Net News—Old Wine in a New Bottle?

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Economics instructors who use the news sparingly in their classrooms may find that news available on the Internet overcomes some problems that have limited the use of news. In a recent survey, teachers of undergraduate economics reported a mean usage of 22 percent (with a median of 22 percent) for the popular press as a source of assigned materials in introductory courses. This usage did not vary markedly for upper division or econometrics courses. The survey results for theory courses suggest more evangelical use—median usage was only 6 percent but a mean of 28 percent suggests the mean had been inflated by some intense users (Becker 1997; Becker and Watts 1996). For introductory courses, this evidence is corroborated by the type of textbook chosen by most instructors. Although McConnell and Brue (1996, xxi) argue that “capitalism in Russia, interest rate hikes, GATT, NAFTA, pollution rights, the balanced budget amendment” are illustrative of “a remarkable time for teaching and learning economics,” their widely adopted textbook uses excerpts from current news sources in only a minor way. The authors discuss contemporary issues but most of the “Last Word” inserts illustrate specific economic principles or themes, and 35 of 40 are written by the authors. The reader is likely to encounter a humorous article, a biographical sketch, or some other noncurrent topic. Ancillary books and the Web site for the textbook are also noticeably devoid of news analysis. Presumably, instructors who use news would choose a textbook such as Parkin (1996) that uses news excerpts extensively because “a major goal of the principles course is to help students build critical thinking skills and use economic principles to interpret daily news events (and their coverage in the media).”

Those who use newsclips are usually quick to extol their virtues, but little, if anything, has been written to explain why nonusers shun them. The explanation probably hinges on perceptions of their educational value, the time and effort needed to select suitable examples, and the costs of producing them. In this article, I address these issues and the use of the Internet for the selection and production of newsclips.

TEACHING AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

Instructors can have students use newsclips to meet course objectives such as to help students acquire knowledge, understand and apply economic principles,
and interpret economic data. Saunders (1990) emphasizes that each course objective should be made operational by specifying the student behavior that would bring it about. For instance, in satisfying the “apply economic principles” objective, the newclip should help students to identify appropriate economic theory and method, solve problems and predict outcomes, and distinguish probable from improbable economic forecasts. The “interpret economic data” objective should, among other things, illustrate how economics helps students to discriminate between the relevant and the irrelevant and between fact and inference.

Well-chosen newclips can satisfy these objectives. Kelley (1983) argues that news cuttings demonstrate the real-world applicability and relevance of economics and inculcate a desire for independent inquiry and learning. He also believes they create a lively atmosphere of communication and debate among students and between students and their instructors. Cowie, Findlay, and Parkin (1997, vii) concur with these objectives but argue that “the best way to retain a knowledge of economics concepts is to use them.” Kennedy (1992) suggests that news items can cover issues that receive prominence in the business press but are not emphasized in textbooks. He contends that such issues often have career relevance for business graduates.

The following teaching rules (Saunders 1990, 69–78) for delivering these objectives are useful as a guide to the selection of news items:

- proceed from the known to the unknown
- proceed from the simple to the complex
- proceed from the concrete to the abstract
- proceed from the particular to the general
- proceed from observation to reasoning
- proceed from a whole view to a more detailed view to a whole view

News in its purest form cannot by definition be “known,” but it should build on a student’s prior experience and knowledge. Without surveying students beforehand, instructors can only rely on their intuition when selecting relevant material. More important, the instructor should be aware that journalists may not proceed in the direction suggested by these rules. For instance, a newclip may move from reasoning to observation or from the complex to the simple or even from the complex to the more complex.

Many instructors like to use newclips because they portray the complexity of business and political situations and the role of economic theory in unraveling that complexity. Rukstad (1992) contains case studies that combine focused newclips, reworked news, and other readings. Case studies, and by implication newclips, allow teachers to “assimilate data, investigate hypotheses, deal with uncertainty and complexity, and ultimately, come to a decision” (Marks and Rukstad 1996, 141). Newclips also permit the instructor to place economics in a wider historical, institutional, and sociopolitical context. Although complexity suits some, for others it may impose an educational cost that exceeds any benefit because it shifts the students’ attentions away from a structured introduction to economic terms, tools, and theories. Teaching involves a sequential flow of topics and concepts, which is rarely followed in a news article. Focused new-
clips fit into the sequence as illustrations, but case study newsclips may contain too much “noise,” and editing them often results in an artificial product.

As an example, a report in the *Australian Financial Review* (van Leeuwin 1997) discusses many seemingly unrelated issues ranging from speculation about a cut in interest rates to the performance of the current account to the policy objectives of the Australian monetary authorities. However, the following focused newsclip of the same report could give students an up-to-date insight into the way Governor Macfarlane of the Reserve Bank of Australia views the conduct of monetary policy:

Mr. Macfarlane told the Conference of Economists in Hobart that the key to monetary policy was inflation, rather than the more general level of economic activity.

“When [the inflation forecast] is below target, policy has to be more expansionary, as at present,” Mr. Macfarlane said.

Market analysts said this could mean that if underlying inflation for the September quarter, due out on October 22, falls below the RBA inflation target of 2 to 3 percent, then the RBA might cut rates again. (van Leeuwin 1997, 7)

**THE COSTS OF PRODUCING NEWSCLIPS**

Instructors may shun using news items because they find it too hard to attain their educational objectives via the structure and language of others. These educational issues underline the importance of selecting news items carefully. Educational objectives rarely coincide with those that drive journalists. The latter may also use language and logic that are inappropriate or draw inferences that are wrong. Kennedy (1992, 200), who has used focused newsclips extensively in his textbooks, warns that “instructors will have to work hard to find suitable newspaper material.” He concludes that newsclips should be short, focused, and written in a language that students can recognize. Without careful selection, the danger is that newsclips (especially case study newsclips) simply end up confusing and discouraging students.

**USING THE INTERNET FOR THE PRODUCTION OF NEWSCLIPS**

Collecting newsclips also requires considerable effort and organizational skills. Instructors often have to go to the trouble of cutting and pasting newsprint so that it fits onto a sheet more suitable for photocopying. Copyright costs are also associated with publishing or distributing newsclips to students. Furthermore, their use requires constant change because yesterday’s newsclips are old news, and the production cycle of text-based materials makes them dated.

Many of these disadvantages are avoided by using the Internet. Most of the world’s reputable news sources are now updated regularly on the World Wide Web. Search engines allow the instructor to be more selective about coverage of the same event. Not only do students gain an impression of immediacy but news downloaded from exotic sources underlines the universal relevance of economics. Production is much easier as well. Most major word processing programs now
allow writers to save their files as Web pages. Bredon (1996) describes a method for producing Web pages that involves copying news addresses (URLs) from within a Web browser and pasting them into appropriate places in a text file running simultaneously in the background. The advantage of this method is that the instructor can read the news, compose the accompanying text, and file the work away without leaving the keyboard—no scissors, no glue, no photocopier, no filing cabinet! Furthermore, the instructor avoids copyright problems (and associated royalties) because the Web page contains links to news sources and the instructor does not copy any part of the original. The instructor can choose those news sources that have a focused byline. Most news sources involve two-stage access. The reader first reads a page containing news headlines accompanied by a short byline that then links to the full article. I have found it relatively easy to get permission from Australian editors to copy the news title and byline onto my Web page. The Web page can also provide cryptic notes and other enhancements (sound, video, interactivity, testing, etc.), which all serve to further focus and motivate the students.

There are drawbacks. The instructor cannot cut pieces out of an article or prevent the student from reading the whole article. This serves to emphasize the importance of selection and focused comments on the instructor’s Web page. Also, some news sites do not leave their articles on the Internet for any length of time. However, constant updating has the dual benefit of emphasizing the ongoing relevance of economics and the diligence of the instructor. Many news sites provide archives of their articles, which can be searched.9

CONCLUSION

Newsclips have not been used extensively in the classroom; the costs of using them apparently exceed the benefits for most instructors. Careful selection of newsclips is essential if the instructor is to attain educational benefits from them. This selection process is made much easier by using the Internet because its search facilities can deliver a much wider coverage of suitable material written by the best journalists. The instructor can also integrate the processes of selection, materials production, filing, and dissemination to students at a much lower overall cost than was hitherto possible using traditional methods.

NOTES

1. News is used here to mean news that has a cited source. News is used in four main ways for teaching economics: (1) Osmotic newsclips have no commentary except possibly for course headings that may help students identify their relevance. They are used in the belief that familiarity will eventually translate into economic literacy. (2) Case study newsclips are published intact and are accompanied by questions and/or analysis. They are usually complex in their coverage. (3) Focused newsclips are short news excerpts used to illustrate a given economic principle or theory. (4) Reworked news is written in the author’s own words with specific acknowledgment of the news source.

2. Quotation found at http://aw.com/he/BE/BECategories/EC/Economics/Parkin/RBLinfo.html.

3. This intuition may be completely wrong. In an Internet survey of the 10 most popular Web sites for July 1997, the Weekend Australian newspaper (August 16–17, 1997) listed the Spice Girls, soccer, Batman, the weather, the X-files, Mars, cricket, Melrose Place, an e-mail directory, and Star Wars—not a news site in sight!

5. See http://mediainfo.elpress.com/ephome/npaper/nphhtm/online.htm, which contains links to 1,756 online newspapers worldwide. Links to hundreds of business and finance magazines can be found at http://www.enews.com/channel/maglist/0,1041,4,00.html.


7. Copies of the article and the HTML template mentioned in it can be obtained by e-mailing the author at george.bredon@unisa.edu.au.

8. Using software such as Microsoft Frontpage 97 allows the instructor to manage the uploading of the newsclip onto the server.

9. See the Times of London (http://www.the-times.co.uk/) for an example of an excellent archive that can be searched by word or phrase through all back issues or issues defined by date, section, or date and section.

REFERENCES


