Tracking Current Events: Using the Internet to Explore Unfolding Stories

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The news stories unfolding day by day are a roller coaster ride. In class discussions, students usually address snippets of stories, such as the capture of a terrorist, as part of current events. However, by the next week, new events dominate the headlines and inhibit further consideration of the prior week's events. As a result, students often do not analyze events in enough depth to understand their complex history, or to realize their implications for the future.

One solution to this problem is for students to use online sources to track or follow current events over an extended period of time. This allows students to appreciate the dynamic nature of current events and to study and take a position on the complex issues underlying them. The authors have designed and piloted an internet site, Track Current Events, which enables students to follow and research current events online and to present their work in the form of an online newspaper or "Tracker." The program is available to teachers free of charge. In this article, we describe the

design of the site and summarize the experiences of teachers using it.

Tracker: An Online Instructional Tool for Tracking Current Events

A person can register at **trackcurrentevents. org,** and log on as an editor or creator of a Tracker. The Tracker software creates a login page for each editor. Our assumption is that the teacher will serve as the editor, and students will be the users. A teacher-editor can register a class and issue students or groups of students up to 40 randomly generated usernames and passwords. This grants each student-user access to the teacher-editor's Trackers and ensures that the work of each student-user is forwarded to the appropriate teacher-editor's account. Only the teacher-editor is able to access student work. A student who wants to use a specific Tracker will use the teacher-editor's login name and password to access the Tracker.

The site has been designed with features that fit a standard three-step instructional model for teaching current events.
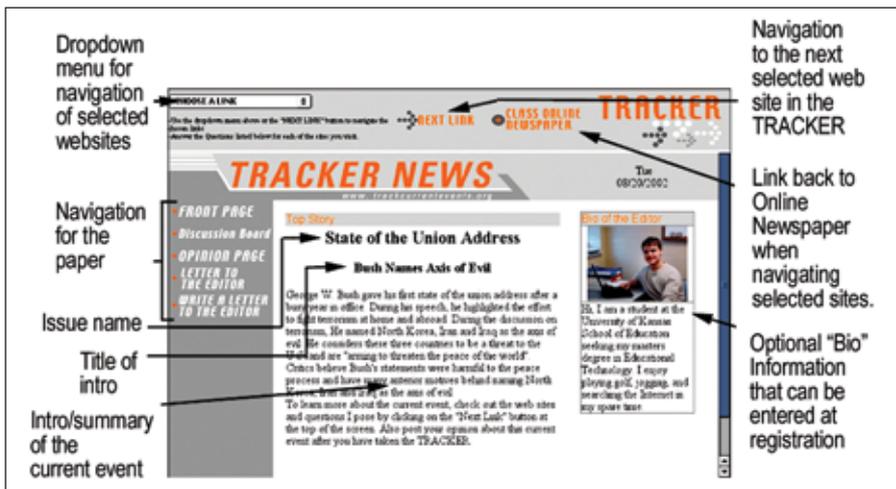
Instructional Step	Feature of Internet Site
Identify & Select the Current Event and Issue(s)	*Online Survey*
Research Current Event and Issue(s)	*Top Story & Links to Online Sources*
Take a Position on Issue(s)	*Opinion Page and Letter to Editor*

Identifying and Selecting an Issue. The teacher-editor can allow students to choose a current event to study by providing students with a list of options and by creating an online survey that students complete to indicate the current events of most interest to them. (The teacher will want to bear in mind her or his own areas of expertise and the amount of time she or he has available to monitor students when constructing this list.) Students rank the events and upload their responses, which are sent to the teacher-editor's home page.
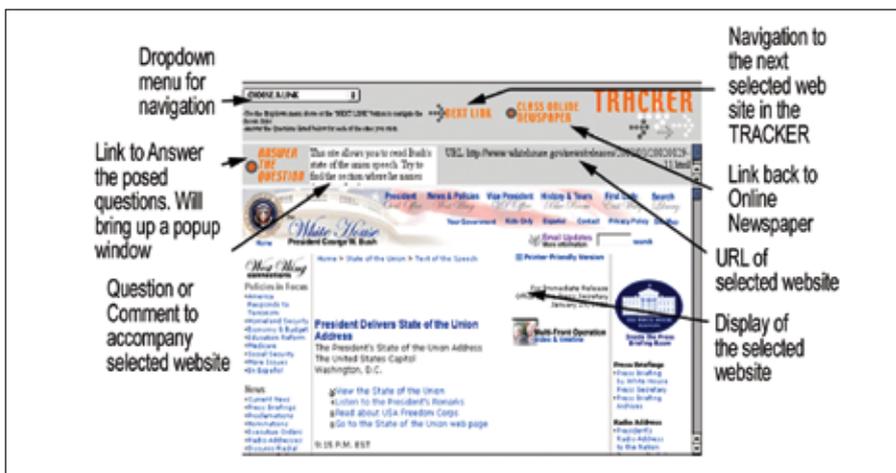
Current Events and Issue(s). The teacher-editor creates a Top Story article on the Front Page that summarizes a current event and related issue. The Front Page is the first screen the user

Screenshot 1 labels:

Dropdown menu for navigation of selected websites

Navigation for the paper

Issue name

Title of intro

Intro/summary of the current event

Navigation to the next selected web site in the TRACKER

Link back to Online Newspaper when navigating selected sites.

Optional "Bio" Information that can be entered at registration

Screenshot 1: Tracker Front Page

Screenshot 2 labels:

Dropdown menu for navigation

Link to Answer the posed questions. Will bring up a popup window

Question or Comment to accompany selected website

Navigation to the next selected web site in the TRACKER

Link back to Online Newspaper

URL of selected website

Display of the selected website

Screenshot 2: Links to Online Articles

encounters. Screenshot 1 provides an example of a Front Page used to cover President Bush's 2002 speech, in which he used the term "axis of evil" to refer to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. After reading the Top Story, the student-user clicks the Next Link button, which connects to online articles selected by the teacher.[1]

As a way to promote thoughtful consideration of the reading, the teacher-editor creates and uploads questions that complement each link. After reviewing the site and considering the question, the student-user clicks on the Answer the Question button (Screenshot 2). The user types a response in the popup and clicks the Upload the Answer button to forward it to the editor's desk or home page.

Take a Position on the Issues. After analyzing the student-users' responses, the teacher-editor posts online arguments for two sides of the issue on the Opinion Page, which students can access and use. The student forms and presents a reasonable response to arguments on the Opinion Page, by writing a Letter to the Editor, and uploading it to the editor's desk.

Putting the Site to the Test

Four teachers, who among them have taught nearly every course in the 8th-12th grade social studies curriculum, field-tested the site. The following vignettes focus on the experiences of two of them.[2]

Vignette 1: As a teacher of ninth grade world geography, Stacia Schwarz used Tracker to study world events related to issues such as the quality of health care and the societal pressures caused by population growth. Her classes illustrated how people of other cultures confronted concerns similar to those of people in the United States. She chose to let her students edit their own Tracker, and contribute Top Stories to the site.

One of the better Top Stories written by a student was titled "Good Air? Where?" The student wrote: "Air quality should be on the top of everybody's worry list. Bad air can lead to sickness, bad crops, and the greenhouse effect. If the pollutants released by industries [are] not put in check, perhaps there will not be a 'one day' for our children's children." The student chose five sites, three of which addressed pollution in an urban area. He titled the first link "Mexico City—Driving Ban?!" and asked: "Why is there the ban?" and "What are the citizens of Mexico City doing to stop the pollution?" The fourth site contained a news report on a study that explored pollution's effects on cities, he asked: "Supposing the information received from the study is true, how will the growth rate of cities change in comparison to less urban areas?" The question required the reader to infer that since cities posed a greater health risk, less urban areas might prove more attractive places to live. The Tracker's last site described the characteristics of air pollution, provided information on pollution in the United States, and suggested how to become an advocate for clean air.

Despite some successful instances of student work, Stacia found that there were serious shortcomings in allowing students to be editors. Students lacked awareness of how to present themselves online; they found it difficult to summarize an ongoing news story and select links that matched their summary; and they were unable to pose sufficiently thoughtful questions.

Vignette 2: In an 11th-12th grade Contemporary Issues course, Jennifer Schlicht served as the editor, the typical approach of teacher-users of the site. She created or edited Trackers on the resumption of arms inspections in Iraq at the time these became an issue in 2002-2003. Her first Tracker, for example, contained links to sites that addressed a different aspect of U.S.-Iraqi relations. The first site discussed Saddam Hussein's contention

that the U.S. was concerned over Iraqi oil and not its weapons. Another site addressed the situation from an Arab columnist's perspective, and students considered how, if at all, the columnist's view differed from a typical American columnist.

Jennifer posted two positions on the Opinion Page.

Side A	Side B
The United States has every right to use whatever force is necessary to take down Saddam Hussein, as well as terrorist groups attacking the United States and our interests.	The United States is required to follow the terms of treaties and act in a diplomatic manner when dealing with adversaries such as Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. Following international law is of utmost importance.

In the Letter to the Editor section, her students were to choose either Side A or B and defend their positions. Students' responses fell into two categories—those who simply reacted to the situation, and those who sought to develop and defend their thinking. In the first category were statements such as "I think we should obliterate all of them!" and "The United States should help the world and kill Saddam." Most students supporting Side A fell into the second category and sought to rationally present a position even though their emotions still permeated their thinking. One student argued: "Saddam Hussein obviously is hiding something, since he kicked the investigators out. In the time that they were gone, he could have hidden his research and weapons. If we don't take preemptive action, he could kill many people." Several students supported Side B. One student thought the "U.S. should follow the terms of the treaties and act in a diplomatic manner because we are the most powerful country in the world. We kind of set the standard … if we don't follow through with the treaties … other countries are more likely to start break-

ing the treaties and then the whole world will be [in] chaos."

Jennifer also used news stories about the resumption of arms inspections in Iraq as a vehicle to move students into the deeper issues of national and global security and relations between the United States and Iraq. Since students investigated the issues at the time they occurred, they came to realize that the "future" of the issues, and the outcome of the events, were unknown and unfolding before them. One approach that works well is to ask students to investigate and make hypotheses about the future of the issue(s) as a means of engaging them in following current events and analyzing new developments. Jennifer adopted this approach as she and her students followed the Iraqi situation for several months. The students' hypotheses served as a good point of reference for their research.

Making the Right Choices
Two challenges facing users of Tracker are the selection of appropriate news stories and the identification of high-quality news websites.

Selection of the Right News Story. When selecting events to research, we recommend the criteria suggested by Parker and Zumeta on how to select public issues for students to investigate:[3]

1. *Interest*: The current event should address an issue or issues that capture the attention of students.
2. *Authenticity*: The event should address public problems that are not only easily recognizable, but are recognized by students as being important to them.
3. *Value Conflict*: The event should involve diverse and competing values that students, possibly with some coaching, are likely to identify.
4. *Pluralism*: The event should be open to interpretation from different cultural and political perspectives and enable students to recognize these perspectives on a personal and societal level.

5. *Perenniality*: The event should be central to one or more enduring public issues.
6. *Curriculum Match and Materials*: The issues related to the event should be related to the curriculum and students should be able to find suitable resources for studying them.

The "curriculum match" is of particular importance, because of the instructional time it takes to move from a review of current events into an exploration of the issues underlying them. Spending this time is most justifiable when the issue selected is aligned to the wider curriculum. For example, Stephanie Sears, a world geography teacher, created a Tracker on AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, which her students used on two occasions prior to her unit on sub-Saharan Africa. During the unit, students made use of the Tracker for several activities related to AIDS in Africa. One site linked to Tracker enabled the students, for example, to map the spread of AIDS over time and to learn place names and locations in the context of studying the issue. While learning about individual nations, students explored sites that enabled them to learn about the response of each nation to the AIDS epidemic. The teacher concluded that her students' use of the Tracker increased their interest and added authenticity because students sensed that they were not only studying a current problem, but one with a future and an outcome that was unknown, important, and unfolding before them.

Selecting Good Internet Sites. Locating websites of suitable quality is a difficult and time-consuming task for teachers. For students, it is a real struggle to find them. While providing a teacher-sorted collection of sites is the more time-efficient technique, students need to develop skills and experience in judging the suitability of websites, and should have the opportunity to do so. Table 1 provides the internet addresses of some helpful news sites for teachers and students, as well as sites with back-

ground information on a wide range of national and global policy issues. Based on experience with the Tracker, we suggest offering students these guidelines.

1. *Establish a website's authority.* As students try to establish a website's credentials, they might ask themselves:
   (a) Who is responsible for posting this information?
   (b) If the person or group is not easily recognized as associated with a reputable news source, is the author's point of view readily apparent?

   (c) Is the information provided in a different format (such as a printed newspaper or TV broadcast)?

2. *Check the accuracy and timeliness of the information.* Just like a reporter, students need to ask the questions of who, what, where, and when:
   (a) Who is reporting the story and from where?
   (b) When did the news story occur, and when was it reported?
   (c) What are the sources of the author's report?
   (d) If a site's credentials are less clear than those of a recognized news source, what sources of information are identified on the site?

   (e) Is it possible to verify the information on the site?
   (f) Is the site evaluated or edited?

3. *Search for objective sources and an appropriate balance of biased sources.* While most major newspapers have an identifiable editorial position on many current issues, their news sources are typically accurate and fair in their reporting of events. Other sites, however, may present the information that best supports the position of a particular group. Such sites can be useful for a student's exploration of an issue, so long as the student's research includes several of them with a range of positions on the event.
   (a) What is a group's, or individual's, motive for posting the information?

Table 1. Useful Sites

One of the hardest steps is getting started. In putting together Trackers, we have learned that several types of sites serve as a good point of departure: general news sites, metalink sites with links to a range of public policy concerns, and sites unique to the issue that the class is following and that can often be located by a search engine:

General News Sites
While CNN (**www.cnn.com**) and Fox News (**www.foxnews. com**) are obvious sources, the following sites have features that are particularly useful for teachers or students.

The New York Times Learning Network (**www.nytimes. com/learning**)

Newsweek Education Program (**school.newsweek.com**)

Public Broadcasting Service News (**www.pbs.org/news**)

Time for Kids (**www.timeforkids.com/TFK**)

Scholastic News (**teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews**)

Local, National, and World Newspapers
News Voyager is a metalink site with links to newspapers that are organized by state (**www.newspaperlinks.com/home. cfm**) and by continent (**www.newspaperlinks.com/home. cfm?mid=int**).

The Newseum (**www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages**), a second metalink site, contains the front page from 300 newspapers around the nation and the world.

Metalink Sites with Background Information on Contemporary Issues
Sample sites that offer background material on contemporary issues include:
Close Up Foundation (**www.closeup.org/papers.htm**)

U.S. News & World Report "News Briefings" (**www.usnews. com/usnews/briefings/nbhome.htm**)

You Think! (**youthink.worldbank.org/issues**) Hosted by the World Bank, this site contains information and links on issues ranging from conflict and corruption, to globalization and the environment.

For More Advanced Students:
Documents in the News (**www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/docnews. html**)

Hot Topics on the Internet (**infodome.sdsu.edu/research/ guides/hot/list.shtml**)

(b) Are multiple perspectives represented in the sites as a whole?

(c) Are sites included that present a position other than my own?

4. *Distinguish between the style and substance of a site.* A well-designed, state-of-the-art site might lack substance. In one case of internet research by high school students, a group of students researched an issue confronting a state legislature on whether the failure to wear a seatbelt should be a primary offense; a second group researched an initiative to make it a traffic offense to use cell phones while driving. In both instances, the students became so captivated by websites about individual experiences on the use of seatbelts or cell phones that they lost sight of the larger issues.

5. *Select informative, interesting, and relevant sites.* The aim is for students to post sites that capture their interest, provide accurate and timely information, and draw a connection between students' lives and the event and underlying issue.

This is a time when it is more important than ever for our students to understand current national and international issues. In our experience, Tracker has been a useful tool for training students to discern the issues that underlie current events, identify worthwhile sites, and design thought provoking questions. Students who use Tracker become more practiced at conducting research, evaluating alternative perspectives, and making reasoned analyses—all of which are necessary skills for the informed judgments they will need to make as voters on the challenges that confront us. ✑

Notes

1. One caution to keep in mind is that certain news sites only keep an article posted for a day or two, and other news sites move them to the site's archives and charge to access them.

2. The third teacher, Dustin Leochner, built a Tracker on Native Americans for his eighth-grade U.S. history students. The fourth teacher, Jeff Strickland, used Tracker to have his twelfth grade government students track bills in the Kansas legislature.

3. Walter C. Parker and William Zumeta, "Toward an Aristocracy of Everyone: Policy Study in the High School Curriculum," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 32-33.

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