Validated Independent News Exercise: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS
Project Censored—August 2020

The Validated Independent News exercise engages students in research of potentially under-reported news stories, providing them with hands-on opportunities to develop their critical thinking skills and their critical media literacy. The assignment also provides students the chance to share their findings with a wider public, online via Project Censored’s website and in print as part of the Project’s annual book series.

An accompanying document—titled “How to Find, Evaluate, and Summarize Validated Independent News Stories (VINs)”—provides a guide to each step of the VINs exercise, from the student’s perspective. By contrast, this document is intended as a supplement for teachers.

Based on experience derived from thousands of VIN submissions received by Project Censored since 2009-2010, these recommendations cover four fundamental aspects of the VINs assignment: story selection, story research, story summary, and story submissions. The aim of this document is to prepare teachers to address some of the questions and challenges that are likely to arise as students work on the VINs exercise.

**STORY SELECTION**
Prepare students to distinguish between independent and corporate news outlets. Though fundamental to critical media literacy, this distinction is often new to students.

- Confirm that each student’s research is focused on a news story by an independent news outlet before they begin working on subsequent steps of the assignment.
  - See the Project website for a listing of useful independent news sources.
- Discussions of whether a specific news outlet is ‘independent’ or ‘corporate’ are often productive learning occasions. Allow time for them. The distinction is not always clear-cut, but in general it’s useful to determine who owns the news outlet.
  - For example, an article on unemployment insurance, republished by Truthout, ought to be credited to Common Dreams as the original source.
- Make certain that each student’s candidate story falls within the acceptable time frame for the current year’s submission cycle.
  - For the 2020-21 VIN cycle, stories should be no older than March of 2020.
- Distinguish between news reports and editorials or opinion pieces. VINs should focus on news reporting, not op-ed pieces.
  - Some news outlets label content as “Op-Ed” or “Analysis.” These labels can be helpful guides, but encourage students to determine the difference between reports and editorials based on the actual content of the article rather than any labels.

**STORY RESEARCH**
Make certain that students **track stories back to the original sources**.

- Online news sites often republish reports from other outlets. Although reputable sites typically include links back to a story’s original source, students often overlook these important credits.
  - For example, an article on unemployment insurance, republished by Truthout, ought to be credited to Common Dreams as the original source.
- Before students can effectively use online search engines or data sets to investigate additional coverage on their topic, they need to be able to state clearly the defining elements of their story. For long or complex news reports, identifying the story’s most important elements may be a challenging task.
  - Help students see how specific elements of their stories (such as the name of an organization or the date of a particular event) can be used to specify the parameters of their online searches for corporate news coverage.
  - In most cases students will not have prior experience using online news data bases to search for corporate news coverage. Allow time to help familiarize students with how to access and use these resources.
    - Guide students to one of the online news databases available at your campus (for example, LexisNexis Newsdesk, ProQuest US Major Dailies, or EBSCO Newspaper Source Plus) and help them learn how to use it.
      - Discourage students from relying on Google News, which experience has proven unreliable for this assignment.
    - Library staff may be available to lead a workshop on effective search skills. Classroom time is precious, of course, but experience shows that the benefits of a workshop with a well-prepared librarian extend far beyond the outcome of this assignment.
**STORY SUMMARY**
Check to see that students have created an original title for their VIN. Project Censored cannot post VINs whose titles are copied from prior news reports.

A complete summary, including the student’s assessment of corporate news coverage, should be 400-600 words in length.

Most students have a difficult time summarizing the main point of their story, and just a few will have any prior experience in writing a summary lead as is conventional in journalistic writing. Help students understand the elements of a strong summary lead so they can write one themselves.

- See the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) webpage on summary leads for practical tips and clear examples.
- Encourage students to look for and include a quotation from one of the story’s sources. A carefully selected quote can serve to summarize a key point or establish a vivid basis for the story’s significance.

The final paragraph should include a clear assessment of any competing corporate news coverage. Without this component, the student’s VIN is incomplete and we cannot post it online.

- If there is no corporate media coverage of the story, the summary should state so and indicate a date as of which this was true.
- If the story has received some corporate news coverage, the summary should describe how the independent news coverage differs from the corporate coverage. Students often need encouragement to pursue this step, because close reading may be necessary to distinguish differences between the competing coverage.
- Students should be rewarded for determining that a given story has in fact been well covered in the corporate press.
  - Many students will treat this outcome as a failure, because well-covered stories are not posted online as Validated Independent News stories. Remind students that research confirming that a given story has been well covered is also a positive result.

Please be sure that references are complete and properly formatted. See “How to Find, Evaluate, and Summarize Validated Independent News Stories (VINs)” for details on proper formatting.

- Citing sources appropriately is an important skill. But many students now use automated citation generators, often irresponsibly. (See the Purdue OWL for pointers on how to use citation generators wisely.)
- Emphasize the proper citation format and encourage students to follow it by making part of the grade for this assignment dependent on proper citation formatting.

Similarly, please make certain that credits for the student researchers and faculty evaluators who worked on the story are complete and properly formatted.

Each VIN needs to be carefully proofread. This includes double-checking that seemingly straightforward facts, such as the name of a publication’s title or the spelling of a journalist’s name, are correct.

Consider creating a checklist of essential elements that students can use to review their work before submitting it. Some faculty even distribute their grading rubric with the assignment for this purpose. Then pairs of students can offer constructive criticism, informally ‘grading’ each other’s rough drafts, so that each one can revise their summaries based on this peer evaluation before turning in the final version.

**STORY SUBMISSION**
Once students’ VINs are complete, faculty submit them to Project Censored.

- Students should submit their VINs to their teachers, not directly to Project Censored.

Save each VIN as a separate document in Word format. We cannot edit or post anything in PDF, Pages, or other formats.

Collect all of your students’ VINs from a semester and send them in a single email message to <andy@projectcensored.org>.

- The final submission deadline for the current cycle is March 26, 2021. This deadline is absolutely firm due to constraints from our publisher. In Spring semester, please plan your course syllabi to meet this deadline.
- Early submissions—especially for batches of VINs produced by students during the Fall semester—are encouraged and appreciated.

Not all completed student VINs are appropriate for publication on the Project Censored website. Please consider the importance and quality of the original news story and the quality of the student summary (including research and clarity of prose) before submitting any given story.

Questions or suggestions? Please contact Andy Lee Roth and/or Steve Macek. <andy@projectcensored.org> <shmacek@noctrl.edu>