

Recitation 06 - Opinion Journalism.doc

OBJECTIVE

Review Opinion Journalism lecture and prepare students for test #1.

Organization

1. Take attendance
2. Review for exam and test preparation

News Quiz

Questions from lecture:

1. Opinions in the news can be singled by . . .
 - a) Overly dramatic writing
 - b) Personal Attack
 - c) First Person voice
 - d) all of the above

(answer: d)

2. The New York Post was founded by whom in order to slander Thomas Jefferson?
 - a) Alexander Hamilton
 - b) John Adams
 - c) Benjamin Franklin
 - d) George Washington

(answer: a)

3. Readers want opinion in their news....
 - a) Yes, all the time.
 - b) Yes, but only for certain topics/sections.
 - c) No, never

(answer: b)

4. A label for an opinion section of a newspaper might read:

- a) Breaking News
- b) In the Headlines
- c) News Analysis
- d) Local News

(answer: c)

Recap Lecture

There is a need to go back over the material covered in the lecture to make certain students understand the distinctions between news and opinion and the various forms of opinion. Emphasize a few points:

1. The difference in the first place between news and opinion;
2. The difference between types of opinion, as commonly labeled and defined.
3. The difference between useful, fact-based opinions and counterfeit opinion journalism.

It's important to emphasize that journalistic opinion must meet journalism's standards of verification, independence and accountability but does give license to express judgment and opinion. Facts may be used selectively, but the "license to kill" we described in lecture does not give license to feed news consumers information that is not factual. Instructors might start class by passing out an example of a good opinion piece—one that's provocative and factually accurate.

Distinguishing news from opinion journalism

Labelling:

- news analysis
- Op-Ed
- Editorial
- Column
- Review

Language:

- first-person voice
- exaggeration and superlatives
- dramatic word choice

Landmarks:

- voice
- faulty reasoning: look for a breakdown of basic argument structures.
 - For example, we can construct an **inductive argument** about the game of chess by looking at a great deal of evidence and trying to form valid premises, such as: "**BECAUSE** more than twenty Grandmaster chess players told us that luck has no place in the game of chess, **THEREFORE** we conclude that luck has no place in chess."

- From this, we can construct a valid **deductive argument** (if the aforementioned premises are indeed true) that takes the form: “**IF** luck has no place in the game of chess, and **IF** luck is a chance factor, **THEN** chess is not a game of chance.”
- Continuing this example, we can suggest a the best plausible **inference** as follows: “**BECAUSE** chess is not a game of chance, we **CONCLUDE** that chess is a game of skill.” (We cannot rule out other possible conclusions, but we have strong evidence to favor this one.)

Common Errors in Critical Thinking

- The “**Straw Man**” caricature: the opposing side’s view is portrayed in its weakest possible form. Tearing down a “straw man” does not imply that the argument is correct.
- **Over-generalizing** from incomplete information: My roommate does x, therefore all college students do x.
- **Ad populum**: Everyone else does X, therefore X is a good thing.
- **Ad hominem**: Attacking a person (he’s ugly) to discredit that person’s argument, instead of attacking something relevant to the person’s argument (e.g. the person’s Ph.D. is from Liberty University, not an accredited university)
- **Ad ignoratium**: Using the absence of evidence as evidence, as in “The FBI file was not able to clear Professor X of spying charges.”
- **False choice/false dilemma**: Overlooking alternate conclusions, as in “Action on the Senate health care reform bill will either rescue the faltering economy or it will bankrupt us.” In fact, there are a lot of other possibilities.
- **Circular argument**: “My professor is a genius because it says so on page 3 of *The History of Geniuses* and after all, he’s the author of that book so it must be true!”

Test Preparation

Students should be prepared to answer up to a dozen questions in which they apply the key lessons of all six lectures to specific stories and situations. Past experience tells us we have to remind them they’ll be marked off for vagueness. Students should pay close attention to answer all parts of each question and be sure to provide specific details for their examples.

Summary of concepts for test #1

1. The Watchdog Journalism Reading.
2. The Gutenberg Variations: Compare and Contrast the Gutenberg and Internet revolutions.
3. Using examples, demonstrate you understand the difference between media and news media and that you are accurate in applying the idea of our primal need for information that alerts, diverts and connects us.
4. The Napoleonic Variations: Why governments fear the pen as much or more than the sword and what this means to journalism’s practitioners and consumers
5. Know the reading cases well enough to write clearly about SWIFT and Google as examples of the power of the press

6. Know your neighborhood, Know your Taxonomy of Information Neighborhoods: Students need gin-clear understanding of the differences between information types and a firm handle on the values of verification, independence and accountability. They need to use elements of the grid in constructing arguments about the difference between journalism and all other information.
7. The First Amendment Variations: students need to be clear on No Prior Restraint, the exceptions, and the Fourth Estate intent of the founders (It's not the press that's protected, it's the press' ability to protect the people from government abuses) and they need to be able to write clearly about the collisions between Free Press rights and National Security, plus individual rights like fair trial, privacy, etc.
8. Oy, the Tension(s): Students need to be skillful in describing news decisions as the product of judgment, the weighing of importance vs. interest and public service vs. commercial success. The news drivers are essential vocabulary for constructing arguments about these ideas.
9. Opinion's place in the News Neighborhood and who gets the unique 007 License to Opine. Students need to know the difference between News Reporting and Opinion Journalism and the difference between Opinion Journalism and...less valuable forms of un-verified or over-emotional screed/rant/tirade. Students need to be able to recognize the labeling that tells a consumer they are in Opinion World, and the language that tells a consumer they are in Opinion World, even if the information has not been labeled correctly.

Examples of excellent answers from past exams

IMPORTANT: Do not pass these answers out to students. Instead, read these answers aloud to students to help them understand what distinguishes a stellar response from a merely-acceptable one.

1. Gutenberg's invention of the printing press and the invention of the internet have been two great information revolutions of human history. The printing press made it possible to mass produce books, rather than having them be individually copied by hand, thus increasing the speed at which information could be transmitted and the number of people that could be reached by a printed idea. In the same way, the internet has massively increased the speed and range of communication. Both inventions have induced the creation of new forms of media, such as mass-produced newspapers and leaflets (the printing press) and blogs (the internet). Both information revolutions have also followed Mark Twain's famous quote about "untruth" having a "double set of wings" with which to travel the world- in each kind of media, lies and conflict are highly popular.
2. (A) This story is designed to alert the public of important information. This is placed first in the website's list (and probably repeated) because of its urgency.

(B) The second story diverts the viewer by making a potentially stressful situation into entertainment. To some extent, it also connects us to the other people whose mishaps are photographed.

(C) The third story is a human-interest story designed to connect the viewer to the lives of the dog walker and his neighbors.

3. Napoleon's remark illustrates the power of information which is applicable in today's world as it was in his. StonyBrookavia tries to control its citizens by withholding and fabricating information. Its citizens view only state-controlled television and listen to government radio programs through radios that can't be turned off. These media deliver propoganda instead of actual news. StonyBrookavia's King is intolerant of people attempting to subvert state media

control and has a history of imprisoning foreign journalists as “spies” and citizens who try to inform others of the country’s actual situation.

4. (A) Entertainment’s goal is to amuse and divert, not to inform, the consumer. It employs dramatization and fiction, rather than verified facts, in order to do this.

(B) Promotion is designed to further a specific product, idea, or individual rather than to give unbiased information. Promotional pieces, such as press releases and ad scripts are written by people and companies directly connected to those they intend to promote, rather than by independent journalists.

(C) Raw information bypasses the journalistic process of verification and can often be misleading or downright false.

5. Supreme Court Justice Evan Hughes coined the term “no prior restraint” in ruling that the government has no right to stop the publication of information, but can punish those involved after the fact if a court rules the publication illegal (such as in cases of libel). The two exceptions to this rule are obscenity and “Imminent” threat to national security.

Announcements
