Aggies GO students analysts offer tools for making sense of our crazy world events

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A team of six political science student analysts are providing ongoing analyses of world events at the new Aggies GO (Geopolitical Observatory) website. From left, Tyler Whitney, Madeleine Waddoups, Hannah Penner, Sarah Porter, Kennen Sparks and adviser Colin Flint, a professor of international studies. Not pictured is Katie Miner.

Visit Aggies GO! at chass.usu.edu/aggiesgo

Observatories are generally bubble shaped.

Funny about that, because a new observatory launched by a crew of political science students hopes to pop a few bubbles.

Here’s one such bubble: “Everyone thinks like I do.”

And another: “The whole world revolves around America.”

The goal of the new Geopolitical Observatory — or Aggies GO — is to burst such bubbles by offering that rarest of news commodities: clarity and context.

Aggies GO, a website featuring ongoing analysis of current global events, was the idea of Colin Flint, a professor of political science. He’s long provided his International Studies students what he calls a “geopolitical toolkit.”

Flint’s students are now offering those same tools to readers and learners, of all stripes, perplexed by the craziness of world events.

The term “geopolitics” itself may seem academic and a tad unexciting. But to understand it, many of us have only to remember singing, as elementary-aged youngsters, “This Land is my Land.”

National pride is just one of the conceptual tools Flint teaches his students. Others include “geographic entities” and the “codes” that make up, for example, a country’s enemies list.

The tools may be conceptual, says political science junior Kennen Sparks, but they work like the real thing.

“You wouldn’t have random boards lying around,” he said. “You’d use a table and tools. Instead of having these separate pieces of information from all over the world, using these tools helps bring them together, gives them greater context and lets us see things as a bigger picture.”

A recent analysis by Sparks, one of six student writers creating the content, explains the hidden messages behind, for instance, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recent controversial visit to India.

Hannah Penney, a junior in International Studies and web master for Aggies GO, stresses that the analyses published regularly on the site are apolitical and academic in nature, rather than from a political point of view. The site offers definitions of geopolitical concepts, then uses them to frame and interpret world events, she said.

“Readers can first read the definition, then read the articles and connect them back to the definition — so they can better understand the world through these definitions,” she said.

Penner says the technical term of geopolitics should not be off-putting. Even she admits to some trepidation herself as a beginner in geopolitics.

“Geopolitics is a discipline that is very jargon-filled and complex,” she said. “I remember the first week, going, ‘Whoa! I’m not ready for this complexity. There are no straight answers. It’s all so muddy!’”

Now, she says, “we’re trying to unmuddy the waters and better clarify what’s going on by using more understandable language.”
Flint left a position five years ago as a geography professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to join USU, where he is now a CHaSS distinguished professor. His books on geopolitics and his articles as editor of the journal Geopolitics and co-editor of Indian Ocean Economic and Political Review have been published into eight languages.

A textbook, *Political Geography*, was recently translated into Mandarin.

After 20 years of teaching, he says, it’s only been at USU that he’s encountered students he believed could undertake such a large task of ongoing global analysis.

“There has consistently been such a high level of great interactions with students here,” he said. “I’m so proud of my students, especially the Aggies GO team.”

“Professionalizing” these students is just one of two purposes Flint sees for Aggies GO. The second follows the university’s land-grant mission and “the role we have to reach out and communicate with the general public,” he said.

Flint anticipates that potential followers of Aggies GO will be students as well as members of the general public who may want to get a taste of university discussion and get in some solid news analysis in the meantime.

Student analyst Tyler Whitney, a sophomore, agrees. He adds, though, that the site will also attract readers who are feeling “stressed” about world events. “We want to give people a clearer mind about the things they’re reading and about the things that are going on,” he said. “Aggies GO lets them be aware of things they never thought about, and helps them disregard things that actually aren’t important.”

Now, back to that bubble, which is familiar to Penner, who is a native of a small town in Davis County.

“I think human nature makes us accept things as they are that’s how they’ve always been, and that’s how they’re always going to be. Flexibility isn’t a very natural type of thing for us as humans,” she said. “But it’s such a compelling reason to stretch yourself because that’s how you learn and grow, and that’s what this website does.”

Others on the staff of six analysts are Katie Miner, Sarah Porter and Madeleine Waddoups.

Visit the site at CHaSS.usu.edu/aggiesgo for ongoing analysis of world events.

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