Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources

CASE #35

We Have Issues: Using Controversial Newspapers in Primary Source Instruction

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED BY THIS CASE STUDY

3.A. Examine a primary source, which may require the ability to read a particular script, font, or language, to understand or operate a particular technology, or to comprehend vocabulary, syntax, and communication norms of the time period and location where the source was created.

4.B. Critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases, and consider how these relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source.

4.C. Situate a primary source in context by applying knowledge about the time and culture in which it was created; the author

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or creator; its format, genre, publication history; or related materials in a collection.

4.F. Demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and historical actors.

CASE STUDY LOCATION Grand Valley State University Libraries – Lemmen Library & Archives
Allendale, Michigan
www.gvsu.edu/library/specialcollections/

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Introduction and Institutional Context

This case study examines a library instruction session held collaboratively between a history faculty member and two archivists using Fr. Charles Coughlin's *Social Justice* newspaper collection to engage undergraduate students with the complexities of analyzing primary sources, grappling with uncomfortable history, and historical continuity from the past to the present.

Grand Valley State University (GVSU) is a public liberal arts institution founded in 1960, with an enrollment of approximately 20,000 students. In Fall 2025, GVSU welcomed its second-largest incoming class in the institution's history.

Lemmen Library & Archives, home to GVSU's special collections and university archives, is currently staffed by two full-time archivists, Leigh Rupinski and Andrea Van Dyke. While the archivists lead instruction sessions every semester geared around introducing undergraduate students to archival resources and rare books, there are limited opportunities to encourage students to deeply engage with one collection. Most "one-shot" sessions of 50–75 minutes include overviews of multiple resources in addition to introducing basic concepts and values related to archives and archival practices.

This case study involves students in Dr. Ian Van Dyke's "American History since 1877" course, a lower-level survey that fulfills general education requirements in history and writing for GVSU students. Of the 29 students in this class, 23 were freshmen or sophomores. Of the 24 who attended this session, only two had been to GVSU's archives before in any capacity. Most were non-history majors.

For a class of first- and second-year students who had largely never handled primary sources firsthand before, using a collection like the *Social Justice* newspapers raised potential challenges as well as interesting opportunities. Dr. Van Dyke approached the archivists with the idea, "What if we used these newspapers to get students comfortable with being uncomfortable?" Since the newspapers were indeed complicated sources, it was determined that the archivists would carefully curate a selection of volumes for classroom use.

Social Justice is a compelling primary source for a US history course. Published and edited by the "Radio Priest" of Royal Oak, Michigan, Fr. Charles Coughlin (1891–1979), the newspaper was a print mouthpiece for Coughlin's political, economic, and social views. These views combined a genuine concern for the poor and needy in the era of the Great Depression and opposition to US entry into World War II—both of which were united by a conspiratorial antisemitism and sympathy for fascism. As a historian of religion familiar with Coughlin, Dr. Van Dyke was excited to use the source to reveal important political and social dynamics of the Depression/interwar era.[1] In addition, Dr. Van Dyke intended to use the paper as an

[1] For more on Coughlin's influence, see Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great*

example of the role of mass media in promoting hatred and extremism, a message as relevant today as it was during the 1930s and 1940s. The ability to draw comparisons to contemporary themes makes *Social Justice* particularly useful for beginner-level students, who can think critically about the text even with limited historical background knowledge.

The subject matter of *Social Justice* created ethical as well as pedagogical challenges, however. Coughlin was an antisemitic demagogue and admirer of Hitler, Franco, and Mussolini. How should educators ask students to engage in "empathy" with a historical actor whose bigotry offends modern sensibilities? Conversely, how can students engage productively with hateful materials beyond superficial dismissal of their value as a window into the past?

This case study will delve into the process of tailoring learning objectives, curating the materials, leading the class session, and the results and lessons learned throughout the process.

Narrative

As a general education course, Dr. Van Dyke's "American History since 1877" must fulfill various learning outcomes determined by the University, including a requirement for students to "evaluate a range of primary sources (textual, material, or both) as evidence of historical analysis and interpretation."[2] The instructors decided to focus on the four TWPS learning objectives identified above (3.B, 4.B, 4.C, 4.F), which correlated with this preexisting general education goal.

First, Dr. Van Dyke and the Lemmen Library archivists needed to establish mutual goals and adjust for disciplinary differences. Early in the planning phase, a key discussion in this project involved balancing two sets of learning objectives: those of an archival teaching space (critical engagement with the *form* or *medium* of a primary source) and those of a history classroom (critical engagement with the *message* of a primary source). Both approaches help situate the primary source in historical context, but in different ways.

It was decided to select issues from the *Social Justice* collection and flag individual articles related to five core themes emphasized in the course: (1) the Great Depression/US economy, (2) US foreign policy/isolationism, (3) antisemitism, (4) (pro)Nazism, and (5) (anti)communism. These themes highlighted conflicting stances over time, controversial viewpoints, and common rhetorical techniques in mass media. In a class session before the archives visit, Dr. Van Dyke would introduce students to Coughlin with a lecture that included an overview of Coughlin's

Depression (Knopf, 1982).

[2] "Student Learning Outcomes," GVSU General Education Program, Grand Valley State University, rev. May 18, 2026, https://www.gvsu.edu/gened/student-learning-outcomes-38.

biography, ideology, and political influence. Students would then arrive at the archives prepared with important context for the material they were about to encounter. This would allow students to compare and contrast articles from different editions, as well as illustrate change (or continuity) of rhetorical positions over time.

Archivists Rupinski and Van Dyke examined the archive's linear foot of *Social Justice* issues spanning from 1937–1942. The archivists created piles of newspapers by year and then skimmed each newspaper to find thematic articles. They combed through each issue searching for articles across the five themes to set aside, while also inspecting each issue to ensure that it could withstand classroom use. The two archivists then read through the articles from the selection more closely to choose five issues for each theme for Dr. Van Dyke's class of approximately 25 students. Each article was selected not only for its topic, but to ensure that all the articles were one page or less to provide the students with comparable reading samples. Articles that were too long, no matter the content, would not be readable in the allotted timeframe of the class. Finally, the archivists also chose articles spanning the six-year run of the newspaper to ensure that students would be able to analyze any changes or progressions in the newspaper's viewpoint as time passed. At the conclusion of this process, the archivists had 25 newspapers in good condition with articles of similar length about each theme spanning the period in question. Van Dyke then created and printed slips for the first page of each newspaper detailing that group's theme, the name of the article the student should read, and the page(s) on which the article could be found (Appendix A).

The archivists struggled most with finding suitable articles across the five categories. For example, some articles were interesting but deemed too short or too long, some were found in issues too brittle for handling, some articles were published in years in which the archivists had already found other examples, and so forth. Many articles also reflected multiple, overlapping class themes. For example, the April 3, 1939, article "Rome-Berlin Axis is a Firm Rampart Against Communism" could fit into both the "pro-Nazism" and "anticommunism" categories, but the archivists ultimately chose the former because it was one of the clearest examples of pro-Nazi sentiment. Searching for articles was easily the most time-consuming facet of this project. Rupinski and Van Dyke estimate that they spent three to five total hours selecting the articles for classroom use, but they appreciated the opportunity to gain further intellectual control of a legacy collection and select articles that would further Dr. Van Dyke's classroom learning objectives in addition to their own.

Prior to their visit to the archive, Dr. Van Dyke used part of the previous class session to present a 10-minute "mini-lecture" on Coughlin to situate his life, ideas, and activism in context. After a brief biography, Van Dyke framed Coughlin's movement as one of many political responses to the Great Depression—an era where millions of Americans sought alternatives to the perceived failures of capitalism and democracy. He also drew students' attention to developments in Europe, where fascist and communist governments proclaimed the superiority of their systems

over that of the United States, and where leaders like Hitler scapegoated minorities like Jews to explain their people's suffering.

For the archival instruction session, Dr. Van Dyke's students visited Lemmen Library & Archives, where they were split into five groups of approximately five students each. Before the students arrived, the archivists put a worksheet and an evaluation sheet at each seat and configured the space for students to work in small groups. To begin class, the archivists both briefly introduced themselves, the Lemmen Library & Archives, and the instructional space in the building. Because the archivists were unsure how familiar students would be with print newspapers, Rupinski used a copy of *Social Justice* to show students different parts of a newspaper (bylines, etc.) and how the articles were formatted, highlighting in particular the ways in which articles might begin on one page and end on a page toward the back of the paper. Van Dyke then described what was expected of the students, pointed out the archivists' guiding inserts in each newspaper, and explained that each group had a different theme to untangle with the help of their worksheets.

The worksheets were divided into timed sections for students to complete as they examined their newspaper and analyzed the articles during the 75-minute class session (Appendix B). The students were given five minutes to look through the newspaper as a whole and write down anything they found interesting or surprising. They then had 25 minutes to read and analyze their article and make inferences based on their article's content and what they had learned in class (3.B.). The end of the worksheet gave students 15 minutes to compare and contrast their articles with their groupmates whose articles covered the same topic.

While students read their articles and filled in their worksheets, the three faculty members circulated around the room, answered questions, and let students know when they should move from one worksheet section to the next. When the allotted time for the worksheet had ended and the faculty confirmed that most students had completed their worksheets and had wrapped up their table discussions, Dr. Van Dyke used the rest of the session to bring the students together for a wider class discussion. He asked questions that allowed students to reflect on what they had read, make connections to themes and content from class, and compare the newspaper's coverage of their topics over time with the other students' topics. Students engaged eagerly, not needing (though welcoming!) the candy and archives-themed stickers the archivists provided as extra encouragement to participate.

Results

Guided by their worksheets and primed by the lecture in their previous class session, many students identified antisemitic messages (whether overt or more subtle) in their articles (3.B.). However, some had trouble squaring background information they had already learned with Coughlin's tone in the paper. For example, students with articles discussing communism

expressed confusion about Coughlin's assertions that *Social Justice* was against extremism. Talking with these students, Dr. Van Dyke nudged them to think about why a leader with "extreme" views would claim to reject extremism. The students (rightly) surmised that the articles revealed a claim of respectability or moderation. As one student wrote, Coughlin was "trying to create an environment that gets people to support his claims," purporting to be "somewhere in the middle to get people on his side." (4.B.) This student noted that Coughlin repeatedly distinguished between "good Jews" who supported the United States and "bad Jews" who undermined Christianity and worked for the spread of international communism—thereby disclaiming antisemitism while leaning into classic antisemitic tropes. Another student identified this tactic as "dog whistle language."

Once students had completed their worksheets, Dr. Van Dyke called on each table group to share one "big idea" from their articles. The point about "extreme" ideas versus "moderate" rhetoric proved especially interesting to students, perhaps because so many of them could relate this dynamic to our own time. As one student put it in her response worksheet, "people turn to who[m]ever has a stronger presence for information." At the end of the session, when Dr. Van Dyke asked the class to vote (by show of hands) whether the articles seemed "similar to what we see in the media today" or "more like ancient history," the former option won overwhelmingly.

A six-question survey was provided to all students who attended the session (see Appendix C). The first substantive question asked students to reflect on the social-emotional aspects of working with uncomfortable sources (4.F.). Students largely reported feeling uncomfortable and sad, with many clearly drawing parallels to reading about current events. One student wrote that working with the sources "feels more real than just listening to someone saying it happened." Another student echoed the sentiment, writing: "It is intense. The author is clearly extremely antisemitic and it is difficult to read." These responses demonstrated that students were able to successfully engage with their own discomfort around the source.

The second question asked students to list one thing they learned about America during this time through the session. This question intersected with not only the primary source literacy goals but the broader learning outcomes of the history department for the course: "Explain historical trajectories and consequences, worldviews, languages, and/or ways of life of diverse cultures within the United States." Students reflected generally on the role of newspapers during this period, and the ongoing influence of mass media in American society. One student pointed out: "I learned that there is still a strong divide in people feeling like they aren't being listened to and want[ing] justice. The government and the people seem to always be having the same battles." This comment spoke to the objective of introducing students to historical continuity (4.C.).

The last two survey questions asked students to comment on the session itself. Students reported that they liked working with the resources directly, but appreciated clarifications and context given by the archivists and the instructor when there were questions. One student

wrote: “I found it most helpful when I had help interpreting it and working through [the] thought process.” Another commented that they appreciated the ability to compare the information presented based on year of publication, again speaking to the way rhetoric changes over time. A major takeaway from the answers here was that students would have appreciated having more context and more time to talk with both their table groups and the instructor to air ideas and dig into the viewpoints presented. In terms of adjustments to the session, most students indicated a desire for more time to read their articles and reflect on them.

Lessons Learned

After the class session, the instructor and archivists shared results from the worksheets and survey sheets. The impressions from the day of the archives visit were reinforced by students’ written responses when it came to the core learning objectives. Students correctly identified several aspects of Coughlin’s perspective. They successfully made connections between different issues of the newspaper and between the perspectives in the paper and broader historical events. They also drew immediate parallels between the 1930s and the present, including the role of media in promoting conspiracy theories and “mainstreaming” extremist views.

On the other hand, it was clear from student feedback and our in-class conversation that students might have benefited from a more robust introduction to the historical context. Dr. Van Dyke had introduced Coughlin during the previous class session. The original rationale for this brief introduction was a desire to prime students with background information without foreclosing the possibility of students’ own discovery in the archive. In hindsight, a longer lesson, possibly with assigned reading from a secondary or tertiary source, likely would have been helpful. More time for reading and discussion also would have been welcome, although this would have required stretching the archives visit over multiple class sessions.

In the end-of-class survey, a student suggested adjusting the format to have two students analyze the same article and then compare it with another partner group’s article. This would reduce the number of articles needed and give students more time for discussion and analysis. It would, however, lessen the “change-over-time" analysis that students also enjoyed. This could be countered with additional in-class time spent contextualizing the period prior to the instructional session in the archive.

Despite the need for adjustments, the authors are pleased to note that the lesson largely succeeded in its core learning objectives. By engaging in a “deep dive” into a single collection—as opposed to a more surface-level introduction to materials from multiple collections—first- and second-year students were able to situate those sources in context, critically evaluate the perspective of their creator, and develop their appreciation for these sources and curiosity about the past.

Moreover, by examining *these sources in particular*, students were able to “get comfortable being uncomfortable.” In this session, students explored the perspective of a bigoted demagogue, learning the context and internal logic of Coughlin’s Social Justice crusade against Jews, communists, and “liberal internationalists” as a way of understanding the broader social and political trends of 1930s America. Thanks to the careful curation of these materials by the archivists and the guidance of their instructor, they could do so without embracing or endorsing Coughlin’s conclusions or perspective. This session demonstrated that careful handling of "uncomfortable” sources could make for valuable generative instructional materials.

Appendix A: Newspaper Inserts

Topic: Antisemitism
Date: December 5, 1938
Article: “Background of Persecution,” p. 7

Topic: Antisemitism
Date: January 30, 1939
Article: “Racial Exclusiveness Creates Jewish Issue,” p. 18

Topic: Antisemitism
Date: March 30, 1942
Article: “And They Killed Christ,” back cover

Topic: Antisemitism
Date: October 19, 1936
Article: “Anti-Semitism Baseless Charge,” p. 6

Topic: Antisemitism
Date: September 29, 1941
Topic: “Is Lindbergh a Liar?,” p. 4, 7

Appendix B: Student Worksheet

LOOK: Examine your newspaper for **5 minutes.** Flip through the whole paper, not just the first page!

1. What catches your eye? What are the headlines about? What images do you see? What's your overall impression of the newspaper?

ANALYZE: Read the selected article, then answer Questions 2–6 **over the next 25 minutes.**

2. What is your article about? Summarize the main point of the article.

3. What evidence does the author provide to support his claim?

4. What kinds of bias are evident in this article? How can you tell?

INFER: Make connections between the source and your learning.

5. What can we learn about America during this time from your article? Think about connections to political, economic, and social changes at this time, within the United States and around the world. "More is more" here! Try to make as many connections as you can, and don't be afraid to make educated guesses.

DISCUSS: With the other students at your table, answer the following questions **over the next 15 minutes.**

6. What are some differences between your newspaper and your other group members' newspapers? What stays the same?

7. How do the newspaper's views on your topic change over time, if at all? [Hint: Pay attention to the date on each group member's newspaper]

Appendix C: Student Survey Questions

1. Is this your first visit to Lemmen Library? Yes / No

2. These articles deal with topics related to prejudice and hate. How did it feel to work with these sources?

3. List one thing you learned about America during this time through this session.

4. What did you find most helpful about the session?

5. What did you find most confusing or wish we had spent more time on?

6. How could we improve this session in the future?