story ideas. In the final semester, they're involved in month-long radio and television news and current affairs workshops, where they take it in turns to be the chief of staff for the daily radio news bulletins, so again, a knowledge of what's on the local, national and international news agenda is essential. They're expected to arrive at the daily 9am news conference having read at least the local newspaper, and with story ideas for that day's news gathering activities.

All BA (Communication) students are introduced to the "joys" of current affairs tests in the first year of the degree. On four or five occasions during each session, they are given a combined Current Affairs and Style Test, each worth 3 or 4 percent of their grade. These tests involve a series of questions about newspaper writing and presentation style, taken from the Fairfax style book and a few questions about news events of the past few weeks.

Rather than ask them to identify Cabinet changes after an election, students would be asked to comment on the trends in voting or the major issues and where the parties stood on those issues. The idea is not to test knowledge of angles or aspects of an ongoing story, but rather to begin to understand an issue as a whole. Issues that staff expect will still be on the news agenda after a cohort of students graduate, such as Mabo, the economy or unemployment, are singled out.

Arch Bell, the chief sub-editor at the Adelaide News in the early 1960s, would give a story to a reporter with the comment, "Add this to your bottomless pit of useless information." Like journalism educators, he believed that reporters needed to know a little about a lot of topics—sufficient at least to be able to interview someone. That's the bottom line of current affairs tests at Charles Sturt—to begin the lifelong process of gathering background material. Reporters never know when they will have to interview someone on that topic.

Questions are always issues-based rather than individual-based. The idea is to encourage early their thirst for news, their wanting to know what has been going on around the world while they slept, and their desire to be up-to-date with the current news agenda. By the time they reach the third session of the course, they are used to the concept of regular current affairs tests. During the core communication practical unit in third session, Broadcast Journalism 1, they are promised a total of 10 tests in the 13 weeks of the session. Since there is no test in the first and last weeks, that means 10 tests in 11 weeks. They can gamble and try to pick which week will not have a test, but most do not risk it. Usually the tests are straightforward: What do the latest developments in the on-going Pay TV fiasco, or the Mabo issue, mean?

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In 1993, rather than hit the second-years with a news-related test first up, I opted for a variation on Ian Richards' map of the world. We have used Richards' original test in the first year, with much the same results. For all that entrants into university journalism schools are among the top 10 to 15 percent in their respective State's tertiary entrance ranking, they have little knowledge of basic geography. As Richards told the JEA annual conference in Adelaide in 1989:

The sad fact is that, however successful they might have been at school, most students out of year 12 are abysmally ignorant of the world in general (2).

Although our students had been warned they would be tested on basic geography, they didn't do much better than Richards' original group. The average was 3 or 4 out of 10. While most had no idea about any African countries, they also had trouble identifying Mexico, Egypt, and the North Atlantic Ocean. One ray of hope was that the two countries most recognised were Japan and Indonesia. Next best were Vietnam and the Indian Ocean.

I had thought that journalism students, with a passion for news and a thirst for communication, would study newspapers and cut out maps and the like for future reference—particularly since so many broadcast journalism majors profess an interest in working as a foreign correspondent.

In an attempt to assess whether they'd learned anything in first year about "news geography", the parts of the world that so often make news, I modified Richards' map asked the second-year broadcast journalism students to locate 10 areas often in the news—Bosnia, Somalia, Iraq, Angola, Java, Cuba, Cambodija, Irian Jaya, Timor and Vietnam.

The class of 49 students took the test. The average mark was 3.1. Five students did not get a single country correct. Nobody got 10. Or 9 or 8. Two, including one much-travelled mature-age student, managed 7. At the other end of the scale, five students could only correctly identify one of the countries or islands, and 11 managed only two. Seven managed only three correct answers.

In other words, more than half the class (28) could locate only three or fewer areas. Angola may have posed problems, but it had been in the news in the weeks running up to the beginning of the academic year. Surely most would have seen enough maps of southern Europe, the Middle East and the horn of Africa to be able to locate Bosnia, Iraq and Somalia.

Eight other current affairs tests were given during the session, including a double test to end the session, giving a total mark out of 100 for 10 percent of the subject's grade. The top mark of 7 (ie. 69 out of 100) went to a mature-age female student, followed closely by the much-travelled mature-age male, and a full fee-paying student from Singapore. Only two "high school leavers" came within 5 marks of the top three. At the lower end of the scale were two students who could manage only 20 out of 100, but that was as much through lack of attendance at mass lectures where the tests were administered as lack of knowledge.
In the second session the focus changes from weekly tests to three current affairs tasks. Here we’re trying to make the students research an ongoing story. The first topic was Mabo, for which they were required to explain the issue and its ramifications. The second task was to write about the Federal Budget — what was in it, what it meant to taxpayers and the economy in general, and what newspaper editorials had to say about it. The final task was to discuss the problems posed for the broadcast journalist by the Code of Ethics. They were asked to comment on how the electronic media break the code, point by point.

All this sounds fine, but how does one assess whether any of the material they read about actually stays with them in that “bottomless pit” of the brain? Until the beginning of 1993 I had asked the final-year broadcast journalism students at their first class of the year to nominate the top 10 news stories of the previous year. I collated the results.

In 1985, from a group of 14 students, two stories from 1984 were mentioned by everyone — the spread of AIDS, and the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. Next, with 12 mentions, were the Los Angeles Olympics, and the re-election of the Hawke government.

A year later, no story was mentioned by everyone, but all but one thought the top story of the previous year was the Reagan-Gorbachev summit, following by the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior (11) and a rash of air disasters, in particular the shooting down of JAL 007 by the Soviets (11). In 1987, 18 students took part in the survey. Only one story from 1986 was mentioned by every student — the space shuttle disaster. Another American story — the on-going Iranagate affair — received 17 mentions. Then the frequency of mention dropped to 13, for both the Chernobyl disaster and an Australian story, the Lionel Murphy Affair. The only other stories to be mentioned by more than half the group were the resignation of New South Wales Premier Neville Wran and the “yellow revolution” in the Philippines (11 each), and the America’s Cup (10).

A year later, Australian and regional stories dominated what the students thought were the top stories of 1987. Only one story was mentioned by all 18 final-year broadcast journalism students — the coup in Fiji. Former Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen received 18 mentions — 16 for resigning and two for his push for Canberra. But he was not mentioned by every student. The next most-mentioned story was also from Queensland — the Fitzgerald Inquiry into corruption in the Queensland Police Force, which was nominated by 15 students. The stock market crash (12) and Labor’s Federal re-election (11) were the only stories nominated by more than half the students.

In 1989, not one story — not the Olympics, not the election of George Bush, not the election of the coalition in New South Wales — was mentioned by all 20 third year students. The Olympic games ranked 19 mentions, followed by the US election (17), the Fitzgerald Inquiry (16), the Pan American jet crash over Scotland (14), the Armenian earthquake (14), the Bicentennial celebrations (12) and the Coalition’s victory in New South Wales (12). Nothing else rated mentions by at least half the group.

By 1992, the numbers taking broadcast journalism (and print journalism for that matter) had nearly doubled, and the statistics become more interesting. A total of 37 students did the Top Ten test in the first week of final year. Less than half could think of 10 major news stories from 1991. One managed 11, 14 remembered 10, six thought of nine, and then it trailed off to where two couldn’t think of more than five major events of the previous year.

Of a possible 370 mentions of various news events, the students collectively could only come up with 316 mentions.

Again no story was mentioned by everyone. Three stories — all ongoing sagas, two overseas and one national — topped the lists by far. The top story was the attempted coup and changes in leadership and structures in the former Soviet Union. It rated 34 mentions. A close second was the Gulf War, mentioned by 33 students. Running a close third, one mention behind, was the collapse of Hawke’s government. After those three, it fell away to 23 mentions for the Strathfield massacre and to stories nominated by less than half the group — like 16 mentions for Yugoslavia, 14 for the recession in Australia, and 13 for the Dili massacre.

Even though the students were not asked to nominate the stories in descending order of importance, it’s a fair assumption that they put them down as they remembered them, so what was mentioned at the top of each list was probably the story that left the biggest impact. Nearly half (18) put the Gulf War first. Next came the Soviet Union with six first mentions, and the Strathfield massacre with five. One student mentioned the death of Patrick White first, and another the release of the Birmingham six. One of the first mentions went to the collapse of the Berlin Wall — which actually took place in 1990. Among the major news events to receive little or no mention was the volcanic eruption in the Philippines, the Bangladesh cyclone and floods that claimed 130,000 lives, the ongoing famine in the Sudan, and the assassination of India’s Rajiv Ghandi.

At the start of 1993, a different approach was used in trying to assess what stories had left an impact with our broadcast journalism students of the future. Realising that the students entering second year had probably had as much exposure to current affairs as their third-year counterparts, I gave them the Top Ten test. With the help of various “This was the year that” newspaper stories and television news review programs, I compiled a list of 89 major news events of 1992, and asked the final year students to rank their top ten from the given list. Among the second-year group, 45 students took part. Twelve could think of less than 10 stories, and three mentioned 11.

Three stories topped the lists with 37 mentions each — the resignation of New South Wales Premier Nick Greiner, the election of Bill Clinton and the Barcelona Olympics. The next two had 33 mentions each — the Los Angeles riots and Somalia. Next best, with just over half the group mentioning it was the conflict in Bosnia (23). The next two most-mentioned stories were the Victoria State election (17) and the problems of the Royal Family. The only other three stories to be mentioned by about a quarter of the group were the WA Inc inquiry, the on-going Gulf War story and a shipwreck off the Shetland Islands.
The final-years were asked to rank their top ten from nearly 90 choices. Two students added new stories—the capture of a Peruvian guerrilla leader and the release of a new U2 record.

Thirty-four students took part, but I had to reject two because one put ten dots alongside their idea of the most important stories and another ranked five stories as equal sixth. Among the final years the top story was unemployment. It received a total of 27 mentions, which means that five didn't consider it an important story. Seven students nominated it their most important story, and five had it second. Sixteen students had it in their top four stories.

Next came Clinton's election with 26 mentions—the top story for four students and in the top four stories for another 20 students. The LA Riots rated 23 mentions, including nine at No. 1. Fifteen had it in their top four. Somalia and the Metherell/Greiner affair rated 20 mentions each with 12 and five top four mentions, respectively. The Barcelona Olympics, and Australia's medal haul rated as the sixth most important story, with 17 mentions. Two students thought it was the top story of the year. While not one second-year student mentioned it, half the final year group (16), thought the on-going story of women Anglican priests was one of the top ten stories of the year. Three put it among their top four stories. Only three other stories rated mentions by more than a third of the group. While two stories were predictable—Bosnia and the WA Inc revelations—the third was rather surprising, as 13 students thought the release of the Coalition's Fightback! package was one of the top ten stories of the year. Only eight thought Mr Keating's One Nation package worthy of mention.

These brief surveys, which students were given only ten minutes to complete, were sprung on them at their first lecture of the year, in the hope that the stories that had the most impact on them in the previous year would be the ones that came to mind. It would be unwise to draw too many conclusions from these results, as one could probably argue that similar results could be gained by giving the same test to any group of final-year undergraduate students. I can only offer anecdotal evidence to suggest that frequent testing on current affairs events and issues does heighten students' news awareness and begin the process of backgrounding them on a wide range of subjects outside their formal studies. It has been my experience that final-session journalism students are more likely to be able to discuss issues in more depth with news sources than their second-year counterparts.

References:

Roger Patching is Senior Lecturer in Broadcast Journalism at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst. A version of this article was presented at the 1993 annual conference of the JEA at QUT December 1-3.