

## Media Literacy and Psychological Science

In this assignment I ask students to identify news media reporting of empirical psychological science and employ critical thinking and media literacy skills to evaluate both the news article and the original empirical research itself. I provide some guidance in class on how to search for and identify reporting of empirical research, a valuable skill that encourages students to interrogate the sources of claims made in the media. This specification also requires students to access and read the original research report, so as to promote critical readings of empirical reports and engagement with original theory and results (moving beyond common over-reliance on textbook and secondary sources).

I scaffold the students' analyses of the news article by emphasizing two general points of critique: a) broad analyses of rhetoric and reliability, and b) scientific modes of critique that require assessments of reporting and corroborating evidence. The first set of analytic goals involve general critical thinking skills, such as evaluating the authority of sources and identification of persuasive techniques. Beyond these I also ask students to evaluate how accurately the news article represents the original research findings, which requires an in-depth understanding of the research and the relative impact of its conclusions. I also ask students to find at least one additional piece of empirical psychological work that offers an alternative viewpoint, in order to foster a sense of the dialogical and dynamic nature of scientific practice. In the final section of the assignment students discuss the potential impacts of news media mis-reporting psychological research. This fosters a reflection on the social impact of the news (and of 'fake' news) and extends this to thinking about how psychological science itself is implicated in social and political processes.

I created this assignment as a pedagogical intervention to address the lack of media literacy among students, and the need to encourage student engagement in political and social discourse. Through this assignment I wanted to emphasize the importance of good media reporting as a means of 'giving away' science and affecting social change. I also wanted to foster critical thinking skills that would allow students to identify mis-reporting and mis-use of psychological science, and direct students to utilize their own research skills to counter these false reports.

So far I have used this as a major assignment in two online upper-level classes (Psychology and the Law, and Human Sexuality), and as a shorter assignment in an on-campus introductory level class. Across both sets of classes I have been impressed by the depth of analysis that students bring to their papers. Given that students tend to sample from recently published news reports, their analyses thoughtfully engage with contemporary social and political issues. Similarly, students often sample from familiar news sources and benefit from turning the analytical lens inward through the application of critical thinking to sources that usually align with their political and social attitudes. The flexibility of the assignment allows an instructor to easily apply the analytic framework to an in-class individual or group activity. For example, I am developing a group activity based on this assignment which would allow students to compare reports across several news sources. In developing the assignment I drew upon resources from the humanities and communication studies, as I wanted the assignment to foster skills required across disciplines. In the actual assignment I included links to university and wider resources on media literacy, but have not included these below for the sake of brevity. I have generally assigned this media literacy paper at later stages of the class; throughout the semester, particularly in early classes on 'research methods' I scaffold my expectations for the critical approach students should take when reading and evaluating empirical psychological work. If this were not the case, one could include more elaboration on these points in the instructions, though I did not find this necessary. The assignment is easily translated across sub-disciplines in psychology, given the contact that all fields have with public science communication.

# News Article Analysis

WITH THE UPTICK IN ACCUSATIONS OF “FAKE NEWS” IT’S MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER THAT YOU ARE ABLE TO CRITICALLY EXAMINE THE NEWS MEDIA AND USE YOUR ACADEMIC SKILLS TO CHECK THE VERACITY OF ITS CLAIMS. YOU WILL ESSENTIALLY BE DOING A “FACT-CHECK” ON A PIECE OF NEWS MEDIA THAT DISCUSSES ISSUES OF LAW AND PSYCHOLOGY. TO HELP GET YOU STARTED I’VE PROVIDED LINKS TO A SERIES OF MATERIALS AIMED AT IMPROVING MEDIA LITERACY – OUR ABILITY TO BE CRITICAL AND USE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE TO IDENTIFY AND FIGHT THE PROLIFERATION OF BIASED AND MISLEADING NEWS STORIES.

[\[Links\]](#)

## Requirements

General Requirements:

- ~2000 words [about 5 pages single spaced]
- You should include references for the journal articles you cite. Use the APA referencing guide to make sure you’re citing them properly. You should use at least two pieces of empirical research.
- You should include the news article as an appendix to your paper, as well as a bibliography in standard APA format. These are not included in your word count.

News Article Requirements:

- The article must specifically reference some type of psychological research, not just talk about a topic in general.
- Must be a publication by a major news source. Many large news publications have science sections that cover empirical research, this is the type of article you should be looking at – not blog posts or some other type of media.
- On most news sites you will be able to find relevant articles by searching key words (e.g. “repressed memory”, “polygraph”, “police training” or any other class-related concept you’re interested in). You could also try searching those key words in *Google News*.
- You don’t *have* to run your article choice by me, but I would recommend doing so.

## Structure

Introduction (max. 200 words)

- Describe the article you are analyzing and what claims it makes about law and psychology
- Briefly explain where you found the article and why you think it is worth analyzing

Analysis (This section should be the bulk of your word count)

*How reliable are the claims of the article?*

- What is the author trying to convince the reader to believe? How do they try to do this and what motivations might they have for doing so?
- What research does the author use? Have they represented these accurately? (read the original research paper and evaluate how well the news article represents it)

*What biases might the author/source of the article have?*

- Does the news organization or website that published this article claim to have a political orientation? (Find the “About Us” or similar section) How might this affect how they report on this issue? (This [Pew Research Center](#) study might help)

*What alternative viewpoints could empirical research offer?*

- Provide at least one alternative explanation of the phenomenon that has emerged from psychological empirical studies – even if you agree with the perspective of the news article (cite at least one piece of empirical research that is NOT part of the class readings).

Conclusion (max. 200 words)

- Overall, how reliable do you think the news article is?
- What impact could misleading/false information about law and psychology in the news have on our society?