IGNORANCE IS NOT BLISS

The following speech was presented by a journalism student who was extremely concerned about the lack of awareness exhibited by many younger Americans regarding news and current events. The speaker makes effective use of the motivated sequence and builds creative motivational appeals into her presentation. Although some of the introductory facts are now dated, Jessica raises some important issues for us to consider and put into practice. You can also read this speech online under Student Resources for Chapter 16 at the Building a Speech Web site.

A Persuasive Speech to Actuate
Jessica Gregg

1. Let’s take a little quiz. If you know the answers to these questions, you can just call them out. What is the Japanese government doing to overcome what they feel is a sense of mistrust in this country toward their nation? Anyone know? The answer is that they are undertaking a $330 million effort to make Americans more familiar with Japan’s cultural and social life. Question number 2. Which nation won the World Cup soccer championship? West Germany? Yes, you’re correct. I knew we had a soccer fan. Whose mother and aunt are suing the National Enquirer for publishing unauthorized photographs of this model? The answer is Marla Maples. And the athletic director of which major university is leaving for a job at the University of Connecticut? The University of Maryland, correct. And the final question: What effects have scientists discovered a human growth hormone to have on the body? No one knows? Well scientists have discovered that a human growth hormone reverses the effects of aging. This has interesting implications for the future, doesn’t it?

2. If you did not know the answers to these questions, you are not alone. Despite the fact that we have entered an information age, a majority of the public remains uninformed and uninvolved when it comes to current events.

3. Our lack of knowledge must be overcome by educating ourselves in order to avoid ignorance.

4. According to a new study, “The Age of Indifference,” released two weeks ago by the Times-Mirror Center for the People and the Press, the under-30 generation knows less, cares less, and reads the newspapers less than any other generation in the past five decades. The survey also states that persons between the ages of 18 and 29 are 20 percent less likely to follow important news stories such as events in eastern Europe, and they are 40 percent less likely to identify newsmakers like West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. There are two exceptions to this. People in this age group show a high interest in sports and in issues like abortion. According to an article in the Baltimore Sun entitled “If You’re Under 30 You’ll Likely Skip This,” the survey’s most dramatic revelation is the decline in newspaper readership. Only 30 percent of Americans under the age of 35 said they had read a newspaper the previous day. This contrasts with figures in 1965 when 67 percent under 35 said they had read the previous day’s newspaper. What is surprising is that TV has not filled the gap. The percentage of people viewing television newscasts is down as well. This, then, is truly the tuned-out generation.
5. If you’re over 35 and you’re sitting there relieved that none of this seems to affect you, think again. According to the Times-Mirror survey, the percentage of all of those reading newspapers and watching TV newscasts has declined in general. In other words, Americans don’t have the information needed to be good consumers, make good business decisions, vote, or understand the current issues of today.

6. We don’t have to stay this way, however; there are options.

7. For example, we can listen to radio news. Most radio stations have a news program every hour, and some have them as often as every half hour. There are some good news programs around. WTTR—1470 AM—has a good program and National Public Radio—88.5 FM—has excellent news. You can also watch TV news. This is possibly one of the easiest and most accessible options for everyone. On the average weekday, there are 56 news programs on television, and this does not include cable channels, business programs, talk shows, or interview programs like 20/20, which do stories about current events. I interviewed Sherri Parks, a professor of Radio, Television and Film at the University of Maryland, who told me that 99 percent of American households have TVs. In other words, more people have television in their homes than have running water. So it shouldn’t be too hard for someone to find a television to tune in to.

8. But just in case television isn’t possible, there is a third option. For twenty-five cents, which is less than the price of a candy bar, you can buy the weekday edition of the Baltimore Sun or even the Washington Post. Many people shy away from newspapers because they feel they’re too time-consuming or boring. Well, the secret to reading a news article is understanding how it is written. Most news reporters use what is called inverted pyramid style. That is, they place the most important details or facts at the beginning of the article and work their way down to the least important. So in order to understand an article, you only need to read a short way to get the main idea. Sometimes this means you only have to read the headline. Other times you must read the entire article. Now the inverted pyramid style does not apply to features or sports. As you can see, reading the newspaper does not have to be a chore. None of these options are. They are easy as well as important.

9. You may wonder why this is so important. What does it matter if you choose not to be informed?

10. Well, according to the Times-Mirror Survey, the fact that the under-35 generation is so uninformed makes them an easy target of manipulation. We know of powerful speakers such as Martin Luther King who used his influence for the common good to get people involved in the civil rights movement. And we also know of Adolf Hitler, one of history’s worst manipulators, who was also a powerful speaker. Do we want to get caught in that trap of blind following? Ignorance is bliss; but then again, ignorance is still ignorance.

11. We can avoid being uninformed and ignorant by following one of the three options. For example, let’s look at reading the newspaper. By reading the paper you can learn much more about world events. You can learn about national events, happenings within the state and county. You can read the sports, the weather, stock figures, the foreign report, and the classifieds. You can find out the opinions of your favorite columnist, as well as those individuals from your community who have written letters.
To begin the conclusion, Jessica used a creative motivational appeal. She placed an ad in the local county newspaper, which no one in the audience had read. The paper was dramatic visual evidence that listeners needed to become more informed.

The speaker used another creative motivator for the action step. She provided a short-term incentive by giving each listener a quarter to buy the evening paper. Jessica demonstrated her willingness to “invest” in the education of her audience.