

Analyzing the Appropriateness of Internet-Based School News Programs for Social Studies Classrooms: CNN Student News as a Case Study

By: [Wayne Journell](#)

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in

Journell, W. (2014). Analyzing the appropriateness of internet-based school news programs for social studies classrooms: CNN Student News as a case study. *The Clearing House: a journal of educational strategies, issues, and ideas*, 87(2), 53-58. doi: 10.1080/00098655.2013.842532

as published in the *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues, and Ideas* 2014 [copyright Taylor & Francis], available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/00098655.2013.842532>.

Abstract:

This article describes a research study on the appropriateness for social studies classrooms of CNN Student News, a free online news program specifically aimed at middle and high school students. The author conducted a content analysis of CNN Student News during October 2012 and evaluated the program's content for substance, bias, and appropriateness for secondary social studies instruction. Although the analysis is specific to CNN Student News, the same approach could be taken with any student-oriented news program available to teachers on the Internet.

Keywords: Education | Social Studies | School News | CNN Student News | Current Events | Politics

Article:

A hallmark of effective social studies instruction, as defined by both the National Council for the Social Studies and prominent scholars within the field, is providing students with knowledge that better prepares them for participation in a democratic society (Kahne and Middaugh 2008; National Council for the Social Studies 2010). The foundation of this knowledge is an awareness of current events and political and social issues, both foreign and domestic. Only then can students be informed enough to engage in the practice of democratic decision making that is essential to successful participation in an increasingly pluralistic American society (Engle 1960; Hess 2009; Parker 2003).

Research suggests, however, that adolescents are often uninformed about current events and political and social issues, and this lack of awareness starts in early adolescence and continues into early adulthood (Journell 2011; Snell 2010). Although a variety of factors contribute to this aspect of civic disengagement, evidence suggests that students' social studies instruction is doing little to encourage political and social awareness. Research on civic education programs in the United States has found that lower-quality programs, which are often disproportionately located

in schools that cater to low-income, high-minority student populations, rarely provide opportunities for students to follow current events. Even in classrooms where teachers claim to place a premium on engagement with political and social issues, research has found that exposure to current events is often infrequent or marginalized by other curricular demands (Evans 2006; Kahne and Middaugh 2008).

Why, then, is incorporating current events into social studies classrooms so challenging? Certainly, finding sufficient time for current events in an era of accountability defined by pacing guides and benchmark tests can be difficult (Journell 2010). Even in schools, however, where student test performance is not as pressing of a concern, current events are often not a regular part of the curriculum. One possible reason for this exclusion is that the tools many teachers feel they need in order to create awareness of current events—newspapers, magazines, cable television—are either too expensive or aimed at a more politically attuned audience than the students in their classes.

The Internet, however, offers several free newscasts designed specifically for middle and high school students, which are being used in social studies classrooms across the United States (Bybee 2006). In the Appendix, I include web addresses for a few of the most popular daily newscasts used by teachers. I also list web addresses for a few organizations that provide other types of digital resources (e.g., lesson plans, age-appropriate news articles) that may aid teachers in incorporating current events into their classrooms.

Yet, how much do we really know about these potentially useful resources? Few analyses of these types of newscasts exist, and educators are too often willing to adopt free instructional tools without first determining whether they meet students' instructional needs. In this article I share the results of a content analysis I conducted on one of the most popular and widely used student newscasts, *CNN Student News*, a 10-minute daily news program that can be streamed free of charge at <http://www.cnn.com/studentnews/index.html>. Although this analysis is specific to *CNN Student News*, the same pedagogical benefits and limitations likely apply to any of the free news programs available on the Internet to social studies teachers.

CNN Student News

Although *CNN Student News* has been available for more than a decade, my first experience with the program was in 2010 when I was observing a high school civics teacher as part of an unrelated research study (Journell and Buchanan 2013). This teacher showed *CNN Student News* at the start of each class, and I was amazed at how attentive the students were throughout the entirety of each newscast. Since then, I have made a point to mention the program in my middle and secondary methods courses, and each time I always have a handful of preservice teachers who talk about how their cooperating teachers use it in their classrooms with great success.

Unlike other news programs designed for schools, such as *Channel One* or *Nick News*, *CNN Student News* is free and does not contain any commercials or other advertisements.¹ The program markets itself as an educational tool for middle and high school classrooms, and the *CNN Student News* website offers several useful features for teachers. Each episode is accompanied by a written transcript that can be downloaded for English language learners or students with hearing impairments, and the website keeps an archive of all previously aired episodes for future reference.

The structure of each episode is fairly consistent with most nightly news programs. The program is hosted by a regular anchor, Carl Azuz, who is very personable and ends each episode with corny puns that students love. Individual segments, however, may be taken directly from CNN broadcasts and feature various CNN personalities, such as Anderson Cooper and Sanjay Gupta. Each 10-minute episode usually starts with a serious news story often related to a major domestic or foreign current event. Then, subsequent segments run the gambit from historical anniversaries to scientific breakthroughs to the latest in entertainment news. Stories are occasionally introduced via a short quiz designed to grab students' attention, and each episode includes a "shoutout" to a middle or high school classroom that has submitted a potential quiz question for the show. Each broadcast always ends with a short, light-hearted segment that provides fodder for Azuz's puns.

Content Analysis

For the purposes of this analysis, I studied episodes of *CNN Student News* during the month of October 2012. This month was chosen because it coincided with the height of the upcoming presidential election, and I felt that election coverage would be an opportune time to assess the program for any potential biases. I analyzed a total of 23 episodes, and my analysis consisted of timing each segment and taking notes about the topic and depth of each story. For the purposes of timing, I considered a segment change to have occurred when the program shifted to a new topic. In other words, if an aspect of the program, such as a quiz or a shoutout, occurred as part of a topic or story, then it was counted in the total time allotted to each segment. After I viewed all episodes, I went back to my notes to analyze the program's content for substance, bias, and appropriateness for secondary students.

Findings

Substance

Excluding the short, silly stories at the end of each newscast, there were 127 different segments on *CNN Student News* during the month of October. The shortest of these segments was 28 seconds while the longest was 4:10, and the average of all segments was approximately 1:32. In other words, many stories on *CNN Student News* are not covered in depth. It would be hard to explain the nuances of any complex event in 1:32. Of course, one could easily argue that *CNN Student News* is providing the same depth of coverage, at least in terms of length, that students

might find on any one of the major nightly news programs. Recent research, for example, found that the average length of news segments on mainstream news programs was only 1:52 (Dimitrova and Stromback 2010).

Although length is one way to measure substance, it is also important to look at content. Based on the assumption that greater airtime allows for a more in-depth discussion of the topic being presented, it may be useful to look at the topics of the longest segments shown over the course of the month. Table 1 lists the topics of the longest segments on *CNN Student News* in October, using 3 minutes as an arbitrary minimum baseline.

Table 1. Longest CNN Student News Segments (October 2012)

Time	Date	Topic
4:10	October 31	The aftermath of Hurricane Sandy
3:53	October 5	A student with a stuttering problem who conquered it through rapping
3:44	October 3	Preparation for the first presidential debate and a history of infamous moments in presidential debate history
3:42	October 1	Human-interest story with Sanjay Gupta about weather conditions and the price of food
3:28	October 26	Classes on computer coding being offered in high schools
3:22	October 8	The September jobs report
3:20	October 16	Preparation for the second presidential debate
3:18	October 16	50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis
3:18	October 18	Update on Malala Yousufazi, the 15-year-old Pakistani girl who was shot by the Taliban for calling for equal educational rights for girls
3:15	October 19	Comparison between Barack Obama's and Mitt Romney's plans for reducing the deficit
3:14	October 11	Previously recorded interview with Malala Yousufazi
3:14	October 11	Preparation for the vice presidential debate
3:09	October 9	A man who created a time-lapsed video using a second taped from each day of his life
3:09	October 30	The aftermath of Hurricane Sandy
3:05	October 29	An upcoming Supreme Court case on copyright laws

At first glance, this list seems to suggest that *CNN Student News* would be fairly useful for social studies teachers. Only three of the stories (the stuttering rapper, the computer coding courses, and the time-lapsed taping) do not seem to have obvious ties to the typical social studies curriculum.

If one probes further, however, the emphasis that *CNN Student News* places on certain stories as opposed to others creates questions regarding its relevance to social studies classrooms. On October 2, for example, the program covered both the conclusion of the United Nations General

Assembly meeting and the upcoming presidential debate, but the combined amount of time given to those two stories (1:40) was less than that devoted to the story of a professional baseball player getting a second shot at an at-bat a decade after he had been hit in the head by a pitch (2:37). Stories with little value to social studies teachers, ranging from Miguel Cabrera winning the baseball Triple Crown to a celebration of the Rubik's Cube becoming the most purchased toy of all time, were often given more emphasis than the “hard” news stories of the day. *CNN Student News*, of course, is not created specifically with social studies teachers in mind, and it is certainly possible that these types of stories were of interest to teachers in other disciplines.

Bias

Instances of overt bias in *CNN Student News* were few and far between. On every political story in the month of October, the program gave equal time to both Republican and Democratic perspectives. On October 4, for example, the debate recap included footage of Jim Lehrer introducing the rules of the debate and the candidates’ handshake followed by two short sound bites from each candidate. Only after the first debate, when there seemed to be a consensus on both sides of the political spectrum that Mitt Romney had won, did the program declare a winner in any of the debates, including the vice presidential contest.

Even when reporting about the candidates’ shortcomings, the program seemed to do so evenly. On October 19, for example, *CNN Student News* chastised both candidates for not providing enough details about their plans to reduce the deficit. When analyzing Barack Obama's plan, the program asserted that there were not enough wealthy individuals in the United States to erase the deficit simply by eliminating the Bush tax cuts for the top 2 percent of American households and that Obama had not been forthcoming about the additional spending cuts that would need to be made. The program then asserted that Romney's plan of increasing revenues by cutting tax loopholes and deductions also would not work because he had not been specific about which loopholes and deductions he would cut.

During the course of the month the only statement that seemed somewhat partisan occurred on October 23 during a story on outsourcing when the program stated that Romney had opposed the 2009 government bailout of the automobile industry without providing any further explanation. At the heart of this debate was an editorial written by Romney (2008) for the *New York Times* titled “Let Detroit Go Bankrupt.” According to Romney, the suggestion being made by the Obama campaign that he would have abandoned the automobile industry was false; rather, he stated that he would have preferred to let the industry go bankrupt and rebuild, with government support if necessary. It is unclear if the producers of *CNN Student News* were making a statement about their view of Romney's position on the bailout or if the lack of explanation was related to issues of substance outlined in the previous section.

Although instances of overt bias were almost nonexistent, one could argue that *CNN Student News* often committed the sin of omission. On October 17, for example, the program's coverage

of the town hall debate only included two questions—a young man asking about jobs and a young woman asking about equal pay for women—and partial answers from each candidate (which did not include Romney's infamous “binders full of women” comment). More concerning was the omission of what was arguably the most influential moment of the debate, the assertion of moderator Candy Crowley—a CNN political pundit—that Obama had referred to the Benghazi embassy murders as a terrorist attack in a White House speech on September 12, which contradicted Romney's line of questioning.

Other omissions were more subtle. The only acknowledgement, for example, of third-party candidates for the presidency occurred on October 25, and even then the program only briefly named each third party without providing any explanation of their platforms. Similarly, considerably more attention was paid to domestic news events, both in terms of number and length of stories, than foreign events. It is doubtful that this domestic bias was made with any sinister motives since major world events, such as the Syrian civil war and the assassination attempt on Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousufazi, were reported on extensively. Rather, it is more likely that *CNN Student News*, like many educational tools, uses a primarily Eurocentric approach to appeal to an American audience.

Appropriateness for Secondary Classrooms

Given the potential limitations of *CNN Student News* that I have described, the natural question teachers might ask is why they should show this program as opposed to streamed versions of nightly news programs aired on the websites of mainstream media outlets. The answer is that *CNN Student News* does a great job of describing complex issues in a way that middle and high school students can relate to and understand. Concepts, such as SuperPACs and the electoral college, were explained in simple terms that one does not often find on mainstream or cable news programs. Also, *CNN Student News* rarely seemed to overload students with information. When discussing the views of the presidential candidates, for example, the program would typically focus on a single topic and provide students with short lists of information about big ideas from each candidate's platform without delving into the minutia that often turns individuals away from politics.

The other way *CNN Student News* caters to middle and high school students is by reporting on issues that are of interest to their age group. For example, although the assassination attempt on Yousufazi received national attention, updates on her condition became a regular feature on *CNN Student News*. In addition to reporting on the political aspects of the shooting, the program seemed to make a concerted effort to note that Yousufazi was only 15 years old and was advocating for her right to an education. Many of the stories had direct implications to middle and high school life, including a detailed analysis of the presidential candidates' stances on education.

How to Use *CNN Student News* in the Classroom

Jump to section

Is *CNN Student News* a useful resource for social studies teachers given the potential limitations outlined previously? As someone who is concerned about the quality of civic instruction in the United States, I am inclined to believe that any exposure to current events and politics is beneficial, which makes *CNN Student News* worthy of inclusion in the social studies curriculum. The limitations of the program, however, mean that teachers interested in using *CNN Student News* in their classrooms must go beyond using it as a way to keep students busy while they take attendance.

Although *CNN Student News* may provide students with more exposure to current events than they typically receive outside of school, it is important for teachers to know that simply watching this 10-minute newscast will not lead to in-depth knowledge about any of the issues aired on the show. To maximize the educational potential of the program, teachers need to view it as a springboard to more substantive discussions or projects related to current events. Teachers can use *CNN Student News* to pique students' interest in a topic and then segue into a short seminar or deliberation (Parker and Hess 2001) about one of the relevant news stories from that day's episode. For more complex topics, teachers could use the program as an introduction to a larger project in which students research an issue of interest and produce a tangible product, such as a letter to an elected official.

This approach to using *CNN Student News* takes time; therefore, I do not necessarily recommend that teachers show the program every day. As with any other type of visual media used in the classroom, teachers would be wise to preview each episode and determine whether the content is worth the instructional time needed to show it. Much of the *CNN Student News* programming is applicable to social studies instruction; however, the emphasis of some episodes is not on social studies–related content. On those days where hard news stories are marginalized in favor of entertainment or human-interest stories, teachers may decide that their instructional time could be better spent on other activities.

Of course, the lighter stories and silly jokes might be what make *CNN Student News* so appealing to students. In that case, a few minutes of off-topic stories may be a small price to pay for students' attention to the news. *CNN Student News*, in many ways, has done the heavy lifting for teachers—the program provides an enjoyable and polished platform for presenting politics and current events to students. Teachers, however, have the responsibility to expand on that initial interest and provide the substance needed to move beyond superficial awareness and toward engaged democratic decision making.

Conclusion

Although this article focuses specifically on *CNN Student News*, the larger lesson that educators can take away from this discussion is how to critically determine whether student news programs are appropriate for their classrooms. *CNN Student News* is just one of the latest and most popular

of these types of programs; as the Internet continues to become more ubiquitous in American education, more free and commercial news programs will be marketed for educational purposes. Regardless of the program, teachers can assess its usefulness by answering the following seven questions.

1. Is the purpose of the program strictly academic or are students subjected to commercial advertisements?
2. Is the academic content of the program aligned with instructional objectives?
3. If only part of the program's academic content is aligned with instructional objectives, then what ratio of on-topic and off-topic content is acceptable?
4. Is it possible to preview the program and only show relevant parts of episodes or just show episodes on certain days when the content is most relevant to the instructional objectives of the course?
5. Is the content appropriate for middle and secondary students?
6. Does the content appear to be overtly biased to a certain political ideology?
7. Would students enjoy watching the program?

Although these questions may seem like common sense, it is important that teachers systematically evaluate these programs just as they would any other type of instructional tool. Performing a content analysis similar to the one that I conducted with *CNN Student News* is a great place to start. A more creative approach would be to have students critically analyze the program based on the aforementioned criteria. Media literacy is a skill that students need to practice, and by letting them participate in the evaluation of course materials, they may develop a sense of agency that will make them feel as though their voices are being heard in the classroom.

At the end of the day, however, teachers are responsible for the instructional materials they use in their classrooms. As more demands are placed on teachers and students, instructional time becomes even more valuable. Programs like *CNN Student News* offer a unique way to bring politics and current events to students, but even when these programs are freely available on the Internet, teachers need to recognize that they come at a cost.

APPENDIX

Daily Student News Programs

- *Channel One*: www.channelone.com (contains commercials)
- *CNN Student News*: <http://www.cnn.com/studentnews/>
- *Nick News*: <http://www.nick.com/videos/nick-news-videos/> (contains commercials)

Websites Offering Teaching Resources for Current Events

- *BBC News for Schools*: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/news/>
- *PBS News Hour Extra*: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/>
- *Teaching with the News*: <http://www.choices.edu/resources/current.php>

Notes

1. It should be noted, however, that *CNN Student News* considered adding advertisements into their newscasts back in 2002, but they ultimately decided against it in response to public pressure (Molnar 2002). For a detailed summary of the tension between privately owned news programs and public education, refer to Blokhuis (2008).

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