NEWS FROM Hemispheres

THE INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH CONSORTIUM
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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Pakistan: Militants destroy NATO trucks
Serb police hunt fugitive Mladic
Falluja school bombing buries students
Mexican drug cartels infiltrating Guatemala

Bombarded with headlines of crime, violence, and poverty around the world, we—and our students—can easily forget that there are triumphs as well as tragedies, successes as well as challenges. While our own news in the United States—especially with the current financial crisis—also can be negative, our deeper knowledge of our society and its achievements allows us to see beyond the bad and recognize the good. But how do our students process stories about war, corruption, and drugs in other countries?

In her recent interview in *Social Education* (November/December 2008), Firoozeh Dumas, author of *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*, discusses the negativity of the news: "People need to be reminded that what they see on the evening news does not represent an entire country. Only bad news is news. Normal, kind people never make headlines." The following activity, inspired by Dumas's reflections, focuses on positive news stories in an attempt to provide balance and perspective on international news.

Teachers can incorporate this current events activity into their classrooms in different ways. Our suggestions are as follows:

(1) Comparing International Current Events: Have students clip 4–5 international news articles from the local paper (or from an Internet site) over a two-week period. They should summarize their stories as follows: Who, What, When, Where, Why, How, My international story is about, and My personal reaction to the story is. Students should then read 4–5 international news stories listed in this newsletter and complete the same series of questions. To close the activity, the class should discuss or write an essay about the differences between their clipped articles and those provided. What impressions did the news stories give them about the world? Is there a noticeable difference between those they collected and those provided here? Why might positive stories not make the biggest headlines?

(2) The U.S. and the World: Same process as above, but with students clipping articles about the U.S. and other countries. Students can compare and contrast coverage: Is the portrayal of the United States more positive? If so, why do you think so?

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Brazil: Good Economic Times

Brazilians have long joked about the untapped potential of their country: "Brazil is the country of the future, and it always will be." The popular saying emphasizes that, although Brazilians are aware of their vast natural resources and the promise of great wealth and power, they don't quite believe that this beautiful future will ever happen.

International attention on Brazil generally focuses on its poverty. Even for those who know little about Brazil, the word *favela* (Portuguese for shantytown) conjures images of cardboard houses rising high into the hillsides of Rio de Janeiro (a Google image search for "favela" will quickly return thousands of photographs for those who are unfamiliar with them). News from Brazil often relates to extreme poverty and degradation: drug wars in the slums, robberies and car-jackings in the overpopulated cities.

Station selling ethanol (A Comun) and regular gas (G Supra), São Paulo. Gas is nearly twice the price of ethanol. Photo by Mario Roberto Duran Ortiz.

But Brazil, as a whole, never has been a poor country. Quite the contrary: Brazil has always been rich in terms of natural resources. Sugar was one of colonial Brazil's earliest exports, and it brought great wealth to Portugal. Reliance on natural resources continued throughout the colonial period and even into the twentieth century: coffee was a major export through the 1950s. Gold and semi-precious stones also provided Brazil with considerable wealth over the centuries. The main problem with these resources is that they were in the hands of the few: land titles in Brazil were granted early in the colonial era, with a few elite landowners being granted enormous tracts of land by the Portuguese crown. In the Northeast, a single family owned a piece of land that was roughly the size of Texas. Therefore, land, and the profit to be made from it, has been in the hands of a small number of elite families. Still today, 2 percent of the landowners in Brazil control half of the land.

In recent years, Brazil has started to focus more on the problem of inequality, addressing it through both social programs that provide food, healthcare, and other basic necessities, as well as energy programs that reduce expenses for everyone. Since the 1970s, it has worked to reduce fuel costs by researching and producing ethanol, a plant-based fuel. Brazil's increasing dependence on its own fuel, as opposed to oil from the world market, has sheltered Brazilians from rising gas prices that the rest of the world has faced. Auto manufacturers—ahead of their peers in other countries, including the U.S.—have made cars to adjust to the new source of fuel. Over the past decade, Brazil has become an international proponent of ethanol and has taken a leading role in the discussions about this alternative fuel.

In the last year, Brazil's discovery of a massive oil field off the coast of Rio de Janeiro has led it to energy independence, something about which the United States can only dream. In addition to its self-sufficiency, Brazil will stand to profit greatly in future oil sales. These positive events have allowed its economy to grow while the rest of the world is in economic turmoil. Brazilians are predicting that these developments will allow them to alleviate poverty. Already, Brazil's middle class is growing—a definite sign of progress—and social programs have more money to help its poorest citizens. The country of the future may have arrived!

In The News:

"In Brazil, The Driving Is Sweeter," *CBS News*, March 29, 2006
Brazil's ethanol program—focused on the production of fuel from sugarcane—has freed it from increasing oil prices. Sugarcane ethanol has been a huge factor in Brazil's move to energy independence and also has meant considerable savings to consumers.
http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/03/29/eveningnews/main1454613.shtml

"Strong Economy Propels Brazil to World Stage," *New York Times*, July 31, 2008
The middle class is growing—and buying—in Brazil. In addition to a booming economy, social programs are helping the poorest citizens.
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/31/world/americas/31brazil.html

"Brazil, Buoyed by Oil and Agriculture, Becomes a Global Power," *U.S. News & World Report*, September 18, 2008
The country that Charles de Gaulle referred to as "not a serious country" has grown up and gotten serious. With planning, stability, and a bit of luck on its side, Brazil is poised to become a leading global player.
http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/world/2008/09/18/brazil-buoyed-by-oil-and-agriculture-becomes-a-global-power.html?PageNr=1

"Brazil oil boom 'to end poverty'," *BBC News*, September 8, 2008
President Lula plans to use oil revenue on social programs in Brazil, and to maximize profits in order to reap the most benefits from the new sources of oil.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7603655.stm

The Middle East: Changing Times

Women in the Nile Delta region of Egypt. Photo by James Buck.

Saudi Arabia might be the last place you would expect to hear about an up-and-coming rock and roll band, especially one whose members are all women. However, thanks to the Internet and social networking Web sites, The AccoLade, an all-woman rock group based in the coastal city of Jeddah, is gaining a global audience.

The group's members met as classmates at Effat College, a women's university in Jeddah. They discovered a common love of music and began jam sessions in the evening at each other's homes. While some of the attention the band has earned has been negative—some conservative Saudis have posted comments on Web sites calling the band "immoral"—The AccoLade has earned an international following and counts fans from as far away as the U.S. and India. In order to make sure that they don't run afoul of Saudi Arabia's conservative religious establishment, they don't use images of themselves in their publicity and refer to themselves only by their first names.

In many ways, The AccoLade's members are symbolic of the new generation of women in the Middle East. In contrast to the long-held stereotype that women in the region are voiceless, oppressed, and form a marginal, invisible part of society, there is a powerful movement afoot to work both within the social and religious framework as well as in defiance to it in order to achieve change.

In Egypt, the Coptic Church and al-Azhar University—the most powerful Christian and Muslim institutions in the country—have joined forces with the secular government and street-level activists to launch a national campaign against female genital mutilation (FGM). Although the practice was officially banned in 1996, both government and international surveys show that it has continued, especially in rural areas. The campaign was initiated by anthropologist Marie Assad, who has been speaking out against FGM since the 1950s. "I never thought I would see this day," she told the *New York Times* in 2007, after a summer of street demonstrations, television campaigns, posters, and fliers speaking out against FGM.

Rural areas in countries like Morocco, Egypt, and Turkey are often the slowest to change because centuries of tradition are the strongest there. Residents frequently view trends coming out of large cities as representative of a corrupt lifestyle. But even in areas where tradition holds sway, changes have begun. In December 2008, Eva Habil became Egypt's first female mayor, beating out five male candidates, including her younger brother. Habil, a Coptic Christian, is the daughter of a previous mayor. Her election, in the rural town of Komboha in Middle Egypt, was cheered as a victory by women—Muslim and Christian—throughout the country and attracted attention from the international media.

While Egypt granted women the right to vote in 1956, women remain underrepresented in the Egyptian government, holding only nine of more than 450 seats in Egypt's Parliament. However, Habil believes that it is only a matter of time before Egyptian women recognize their political power and begin to make their voices heard. "I am the first woman mayor," she said shortly after taking office, "but believe me, there will be others." If the young women in The AccoLade and the volunteer workers coordinating the anti-FGM campaign in Egypt are any indication, the change that Habil hopes to see may come sooner rather than later.

In The News:

"The AccoLade: Saudi Women Rock Out," *National Public Radio*, December 16, 2008
Includes a link to the band's first single and an archived audio clip of the news story that ran on NPR's *All Things Considered*.
http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98138992

"Egypt's first woman mayor takes role in her stride," *AFP*, December 14, 2008
An in-depth piece on Eva Habil, Egypt's first female mayor.
http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/qM5h9eub9bmzXUFH19uRw2EFlt-dp0w

"Voices Rise in Egypt to Shield Girls From an Old Tradition," *New York Times*, September 20, 2007
Circumcision, as supporters call it, or female genital mutilation, as opponents refer to it, was suddenly a ferocious focus of debate in Egypt when a thirteen-year-old girl died after the procedure was performed.
http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/20/world/africa/20girls.html

"How Heavy Metal is Working its Way into Islam," *National Public Radio*, July 10, 2008
While music like heavy metal, punk, hip-hop and reggae—often voices of protest—typically has been considered immoral in the Muslim world, it also has become the voice of a new generation looking for a new identity. This piece contains an excerpt from the book *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam*.
http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92421152

Slovenia: Shining Star of the Balkans

The Balkans have long been a troubled region with various ethnicities vying for either dominance within the region or autonomy from larger, conquering empires (in particular, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire). In the early twentieth century, several nations declared independence, giving rise to the term "Balkanization," or the breakdown of a region into smaller—usually hostile—units. After World War I, the region once again was forcibly forged into a single unit, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later renamed Yugoslavia (meaning Southern Slavs). After World War II, under the strong hand of Marshal Tito's Communist government, ethnic conflict was suppressed, and Yugoslavia continued as a single economic entity until the collapse of Communism in 1990.

Tartini Square in Piran, Slovenia, on the Adriatic Sea. Photo by Gilbert Rappaport.

In the early 1990s, Yugoslavia disintegrated as individual countries declared their independence. Genocide, war crimes, and "ethnic cleansing" typified the news from the Balkans as long-dormant ethnic, cultural, and religious rivalries reared their heads. Bitter civil wars devastated the region, populations were slaughtered, refugees fled, and economies were disrupted. The change from a Communist "command" economy to a market economy slowed, and, although the wars have ended, ethnic fear and mistrust hinder economic reconstruction to this day.

During this time, one country quietly managed to avoid these conflicts and proved to be an outstanding example of social stability and economic prosperity. In 1991, Slovenia was the first post-Yugoslav republic to declare its independence. In many ways, Slovenia was the best candidate for stability from the beginning. A small country in the northeast corner of Yugoslavia, it borders the western countries of Italy and Austria and has a homogeneous population of approximately two million. While Slovenes made up only 8 percent of the population of Yugoslavia, they represent 83 percent of the population within the borders of their own country, with no other ethnicity approaching 5 percent. As a result, Slovenia avoided the ethnic rivalries and civil wars that plagued the other former-Yugoslav states. Highly industrialized, Slovenia was already one of the most prosperous parts of Yugoslavia at the time of independence, and it quickly turned to its western and northern neighbors for trade. Slovenia took quick measures to privatize the economy and stabilize inflation. By dedicating funds for improvements to infrastructure, such as better roads leading from the borders to the capital of Ljubljana, and implementing liberal economic policies, barriers to international trade were reduced and economic development flourished.

Slovenia's successful economic and democratic reform allowed it to join the European Union in 2004. By 2007, it had reduced inflation, minimized unemployment, and increased its gross domestic product sufficiently to allow it to become the first post-Communist country to adopt the Euro. Becoming a part of the Eurozone has made international investment and international travel even easier, and Slovenia is now a popular European tourist destination.

In 2008, Slovenia held the Presidency of the EU Council, a responsibility that rotates among member states for a period of six months. Slovenia was the first of the "new" (post-2003) member states to hold this responsibility. During the six-month tenure, the country holding the Presidency is the "face" of the European Union. While each member state assumes this responsibility at some point, it also is considered an honor and an opportunity for a country to bring to the forefront issues that it deems particularly important.

While it addressed many broad issues affecting the whole of the EU, such as energy policies and labor law, Slovenia included among its priorities numerous policies and agreements concerning the stabilization of the Balkan states, and was seen as a "bridge" that could facilitate dialogue between the EU and the western Balkan countries still striving for EU membership. As the Balkans slowly regain their place in Western Europe, Slovenia has set the example of a successful transition to peace and prosperity.

In The News:

"In Slovenia, prosperity and ambition," *International Herald Tribune*, April 28, 2005
Slovenia's economic reforms, allowing a gradual transition from a Communist country to a market economy, have won praise from the European Commission and led to the description of the country as "Europe in miniature."
http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/04/27/news/enlarge4.php

"Slovenia Strides Westward and Does Not Look Back," *New York Times*, July 26, 2006
Slovenia, which borders Italy and Austria, is increasingly integrating into Western Europe through membership in the European Union and plans to convert its currency to the Euro.
http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/26/world/europe/26slovenia.html

"Slovenia comes 'home' to Western Europe," *MarketWatch*, December 12, 2008
Adopting the Euro as Slovenia's national currency has facilitated international investment and tourism and led to increased economic prosperity.
http://www.marketwatch.com/news/story/slovenia-euro-reunites-nation-neighbors/story.aspx?guid=%7B4436698B-FDAE-409F-BEBB-FEB859880705%7D

India: Shared/Ambiguous Religious Identity

India is famously known as the world's largest democracy, with a population that encompasses many languages and considerable ethnic and religious diversity. Two major religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as the faiths of Jainism and Sikhism, are native to its soil. Indians long have embraced the importance of this diversity as a national and cultural strength. At the time of independence in 1947, India was created to be a non-Hindu state in which all religions are equal. To that extent, the Constitution of India declares the nation to be a secular republic that must uphold the right of citizens to worship freely and follow any religion or faith.

Unfortunately, international media attention on India, and the region of South Asia more generally, tends to depict deep-rooted differences and tensions between different religious communities, especially Hindu and Muslim. Press coverage of the region overwhelmingly focuses on historical political hostility between the two groups and contemporary acts of violence committed by religious extremists. Such media representations lead to the idea that the two communities are distinct, homogeneous, monolithic, and completely separate. Additionally, they portray the region as a place of growing violence, terrorism, and ingrained fundamentalist values. In fact, the impression of communal division is dangerous because it can lead to a reinforcement of extremist perspectives. Even at their worst, the tensions and violence between the communities are outweighed by far more examples of close cultural, religious, and personal relations and bonding between Hindus and Muslims.

As elsewhere in the world, religious identity in South Asia has never been clear-cut. Quite to the contrary: Hindus and Muslims have a long shared history and cultural heritage on the Indian subcontinent. A significant number of religious practices and sacred spaces bring Hindus and Muslims together in common worship and ritual participation. Some of these shared traditions and their followers cannot easily be classified as "Hindu" or "Muslim" but rather as somewhat in-between. These community identities defy the division of "Hindus" and "Muslims" into two completely separate communities, contrary to the image put forth by both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists.

Many examples abound of groups who consider themselves "Muslim," but practice many "Hindu" customs. Some groups regularly pray at local Hindu temples and appear outwardly as Hindus, keeping their faith secret. Some groups practice rituals from both religions: in Rajasthan, one community celebrates such Hindu festivals as Holi and Diwali and also offers prayers during the Muslim festival of Eid. Other shared religious traditions center on charismatic saints who preached an ethical monotheism, striving to bring Hindus and Muslims closer together in recognition of their common humanity. Some temple complexes look fully "Hindu" but have Hindu and Islamic religious messages painted on their walls or contain the graves of Islamic saints, which attract many Hindu pilgrims. At other Hindu temples, Muslim singers have, for generations, performed devotional music. These are but a few of the ways that Hindus and Muslims come together in India to worship, celebrate, and promote peace.

Religious shrines, like the Tomb of Hajji Ali in Mumbai, are revered by Hindus and Muslims alike. Photo by Christopher Rose.

In The News:

"Islam and Hinduism's blurred lines," *BBC News*, July 14, 2008
Mixed Hindu and Muslim identity has existed for centuries in Rajasthan, India. Despite the long history of mixed religious affiliation, the community is under increasing pressure by religious fundamentalists to clarify and choose one religion.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7473019.stm

"Varanasi Journal; Braids of Faith at Baba's Temple: A Hindu-Muslim Idyll," *New York Times*, March 17, 2006
Hindus and Muslims share religious practices and cultural identity in the northern city of Varanasi. Despite a temple bombing, Hindus and Muslims continue to come together in common worship at Sufi shrines and commercial and artistic collaboration.
http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0DE2DF1E31F934A25750C0A9609C8B63&scp=25&sq=hindu%20muslim&st=cse

"Multi-faith event opens section of Mumbai hotel after attacks," *Detroit Free Press*, December 21, 2008
Following the November 2008 attacks by Islamic militants in Mumbai, religious groups join in peaceful protest. The event brings together leaders of the Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Sikh, Parsi, Buddhist, and Jain faiths.
http://www.freep.com/article/20081221/NEWS07/81221019/1009/NEWS07

"MEANWHILE: Bollywood Films Preach Hindu-Muslim Tolerance," *International Herald Tribune*, October 24, 2001
Although often formulaic in plot and light in nature, Bollywood films project messages of tolerance and portray the diversity of Indian society and heritage. Indian cinema shows the good and bad in every community with Muslim actors playing Hindu heroes and vice versa.
http://www.iht.com/articles/2001/10/24/edtharoor_ed3_.php

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—Institute for Cultural Landscape Studies, Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University