

# YOUTH MEDIA REPORTER

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## Letter from the Guest Editor: Dean Miller

By: Dean Miller

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Category: [Letter from the Editor](#)

You don't have a movement until you have joiners. 2010 may well be remembered as the year news literacy's joiners began to rapidly outnumber—and outrank—its founders.

As one would expect, a movement dedicated to free inquiry and free expression is itself defined by its diversity. So, while the Stony Brook Model has provided root stock for university news literacy programs across the country, what this issue of *Youth Media Reporter* seeks to explore is the wide variety of forms that news literacy has already taken, just five years after its birth in a classroom on the North Shore of Long Island.

In this issue, we asked writers from a variety of backgrounds—high school teachers, radio journalists, youth media practitioners, university professors and instructors and NGOs—to try to define what news literacy is—and is not—even as we take time to explore what it is becoming.

What comes through is this: news literacy is not a new name for media literacy, the useful scrutiny of the impacts of all things written, seen and heard. What also became clear is that news literacy is not merely a new name for civics, despite the importance of news literacy in students' preparation for their civic lives.

News literacy teaches students how to use critical thinking in their search for reliable information, usually through journalism, but increasingly, youth media programs. What's exciting is preliminary data that show news literacy education has powerful effects on youth development, increasing civic engagement and attention to news about the world outside schools.

As the guest editor of this issue of YMR, my aim is to showcase the way educators and other professionals have harnessed skills developed as journalists and as organizers of youth media programs to teach students how to flex the information muscles they need as citizens in a democracy.

### **News Literacy at Stony Brook: A Historical Reflection** □

The godfather of the movement was a newspaper editor. Howard Schneider left *Newsday* after leading the young paper to multiple Pulitzer Prizes. Restless, he began a new career teaching at Stony Brook University on Long Island and building its new journalism school. What struck him immediately was that one large group of students was lost in the digital flood of information, willing to believe whatever they happened upon, and another large cohort had adopted a defensive cynicism, unwilling to trust that

information could be anything other than spin.

By late 2005, Schneider had built the first stand-alone course in news literacy. Seeing connections, he collaborated with hard science, social science and humanities experts at Stony Brook to build a course that helps students understand the importance of reliable information to their inherited role as stewards of a democracy.

This Humanities approach helps students understand how human nature, cognitive blind spots and powerful societal forces make it hard work to find reliable information: you can *not* be passive about this. The course that emerged is the foundation of this new discipline dedicated to the very post-modern task of sifting the Web for the trustworthy information essential to the ancient endeavor of self-rule.

Schneider was certainly not alone in finding students adrift in the flood of information and, by 2006-2007, several of America's largest private foundations looking to solve the same problems selected the Stony Brook model for replication and promulgation. Some highlights:

- The Knight Foundation funded the nation's first Center for news literacy to test, revise and spread the course, teaching 10,000 undergraduates at Stony Brook University;
- The Ford Foundation funded the first national conference on news literacy and the creation of the Summer Institute for News Literacy to train new teachers; and,
- The McCormick Foundation has funded the Center for News Literacy's conference web report, and then follow-up news literacy national conferences, including workshops where government and media leaders meet with academicians to share best practices. McCormick's latest grant funds a partnership with the Project for Excellence in Journalism, which supplies fresh ripped-from-the-news examples for news literacy classrooms.

### **From University Campus to High School Classrooms**

The campus news literacy movement spun a creative counterpart in secondary schools. About the same time Stony Brook's News Literacy program launched, another Pulitzer Prize winner, Los Angeles Times investigative reporter Alan Miller, began talking to sixth graders at his daughter's middle school in Bethesda and discovered a connection. Though newspapers were in decline, students awash in media were receptive to learning about the values of journalism.

English teacher Sandra Gallagher wrote to Miller: "All of the information you shared was interesting to [my students] and pertinent to our curriculum. You brought to life the idea of 'newspaper' and opened a new perspective of thinking."

Miller had found a new way to make a difference and began work on a program to connect journalists like himself to other classrooms like his daughter's. After a brief visit to Stony Brook, Miller assembled a team of secondary school curriculum experts and built an age-appropriate curriculum that would be taught by journalists like himself in partnership with teachers in schools across the nation.

By 2008, he had sufficient funding to launch formal pilot projects in the 2009-2010 school year. What became the News Literacy Project worked with 17 English, history and government teachers in seven middle schools and high schools in New York City, Bethesda and Chicago, reaching nearly 1,200

students. More than 75 journalists spoke to students and worked with them on projects. The McCormick Foundation became the project's third major funder.

But a great deal of work lies ahead. While it makes sense to teach news literacy in public schools, curriculum adoption is a barrier to nigh-impenetrable thicket to the academic outsiders who comprise News Literacy's leadership.

At the same time of this YMR issue launch, a coalition led by the American Society of Newspaper Editors has begun to crusade for the inclusion of news literacy education in the Common Core Standards proposed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Preliminary data collected at Stony Brook show that in addition to measurable increases in news literacy students' ability to detect opinion-tainted writing and flawed reporting, they are more likely to register to vote than their peers in a control group. Such data may be useful in the slog toward winning formal adoption into public school curricula.

### **President Obama and Friends of News Literacy**

Lately, the news literacy effort has attracted interesting friends. For example, the National Endowment for Humanities Chairman Jim Leach, a Republican who represented Iowa in the U.S. House for 30 years has embarked on a "civility tour" of the nation, in which he sounds many of the key themes of news literacy, most notably the importance of reading a wide range of news sources and engaging with those of contrary minds.

At the University of Michigan's commencement on May 1, President Obama devoted the last third of his remarks to those ideas that focus news literacy, distinguishing it as the core information competency of citizens:

*"...If we choose only to expose ourselves to opinions and viewpoints that are in line with our own," he said from the bully pulpit, "[we risk becoming] more polarized, more set in our ways. That will only reinforce and even deepen the political divides in this country.*

*But if we choose to actively seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our beliefs, perhaps we can begin to understand where the people who disagree with us are coming from.*

*Now, this requires us to agree on a certain set of facts to debate from. That's why we need a vibrant and thriving news business that is separate from opinion makers and talking heads. That's why we need an educated citizenry that values hard evidence and not just assertion. As Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously once said, "Everybody is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts." Still, if you're somebody who only reads the editorial page of *The New York Times*, try glancing at the page of *The Wall Street Journal* once in a while. If you're a fan of Glenn Beck or Rush Limbaugh, try reading a few columns on the Huffington Post website. It may make your blood boil; your mind may not be changed. But the practice of listening to opposing views is essential for effective citizenship. It is essential for our democracy."*

*“Here’s the point. When we don’t pay close attention to the decisions made by our leaders, when we fail to educate ourselves about the major issues of the day, when we choose not to make our voices and opinions heard, that’s when democracy breaks down. That’s when power is abused. That’s when the most extreme voices in our society fill the void that we leave. That’s when powerful interests and their lobbyists are most able to buy access and influence in the corridors of power—because none of us are there to speak up and stop them.”*

Reviewing President Obama’s speech also speaks directly to the youth media field.

Practitioners must guide students to think about the information they use in their media and to look at examples of opposing views. Youth media, in teaching media literacy and story-telling skills, is a tool to influence and have access to power—creating a stronger democracy. News literacy, as a movement that is growing, is a resource and skill set that is useful to the youth media field and a potential arena to build collaboration and partnerships.

Alongside YMR editors Ingrid Hu Dahl and Christine Newkirk, I hope this edition of Youth Media Reporter sparks the kind of dialogue that can move both fields forward.

Special thanks to all eight contributors (written and podcast), YMR’s Peer Review Board, Lynn Sygiel, and to the Journalism Program at the McCormick Foundation.

Sincerely,

Dean Miller | Director, Center for News Literacy | Stony Brook University

## **Fuzzy Logic: Why Students Need News and Information Literacy Skills**

By: Debora Cheney

Published: June 24, 2010

Category: [Perspectives](#)

Recognizing the need for reliable and appropriate information—locating, evaluating and using it appropriately—has never been easy. Collecting information once involved a trip to the library—a much different experience than a trip along the information highway. The sheer volume and ease with which information is made available makes it appear deceptively simple to find information. Yet, without the skill to search and navigate mass information mindfully and effectively, it is increasingly difficult to locate reliable sources necessary to fulfill civic roles and life-long learning needs.

In fact, it takes more savvy and skills to locate appropriate and reliable information than what is frequently believed. Strong information gathering skills allow students to be more careful in how and where they search and serve as an important antidote to “fuzzy thinking and logic”—theirs and others’.

**About Information and News Literacy:**

Information literacy is the ability to recognize when information is needed and to locate, evaluate, effectively use and ethically apply the needed information. Both information literacy and news literacy are concerned with evaluating and using information ethically and mindfully—broadly, across many disciplines, as well as within the news context. Information literacy focuses specifically on the search process, recognizing information needs and fulfilling those needs with a purposeful search strategy. The journey of the search process is applied with purpose—to apply knowledge of information, how it is organized, what the sources are, and how to reach the destination of an appropriate information source. All too often students are taught how to evaluate and understand information, forgetting that the skills required to *search* for information are critical.

### **A Librarian's Perspective**

Librarians share concern over student's inability to search effectively for information and resistance to diverse methods to find credible information—despite the ties students have with the Internet and other media devices. Recent studies from University College London (1) and the University of Washington, The Information School (2) indicate that students are inveterate “power browsers”—they use and search resources that are most familiar to them over and over regardless of the source's appropriateness for the information need (for example, *Google*). Even within the library, students often get stuck using library resources they learned about during their first year of college and rarely extend themselves beyond a handful of such sources. Typically, they use those resources most frequently recommended by their faculty/instructors, and, of course, by their social network. Together, information literacy and news literacy efforts seek to redirect our students to new ways of thinking about *how they search* as well as *how they think*—that is, to reduce the possibility for fuzzy thinking and logic.

The use of library news sources for student research is a window into why both information literacy and news literacy skills are needed. My own research with newspaper databases indicates students are using fewer library news databases, such as *LexisNexis* or *Newsbank*; rarely use search strategies such as Boolean or positional operators in these databases that would help reduce recall and increase the precision of their searches; and are frequently looking for information in news stories that they would more effectively find elsewhere (statistics or demographics, for example).

It is also apparent that students do not know where to develop a greater understanding of historical events, the pros and cons or the effect/affect of a law or policy—some appear to be “power searching” their way through news databases in the same way they are power-searching their way on the Internet—never searching deeply, effectively, or purposefully. Sometimes they appear to be working very hard looking in all the wrong places, struggling to find what they need to move forward, or why they could not find what they needed.

The result of these miscues is that students give up before they find information that can be appropriately evaluated and digested. Students typically use information that finds them, rather than deciding what information *they* need. Unfortunately, these search strategies become repetitive rather than improved and librarians can support students to think outside the information box.

As information sources grow and proliferate on the information highway, students ought to be challenged to locate information that is more challenging and buried, less obvious and more democratic.

### Next Steps

Garrick Utley (3), a former NBC journalist, has called the Internet an “infinite digital wilderness”(4) and argues that teachers—and, I would add librarians—need to serve as guides through the wilderness.

To facilitate this, faculty and librarians should partner to:

- develop effective strategies for teaching information and news literacy;
- advise and recommend which Internet and library sources are most useful at each stage of the student’s intellectual development; and,
- team-teach to incorporate these skills into the classroom and curriculum.

Together, we must introduce students to a growing variety of information sources and search strategies that are staged appropriately throughout the curriculum or even within the same course. Search skills and knowledge of a wide range of information sources and their value need to be taught over and over—in the same manner and in the same context that news literacy skills are taught. Students need repeated practice and feedback on the search process, just as they need practice and feedback on learning how to read and understand news forms.

As a librarian, I would also argue we need to teach students how to serve as their *own* guides—another important aspect of Information literacy—and develop searching strategies that produce accurate and credible information and sources. Teaching our students successful power searching and power thinking requires a collaboration effort of care, thought, and skill. News literacy and information literacy are skills that can serve as the antidote to fuzzy thinking and logic.

*As a news librarian, Debora Cheney, seeks to foster news and information literacy by working closely with students, librarians, and faculty colleagues teaching them about the importance of news content in academic libraries and to create an environment within the library which values news resources. As The Larry and Ellen Foster Communications Librarian, she works closely with students in The Pennsylvania State University’s College of Communication.*

### Endnotes

(1) *Information behaviour of the researcher of the future: A CIBER briefing paper* (2008). University College London, JISC. Retrieved from [www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf](http://www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf).

(2) Head, A. J. & Eisenberg, M. B. (2009). *How college students seek information in the digital age: Lessons learned* (Project Information Literacy. Progress Report). Seattle, WA: University of Washington, The Information School. Retrieved from [http://projectinfolit.org/pdfs/PIL\\_Fall2009\\_Year1Report\\_12\\_2009.pdf](http://projectinfolit.org/pdfs/PIL_Fall2009_Year1Report_12_2009.pdf).

(3) Garrick Utley currently co-hosts American Abroad on Public Radio International (PRI).

(4) Garrick Utley. (2009, November). “Academe and the decline of news media.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*. <http://chronicle.com/article/Academethe-Divine-of/49120/>

# Understanding News Literacy: A Youth Media Perspective

By: Ingrid Hu Dahl and Christine Newkirk

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In today's media environment, newspapers look like blogs, corporate websites look like newspapers, and citizen films look like professional documentaries. The digital media are everywhere, and young people, more than any other demographic, are awash in this new media environment. The most recent Kaiser Family Foundation Study, "Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8 to 18-Year-Olds," found that young people today are exposed to an average of 10 hours and 45 minutes of media per day, and 1 out of 5 young people consume over 16 hours of media per day (1). This means that young people are absorbing information from multiple sources at once during every waking hour of their lives.

Granted, new media technologies have ushered in an era where young people not only consume media, but also create it. The field of youth media is well-known as an educational strategy that leverages the media production process toward youth empowerment, professional development, and media literacy. Youth media programs fully embrace the ever more accessible media production technologies to help young people find and amplify their own voices and broadcast their perspectives, concerns and questions to a wide audience. The youth development and community-building facets of the youth media field continue to grow and gain high esteem.

Recognizing that real social justice and empowerment come from being able to read the world for its messages, evaluate those messages, and articulate a unique point of view in response, youth media programs have always incorporated elements of media literacy in their practice. Media literacy helps young people analyze and deconstruct media messages by asking questions like "who created this message?" "what creative techniques are used to attract my attention?" and "how might different people understand this message differently?"(2)

In this issue of *Youth Media Reporter (YMR)*, we are shining a spotlight on an emerging trend in the literacy field that resonates with specific practices of many youth media programs, representing an approach defined by a group of leaders in the field of journalism education. These educators and practitioners, in response to the increasing cynicism young people express around the reliability of the media, have developed questions designed to help young media consumers not only recognize messaging, but discern verifiable fact from opinion and spin. Janet Liao of the McCormick Foundation reports that according to the foundation, "News literacy is defined as the ability to use critical thinking skills to judge the reliability of news reports and sources (SUNY 2009)." The hope is to empower young people not only to read the media for underlying messages and motivations, but also to have the skills they need to find and use reliable and accurate information in their own media productions.

To a broad community of educators, journalists, academics and funders, this practice of teaching young people to "read" media for its transparency, reliability and verifiability is identified as news literacy.

Patricia Campbell, the President of Campbell-Kibler Associates, Inc., explains, "the digital divide isn't so much about having access to technologies, but is rather about having the knowledge necessary to be an effective finder of reliable information. [For example], what librarians have always taught—how to use

keywords and library research skills—is still relevant today, with the new technologies. But this knowledge also needs to be adapted to suit the new technologies. Media literacy signaled a shift toward the conceptual thinking skills, and today there is a shift back toward the practical, more concrete skills” (3).

### **Welcome News Literacy**

The McCormick Foundation, Stony Brook University, the Knight Foundation and Ford Foundation have been instrumental in assembling a community around news literacy initiatives. This issue of *YMR* strives to bring youth media practitioners into the fold, because there is great potential for growth through the collaboration between the two fields.

Carol Knopes of the High School Broadcast Journalism Project explains, “I was on the board of Young D.C. and for several years worked on the importance of youth media as a form of self expression. But, we also need concrete truths to make [youth produced content] stronger. I see news literacy work go hand in hand in working with issues to deal with the media. [Youth media educators] need to fill the huge information/knowledge gap and ask if the young people they serve are watching the news and getting accurate information” (4).

In this vein, Knopes, along with a diverse group of educators who comprise the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA) News Literacy Team, put together a list of “Five Questions for Information You Receive or Pass Along” for teenagers, which include:

1. Who said it?
2. Where did that person get the information?
3. Is that person biased on this subject?
4. Am I biased on this subject?
5. Where can I discuss this with others or find more information to form my own opinion?

In the same vein, Lissa Soep, senior producer and education director at Youth Radio (and also author of “Drop that Knowledge” and Peer Review Board member of *YMR*), in response to Katina Paron’s article (in this issue) says “I appreciate that [Paron] critiques the tendency for youth media folks to celebrate the process of making and expressing, without always drilling down to the skills young people need to understand and interrogate their sources.”

### **News Literacy in Youth Media Programs**

This is not to say that youth media programs are not already using news literacy strategies in their own practice. Lynn Sygiel, Bureau Chief from Y-Press in Indianapolis, IN (and a Peer Review Board member of *YMR*), explains that for many years their program has focused on inquiry techniques as one of the core competencies for young people.

According to Sygiel, the news literacy approach is a necessary building block of a great youth media program. Sygiel explains, “Recent research and trends suggest that youth media may be needed more in

communities than ever before. At a time when youth media is threatened to be overshadowed by what is referred to as user-generated media (e.g. *YouTube*, *MySpace*, etc.), supporting organized, educationally-based youth communications is imperative. The descriptors of news literacy center on identifying truth. So if news literacy teaches young people to be savvy, critical consumers of the news, youth media must teach youth producers to be savvy, unbiased truth tellers.”

Youth media might learn how curriculum is developed specific to news literacy and vice versa; and, how to help youth producers gather credible and source-checked facts in content that uses statistics, information and even personal storytelling.

Clark Bell, the McCormick Foundation journalism program director says, "A growing sector of the U.S population does not distinguish or appreciate the differences among professional journalists, information spinners and citizen voices. It is important, especially for youth, to be savvy consumers of news so that we become better decision makers.” He continues, "We're excited to partner with *YMR* to address the emerging area of news literacy and to enhance the ability of young people to analyze information and decipher what is and isn't reliable."

As co-editors of *YMR*, we are pleased to introduce news literacy to the youth media field and our broader audiences as both an important skill set to digest and an arena for future collaboration. Saving journalism after all, is about sustaining youth media—both hold true the essence of story-telling for a democratic future.

*Ingrid Hu Dahl is the editor-in-chief of Youth Media Reporter and a program officer of youth media at the Academy for Educational Development (AED). Dahl is a national and international speaker on youth media, women's leadership and social change. She has taught media literacy workshops at various high schools, youth media organizations (Reel Grrls 2009 Reel Queer Camp), and several Rock n' Roll Camp for Girls sites across the U.S. Dahl holds an M.A. in Women's & Gender Studies and is currently in the Brooklyn-based band, RAD PONY.*

*Christine Newkirk is the editor of Youth Media Reporter and a senior program associate for the Center for Youth Development and Engagement at AED. Newkirk will receive her M.A. in International Affairs at The New School in fall 2010. She is a youth media practitioner focused on work in Brazil and speaks Portugese and Spanish. Newkirk also has an extensive research background, previously supporting the efforts of Computers for Youth in NYC.*

#### **Endnotes:**

- (1) Find the report here: [www.kff.org/entmedia/mh012010pkg.cfm](http://www.kff.org/entmedia/mh012010pkg.cfm).
- (2) See the Center for Media Literacy's website for more information and a MediaLit Kit: [www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org).
- (3) Personal Interview, May 28, 2010.
- (4) Personal Interview, June 6, 2010.

# Can a Democracy Survive without Reliable Information?

By: Alan Miller

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Category: [Perspectives](#)

Our culture of news and information has never been richer or more democratic—anyone with an Internet connection can contribute to the public conversation and dig deeply into complex topics.

Citizens with little or no journalism training are now the gatekeepers of public information who readily create, publish and disseminate information. But expanding the concept of "journalism" to include cell-phone videos and social networking sites is a double-edged sword.

Developments that make this digital media reality so full of potential also make it fraught. That's why news literacy training—as well as increasingly relevant youth media programs—are so vital.

A recent study by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project and the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that 70% of respondents feel overwhelmed by the amount of news and information from different sources, and 72% think most sources of news are biased.

How do we know what information is trustworthy? How do we distinguish credible information from raw information, misinformation and propaganda? And if all information is viewed as created equal, why would anyone seek out quality journalism—especially if the public thinks it is all driven by commercial, political or personal bias anyway?

Because the focus on standardized testing in schools has tended to push civics or current events courses out of classrooms, schools today frequently do not address these questions. A consensus is developing both across the United States and in Europe that national efforts are needed to create a savvy, digital-age citizenry that is informed and engaged. The nascent news literacy movement has begun to meet this challenge.

## **The New Literacy Project**

The News Literacy Project (NLP)—which has just completed its first full year in seven middle schools and high schools in New York City, Bethesda, MD, and Chicago, IL—is giving students the skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news and information in all its forms.

The project is creating partnerships between current and former journalists and social studies, history and English teachers. Its lessons are built on a foundation of four essential questions: • Why does news matter? • Why is the First Amendment protection of free speech so vital to American democracy? • How can students know what to believe? • What challenges and opportunities do the Internet and digital media create?

NLP has a growing cadre of more than 150 journalists, including Pulitzer Prize winners, broadcast reporters and producers and book authors, who volunteer their time in the classroom. Many have been recruited through the project's 15 participating news organizations. These include *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *USA Today*, CNN, NPR and ABC and NBC News. More than 75 journalists made classroom presentations in the past school year.

The journalists work with teachers on lesson plans and drop-in units that focus on the project's major themes and engagement with the students. The material is presented through hands-on exercises, videos and the journalists' own compelling stories. The curriculum also addresses such new media mainstays as viral e-mail, *Google* and other search engines, and Wikipedia.

Through NLP, participating teachers can request journalists whose expertise fits their curriculum; for example, a social studies teacher might seek a political reporter for a government class, while a colleague focusing on international issues might request a former foreign correspondent.

The project's unit culminates with every student doing a project. Students have created their own newspapers (with a hard news story, a feature, an opinion piece and a review), produced video and broadcast reports and done videos, raps and online games about what they learned about news literacy and would like to teach others.

A video highlighting seven student projects at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Md., can be viewed at [www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/blog/the\\_news\\_literacy\\_project\\_produces\\_new\\_video](http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/blog/the_news_literacy_project_produces_new_video).

The project aims to give students the critical thinking skills needed to be smarter and more frequent consumers and creators of credible information across all media and platforms. Students are learning how to distinguish verified information from raw messages, spin, gossip and opinion, and are being encouraged to seek news and information that will ultimately make them better-informed citizens and voters.

As Kathy Kiely, a *USA Today* reporter and one of our journalist fellows, tells students: People who are citizens in an information age have got to learn to think like journalists.

### **What Students Say :**

To better understand the impact of News Literacy Project (NLP), we interviewed one of our students, Courtney Griffin, who attends the Reavis School in Chicago, Illinois. Courtney is 14 and just graduated from the eighth grade. She completed the NLP's unit as part of an extended day program. She and her classmates produced a 6 1/2-minute broadcast piece on peer pressure that Courtney narrated. The piece can be heard at

[www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/blog/nlp\\_students\\_in\\_chicago\\_produce\\_broadcast\\_report](http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/blog/nlp_students_in_chicago_produce_broadcast_report).

Courtney's future plans are to graduate college and major in business. She sees the media as "a very significant thing to learn about at all ages because people should know what is occurring around their national community, moreover, the entire world."

### **NLP: What did you think about the news before doing the News Literacy Project?**

*Courtney Griffin:* I always thought the news was important, so I tried to keep up with everything. I watched the news a lot before the project because I knew it was important to know what was happening around me—in the community and also around the country.

### **NLP: What activities did you do with the News Literacy Project?**

*Griffin:* We learned about the [News Literacy Project] word wall terms, and watched a video about what

makes news interesting to people. We also explored a website about journalists who were executed, and talked about why someone would want to do this. We read some things about propaganda too, and looked at some examples of it.

**NLP: What did you learn from them (ideas, words, concepts, etc.)?**

*Griffin:* Besides propaganda, we talked and learned a lot about standards, sources, vetting, and the First Amendment—especially the freedom of the press and how that is needed so that people know what is really going on. We also learned about anonymous sources—that if someone does not want their name to be cited, the journalist will keep it furtive; but anonymous sources are not always trusted by others.

**NLP: Which journalists came to speak to your class (include their news organizations) and what did they talk about?**

*Griffin:* Natalie Moore (WBEZ), Lynette Kalsnes (WBEZ), and Irene Tostado (Univision). They taught us how to plan our radio sequences, how to do good interviews, write our narration, choose music, and they showed us examples of the work they do. Natalie played one of her reports about a “food desert” in Englewood, then explained how she did it and that it takes a lot of time to get the most interesting stuff on tape. Irene talked about propaganda and the limits to free speech. She also helped us format our radio piece and write the script for the narration using research we did on the Internet.

**NLP: What were the most surprising, important or interesting things you learned from them?**

*Griffin:* What was surprising was all the time it took to make a proper radio piece. Basically everything was interesting, but Natalie’s report really caught my attention. It was about neighborhoods that don’t have grocery stores that sell fresh foods such as fruits and vegetables. These places are considered food deserts.

**NLP: If you had to write a headline about the News Literacy Project at your school, what would it say?**

*Griffin:* “After News Literacy Project Becomes Operative at Reavis, Students Want to Join”  
[Interviewer’s note: Griffin said that at the beginning of the after-school program very few students were interested NLP, but now people are interested to join next year. Her headline was to get more attention to the program, which was competing with other programs offered at the same time].

**NLP: What kind of project did you do with the News Literacy Project?**

*Griffin:* My group did a [radio] report on peer pressure because we thought that is what affects our students the most at Reavis. I was the narrator, and the job was very difficult because I had to continuously record pieces over and over again until they were right.

**NLP: What did you learn from it?**

*Griffin:* I learned that the majority of students who attend Reavis give in to peer pressure. But I also learned that not all peer pressure is bad—there is good peer pressure, too. Peer pressure to do the right things, like study.

**NLP: How has your view of news and information changed as a result of the News Literacy**

### **Project? If so, how?**

*Griffin:* At first, I thought that it wasn't difficult to get accurate information about something that has occurred, but my opinions changed. For example, a news reporter has to check and see if there were witnesses when an event happened, and then they have to vet the witness to see if they are telling the truth. Now I have the experience of what news reporters have to go through to put a factual story together.

### **NLP: Has your news or information habits or practices (how you get news, what you believe, how you search for information on the Internet, or handle email and texting) changed as a result? If so, in what ways?**

*Griffin:* Yes. I don't forward emails anymore because if it's false, I don't want other people to believe it. I also check multiple sources for accurate information and read everything on the page. I learned that everything you receive is not factual—sometimes you have to check your sources instead of just listening to what one report says, unless it is from a known news station.

### **NLP: What do you think is the most important thing you gained from the News Literacy Project?**

*Griffin:* The knowledge and language of journalism—it helps me understand how to handle information and resources.

### **NLP: What have you learned about news literacy that you think needs to be shared with other students?**

*Griffin:* I learned that it is important to learn certain words and concepts so that [you can] understand what it is you are receiving [in the news].

The interview above with Courtney Griffin showcases the unique blend of news literacy concepts with creating media stories and news, helping her to “handle information and resources.” Investigating a story or topic always requires evaluating information and finding credible facts and sources. Youth media programs who support young people as they create their own stories and media might find the following tips useful to identify bias and fact check.

### **Tips: Evaluating Information :**

The following is reprinted from Edutopia magazine with permission from the NLP: “Think critically about news and information: Who created the information? Can you tell? For what purpose? Is the information verified? If so, how? What are the sources? What is the documentation? Is it presented in a way that is fair?”

Ask yourself, “What is it that I'm viewing?:” Is it news? Opinion? Gossip? Raw information? Advertising? Propaganda? How can you tell?

Look for bias in news and information: Watch for loaded or inflammatory words. Does the author clearly have an agenda? Is more than one side of a story or argument presented? Is the subject of the report given a chance to respond?

View high-quality journalism as a benchmark against which to measure other sources of information: This step includes an independent and dispassionate search for reliable, accurate information, verification

rather than assertion, a commitment to fairness, transparency about how information was obtained, and accountability when mistakes are made.

Beware of information found on Wikipedia; it can be changed by anyone at any time. This fact makes it uncertain that you are getting accurate information at a given moment. However, the primary sources linked in Wikipedia entries are a rich trove of reliable information.

Act responsibly with information you share and create: Exercise civility, respect, and care in your online communications; remember that information on the Internet lives forever and you have no control over who sees it or what they do with it. Do not expect emails to be private. Do not allow yourself be fooled: Nobody likes to be taken in. If it sounds too good or too incredible to be true, it probably isn't true. Good places to check urban myths are the Annenberg Policy Center's FactCheck.org and Snopes.com.

### **Next Steps**

As NLP and our colleagues begin to write the opening chapters of the national news literacy movement, youth media can join our efforts to expand within our current locations, to add schools in additional communities and to find ways to raise the profile and expand the reach of news literacy education nationwide.

Working in partnership is beneficial as both arenas increasingly rely on digital media in our programs. Like youth media, NLP hopes to engage students with their peers online, outside of our classrooms and around the country. We hope to provide a forum for students to share their work and become active news literacy watchdogs. (of news literacy.) We welcome the opportunity to collaborate with youth media programs in the field that provide outlets for students to develop their journalism and communication skills across myriad platforms.

NLP is also looking for creative partners in schools and communities nationwide. You can learn more about the project at [www.thenewsliteracyproject.org](http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org). If you are interested in becoming involved, please send an inquiry to [info@thenewsliteracyproject.org](mailto:info@thenewsliteracyproject.org) or contact [Kate Farrell](#), the project's program coordinator.

*Alan C. Miller is the founder and executive director of the News Literacy Project. He was an investigative reporter in the Washington bureau of the Los Angeles Times for 14 years and worked for the paper for 21 years. He won the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting in 2003.*

## **News Literacy: A News Lens for Youth Media**

By: Katina Paron

Published: June 24, 2010

Category: [Perspectives](#)

University journalism departments across the country are getting involved with a new trend: teaching news literacy as an elective, seminars and/or mandatory courses for all incoming students. Most young people aren't familiar with the phrase, but what is becoming familiar is an adult journalist visiting their high school classroom asking where they get their news.

It seems that news literacy training is creeping into the lives of the youth with whom we—as youth media educators—work but is there a place for it in youth media programming? What is news literacy and what does it bring to the youth media field?

In its essence, news literacy is an initiative to: • educate people to distinguish legitimate news sources from propaganda and sensationalism; and, • engage people in the conversation about the role of a free press in a democracy.

I have been working in youth media, mostly in a print setting, for 15 years and I know how passionate and effective we are in getting young people to actively create and contribute to media (1).

### **Cross-Over Benefits: News Literacy and Youth Media**

Currently most of my youth media work takes place in New York City public high schools where I freelance as the newspaper adviser for two high schools. I also co-direct the NYC High School Journalism Collaborative, an initiative at Baruch College, to provide support, training and opportunities for high school newspaper teachers and students. Because my work focuses on journalism skills training, I am by default teaching news literacy, which leaves me uniquely positioned to see the crossover benefits.

What I see in schools is that there is so much “information” easily available and students do not have the skills to sort through it. As a result, students search on *Google* but do not know how to sort through the 14-pages of links that result.

Think about how you researched papers or looked up information when you were in high school. For example, I remember filling out my financial aid form for college as a teen and one of the questions was: “How many people live in your community?” I had no idea nor did my mother. It was 9 p.m. on a weeknight, the library was closed and the form had to be post-marked the next day. I made up a number that was probably ridiculously low. I remember feeling completely isolated from information about my community.

Fast forward to the present and students can easily bring up [Census.gov](http://Census.gov) and find that Shelby Township, Mich. had a population of 65,159 in 2000. But, if they landed a Google search on [www.americantowns.com](http://www.americantowns.com), they would find that my hometown has only 3,951 residents; another search, to [www.zipareacode.net](http://www.zipareacode.net) puts the figure at 69,812—which is 4,653 more than the Census. Which one is right?

News literacy helps students understand that the question really is, “Which source is most legitimate?” The personal example I use has real world implications. There is so much information that is readily available that it is hard to know what to trust. For student journalists, this as part of their training; they learn how to research, identify legitimate sources of information, consult independent experts and provide context. In the youth media context, news literacy practices provide a framework for due diligence in our teaching.

For example, years ago I was working with a group of young people on a story about homelessness. Homes for the Homeless stated on its website that the average age of a homeless person was 9 years old—a powerful statistic for a youth media piece that wants to grab adults’ attention. But, as a youth media educator, I wouldn’t let the youth reporters use it until they got the whole story from the nonprofit.

The students called the NGO and after several hand-offs were eventually told how that statistic was determined. They decided it was legitimate research and so the statistic went into the article. It did not change the outcome, but the students learned when and how to question information presented as fact and to take ownership over the material found in their work. Youth media practitioners must encourage students to identify “real” news and information.

“The process of making media is a window into news literacy,” said Janet Liao, a journalism program officer at McCormick Foundation (2). When we teach young people how to make media, we have the perfect opportunity to teach them how to do it well, because in the process of making media young people run into the problem of finding reliable material for their productions. This process provides a space to talk about the necessity for using the stringent standards of knowledge production that are the foundation of professional media work.

And in the eyes of John Nichols and Robert McChesney, who are spearheading a media reform movement ([www.freepress.net](http://www.freepress.net)), the opportunity to train young people about good journalism is also chance to save democracy. “What should be done about the disconnect between young people and journalism?” asked Nichols and McChesney in *The Nation*. “We need to get young people accustomed to producing journalism and to appreciating what differentiates good journalism from the other stuff”(3). Even outside the youth media field, professionals are drawing a connection between youth creating media and understanding the importance of a high quality, independent press. If those outside the youth media field can see it, we should too.

### **Youth Media as Citizen Journalism:**

As youth media practitioners, if we teach young people that every news article or blog entry they comment on and every *Facebook* post or tweet they write is a permanent part of the information landscape on the web, then we are taking part in journalism and news literacy practices. We just do not make that distinction enough, nor, do we typically compare the work done in youth media to the practices of investigative journalism.

Professor Geanne Rosenberg (4) at Baruch College sees news literacy as an essential part of primary education because so many young people are active as citizen journalists, whether they know it or not. She explains, “There’s an increasing role for the public to contribute to news gathering. If we can teach our students how to contribute high quality, factual information, that is good for students and for society.” Rosenberg, who is the founding chair of the Department of Journalism and the Writing Professions, is developing curricula that she hopes will reach the college’s 1,400 incoming freshman.

In a combined effort to bring understanding of these elements outside the newspaper classroom, Rosenberg and I are organizing a High School News Literacy Summit at Baruch College in November 2010—a day of workshops and speakers that will serve 250 high school government students and teachers in New York City (5). “Because news is fragmented across the Internet and mixed with opinion, propaganda and misinformation, students need to be empowered to inform themselves,” said Rosenberg. The summit—the first of its kind—will provide workshops hosted by The News Literacy Project, Stony Brook University, The Pulitzer Center, New York Community Media Alliance and The LAMP.

In addition to teaching students that whatever they do online can follow them around for the rest of their lives, we also want to teach them that they are adding information to what's out there and they have a responsibility to make sure they support their claims. Accreditation of facts and reliable sources are things I talk a lot about in my youth journalism classes and high school newspaper trainings; however, the point of news literacy is that there is a large social value to teaching these skills outside of traditional journalism environments. "The better informed they are, the better decisions they make about community," said Liao.

An important aspect of news literacy is teaching how to "to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports and news sources," according to Stony Brook University's Center for News Literacy. We can incorporate this in our youth media programs during the research phase of their projects. When students talk about getting news online, as educators, have a conversation about what the sources are. If youth producers say they saw it on *Yahoo*, it is important to share that *Yahoo News* rarely does original reporting. When youth producers see AP (*Associated Press*), do they know what that means? If not, it is our responsibility to point it out as a teaching opportunity.

This form of fact checking is not new; it is inherent in the world of journalism. However, this attention to detail will help young people be more critical in their own work and in their own lives. Whether they are reading their favorite sneaker blog or producing a documentary on undocumented youth, they need to be able to distinguish fact from opinion and to understand the value of independent research and reporting. "News literacy is an essential skill as how [young people] are going to operate in the world," said Katherine Fry, Ph.D. Fry the co-founder (along with DC Vito) of The LAMP, a New York-based media literacy organization that served 700 people (mostly youth) last year. Through The LAMP's media producing workshops, participants learn to understand "how information is put together," which Fry considers a crucial element to news literacy.

As Megan Garber (6) put it in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (7), "News literacy...is fundamentally about distinguishing—and appreciating—excellence."(8) Fry said these skills will make them better prepared to handle college and the professional world when they leave our doors. It will also make their media pieces stronger, more believable and professional.

### **Lifelong Learners** :

News literacy advocates see the field as an audience-building technique—once you teach students why independently reported journalism is crucial to democracy and you give them the skills to evaluate the source of information, they will create a permanent place in their lives for quality media. The goal is to create a "community of people who are interested and take part in civic life," Garber writes. This holds true in the youth media world as well—if we teach youth producers to pay close attention to the media in their lives, and help them express themselves and inform others through the media they produce.

In a previous YMR article, Lisa Lucas of the Tribeca Film Festival argued that "We cannot encourage students to think outside of the box without showing them what actually is outside of the box."(9) True, but if they have never taken a close look of what is inside the box, then they won't know the importance of branching out.

In my years in youth media, I have heard many arguments from practitioners who deliberately reject mainstream media, in their own lives and in the programs they run. Through my experience, I have seen that the practitioners who broaden their perspectives on the mainstream media better serve the young people in their programs. We have to help young people understand all media—not just alternative press.

Without a critical audience we are heading for information anarchy—an environment that will devour youth media. Just like a parent needs to train a palate to enjoy real food versus processed items from a box, we need to teach our students to consume quality media. It is our job to help young people understand the world of news and information that they are immersed in every day 24/7. It is not enough for us to help them create more news and more information; we need to show them how to make sense of what is available to them now.

*Katina Paron is a journalism educator with 15 years of youth media experience. She is the co-director of the NYC High School Journalism Collaborative at Baruch College, where she is also an adjunct lecturer. She is the founding newspaper adviser for Achievement First Crown Heights High School and the Business of Sports School. She is an instructor with the Bronx Youth Journalism Initiative, part of the Bronx News Network. As the co-founder and former Managing Director of the youth news agency, Children's PressLine, she has worked with thousands of students to develop professional quality media that has been published in the Daily News, Newsday, Metro, Minneapolis Star-Tribune and Espn.com, among other places. She is a professional journalist who has focused on health, literary arts and youth media. Her work has been recognized by NY1 as "New Yorker of the Week" and by WCBS-TV as a "Hometown Hero." Ms. Paron received her B.S. in journalism from Boston University.*

## **Media and News Literacy in Seattle**

By: Jessica Partnow

Published: June 24, 2010

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In March 2009 I visited a social studies class at Chief Sealth High School here in Seattle, Washington. The 12th grade class was just starting a unit on global water issues, so their teacher asked me to come in and talk about some of the reporting I'd done in East Africa the year before. I introduced myself as a radio journalist and right away a hand shot up in the front row.

"What's a journalist?" asked a high school senior, in total earnestness.

My immediate reaction was shock: how could an 18-year-old not know what a journalist is? I felt lost—a foundational element of what I had come to talk about was missing. But we plunged ahead with a news literacy question: "Where do you get your news?" Some answers you would expect—the local paper, web sites, NPR—and some were surprising, such as Nike.com. These answers helped the class engage in a conversation about news and radio and the difference between news and advertising.

### **Common Language Project**

As a founding member of the Common Language Project (CLP), a nonprofit multimedia journalism organization based in Seattle, I cover underreported local and international issues. Since 2006 the CLP has reported on child labor in Pakistan, immigration and deportation in the Pacific Northwest, and climate change and water access in Ethiopia and Kenya, to name a few.

At the CLP, we can barely keep up with the demand from teachers for our journalists to visit their classrooms. Our network of teachers has found a range of ways to fit our work into their lesson planning. Some work us into units dealing with the issues we've reported on, like global health, climate change, or education, others into journalism classes, and others into media literacy units within social studies curricula. We want to maintain this diversity of class subjects, but we are also looking to expand our program to meet teacher demand while creating an opportunity to track the long-term impact of media literacy education on students.

### **Media Literacy: An Important Exercise**

Youth media organizations often teach media literacy prior to producing media. For example, at Reel Grrls, a filmmaking program for teenage girls in Seattle where I work part time, media literacy is a key aspect of every program. Reel Grrls has found that participants need a larger context in order to understand how the media works before they can start to tell their own stories. Girls in the program have gone on to produce award-winning films that have shown in hundreds of film festivals all over the world. Many graduates of the program say that gaining a basic knowledge of media literacy was a pivotal moment in developing their ability to become storytellers.

The inspiration to start talking to students about media literacy came during the CLP's first international reporting project, when our team reported from Israel and the Palestinian Territories during the Israeli-Lebanese War of 2006. Being submerged in the locally produced news reporting of the conflict inspired one of the first media literacy exercises the Common Language Project developed.

As a trainer, I brought a copy of the English-language news monthly *Egypt Today* to help students compare with *Newsweek* coverage. Both magazines featured articles on the conflict. *Egypt Today* ran a several-page spread of full color photos depicting desperate people searching for friends and family in the dusty rubble of a freshly-bombed apartment complex; another photo showed a dead body before it had been covered with a sheet. In contrast, *Newsweek* used an infographic as its main illustration: stick figures in red and blue to indicate the numbers of injuries and deaths on either side of the conflict.

Students love this exercise. Many respond to the idea that our media are sanitizing our information for us. They enjoy a rebellious, typical teenage reaction to being told what to think. Others pick up on the emotional manipulation inherent in printing pictures of extreme suffering—or in choosing not to print them. We love to facilitate these discussions, helping students think about how—and who—is processing their information for them. And perhaps even more importantly, to foster a love for what we call the 'mind-boggler,' or questions that do not have one simple answer—where wrestling with every side of the issue is what is most important.

In another exercise, we show students a chart mapping the crossover in membership on the boards of directors of major corporations with those of news outlets. At first, our chart is typically met with the familiar mild annoyance that any teacher might expect when asking high school students to read a graph. But as the discussion develops, students quickly grasp the concept of conflict of interest, and suddenly start to make intellectual leaps to many different issues in their lives.

Students consistently tell us that realizing this information empowers them to understand their role in the

information landscape and to consider the motivation of other players. A student we visited in 2007 offered a succinct answer to one of our evaluation questions—“What information presented was the most useful to you?”—simply: “Mainstream media chooses what becomes news.”

### **News and Media Literacy**

In January 2011, the Common Language Project plans to launch a Digital Literacy Initiative in Seattle in partnership with public high school teachers and the University of Washington. Our program will bring journalists into classrooms around the city for a series of visits exploring news, media and digital literacy, local investigative journalism, and international reporting, with the goal of fostering an understanding of the news and how it gets produced. We see news and media literacy as two critical thinking tools—we know that students who receive this training will go on to become more engaged, empowered citizens.

In the summer time, these students will be invited to a summer camp that will offer the chance to try their own hands at investigative reporting and media production. They will learn the basics of research and reporting, visit newsrooms around the city, and produce multimedia stories on their own communities.

### **Next Steps**

The Chief Sealth High School student who asked what a journalist was turned out to be one of the most engaged in the class. But her knowledge of the role of journalism in democracy, of how to distinguish between forms of media and of how to access reliable information about the world around her was sadly underdeveloped. She understood so much about how the world works—but not about how that information had reached her.

Something is missing from our public school curriculum when a high school senior does not know what a journalist does, or why it is important to think about where his or her information is coming from. We are pushing Seattle to become a key city in the national news and media literacy movement. We want that 18-year-old student to be the last high school senior who doesn't know what a journalist is.

*Jessica Partnow is a radio producer and cofounder of the Common Language Project, a new media nonprofit based at the University of Washington that reports in-depth stories for newspapers, public radio and television, and online outlets. She teaches an undergraduate course in Entrepreneurial Journalism as well as high school workshops on news and media literacy, and spends two days a week working at Reel Grrls, a filmmaking program for teenage girls.*

## **The Urban Journalism workshop Program: A Case Study**

By: Olivera Perkins

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Category: [Perspectives](#)

There is not a single journalist in the United States who has not witnessed—or been personally affected by—the chaos that has befallen many newsrooms in the past few years: mass layoffs, furloughs and slashed news budgets. For those of us who have spent many years engaged in programs to get high school students to pursue journalism careers, we have asked ourselves if it is even responsible engaging in such pursuits. Ironically, at the same time the news business has seen massive cutbacks, news *consumption* has remained steady and even increased. Therefore, it is essential that educators train young people to be

responsible media consumers. Due to the advent of technology, younger generations are constantly bombarded with information. As a result, students must be taught to distinguish news from all the media and information masquerading as news.

### **About Urban Journalism Workshop Program**

"Is it responsible to even suggest careers in journalism, given the state of the industry?" The answer is yes, but we must expand our missions to include training responsible young media consumers and news creators. Over the years, the Cleveland Urban Journalism Workshop (UJW) program—which is solely operated by journalist volunteers—has prompted several students to pursue journalism careers.

Beginning in the 1980s, many chapters of the National Association of Black Journalists began holding journalism workshops. The primary goal was to encourage minorities to pursue journalism careers. Most UJWs, like Cleveland's, held six-hour sessions on Saturdays for eight weeks.

Even if many of us did not realize it, news literacy was one of the several unstated goals that had emerged in UJW over the years. Workshop alums in non-journalism careers say that the lasting impact of UJW helped them become better writers and to understand important concepts like fairness and balance. In addition, many say that the socio-economic and racial mix of their workshop peers was the first time they had meaningful contact with students unlike themselves. According to the U.S. Census data, Cleveland persistently ranks as one of the most segregated cities in the country, and learning about journalism and news is important to get accurate information to diverse audiences.

The UJW is not sponsored by a school district or academic institution; however, for about a decade we have partnered with John Carroll University in University Heights. The college assigns a faculty member to attend the workshop and the University sponsors our graduation ceremony. The program recruits about 30 students per workshop from throughout Northeast Ohio across inner city and elite schools. Some of our students are sent by guidance counselors identified as "challenging" since program participation typically results with increased critical thinking skills and improved academic success.

The UJW structure includes:

- morning sessions
- a news quiz
- lectures on journalism principles and news literacy
- a "newsmakers" segment, which simulates a press conference
- multi-media projects

Like most programs that focus on storytelling or journalism, we start with the five Ws and H: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? These are not only key to news writing, but news literacy, as it frames learning with creating savvy news consumers. As part of our newly expanded mission, the committee decided to sprinkle news literacy into our existing format. Next year, we hope to implement more formal components.

Media is a big part of the workshop. For example, we held a session at a television station; and, another was based entirely on still photography and some video. The last three weeks are devoted to writing articles and doing multi-media projects for the UJW print and online products.

The multi-media projects students produce can be viewed at the following link, which includes a video commentary on censorship, a short feature on teen robotics and a [sidebar interview](#) on teen stress with a young woman who is the only working member of her family. Student work also appears throughout the workshop on the [UJW blog](#).

### **News Literacy**

As the UJW has evolved, news literacy has become more and more important. Instead of quizzing students about a week's news events, we now ask students to offer opinions about how different media cover a story and analyze news content overall. Instructors teach a lecture titled, "What is News?" and many volunteers work one-on-one with students, who reinforce and apply news literacy principles in their teaching.

We found that although news literacy was introduced in the lectures, many students did not fully grasp the concept until they worked one-on-one with journalists in reporting/writing their own stories for the UJW newspaper. Students needed educators to help identify and point out the differences. We emphasized how students should scrutinize clues to accuracy before accepting information as reliable. Students explored the difference between news and gossip—a topic that is close to the fabric of their school experience. In this era of social media, blogging, text messages and emails blur what news is reliable.

This year, we introduced a question asking session to elicit the students' opinions about how an event was covered. The answers often sparked lively discussion about fairness and balance and how a single topic is covered in different forms of media. Students learned how to identify reliable sources of information—for example, government data and reports or academic citations—to critically analyze whether or not mainstream media used reliable sources in their stories.

Students were given different types of examples in which media failed to use reliable sources. We discussed phrases like "Channel X News has learned" and contrasted that with the use of anonymous sources. This gave instructors the opportunity to discuss relying on rumors or hearsay versus reporting involving anonymous sources. The discussion revolved around how many print and broadcast operations have very strict guidelines governing the use of anonymous sources. Instructors discussed why many of them prohibit the use of anonymous sources all together.

Critical to these discussions was the importance of knowing opposing viewpoints. For example, the class analyzed a radio report on trans-racial adoptions. Sources quoted as supporting trans-racial adoptions included representatives from academic institutions and professional organizations that had done research on the topic. The only sources quoted as opposing trans-racial adoptions were random customers at a local barbershop.

### **Next Steps**

Students benefit from a habit of critically analyzing information they consume. Youth journalism and media programs should incorporate news literacy into their curricula. By doing this, they are giving students a skill to use immediately and throughout their lifetimes. For youth media educators, the UJW is a case study that helps present how accuracy is the most important element of news and that correction is necessary to inaccuracy.

Thinking like a journalist includes seeking truth and reporting and interpreting information; minimizing harm and treating human beings with respect; acting independently, free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know; and, being accountable to one's listeners, readers, viewers and one another. Steer youth media producers away from Wikipedia as a primary source of information and help train youth to analyze different forms of information and sources from the internet, radio, video and print. As storytellers, students require insight into the principles of journalism—fairness, accuracy, balance and objectivity.

*Olivera Perkins is a reporter at The Plain Dealer in Cleveland. She has been an Urban Journalism Workshop volunteer for more than 15 years.*

## **News Literacy in High School and Middle Grades: Why We Need it Now More than Ever Before**

By: Steve Shultz

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Category: Perspectives

I was first exposed to news literacy as a set of skills when I was invited to be the lead teacher coordinator of the Center for News Literacy Summer Teacher Institute at Stony Brook University. It was already apparent that an elective course in News Literacy was most desirable for undergraduates (Stony Brook offered the nation's first such course). Students gravitated to learning examples of biased sources of news: how propaganda is designed to persuade, while the goal of advertising is to sell; and how publicity enhances an image, while entertainment diverts the consumer from the reality of his or her daily life.

However, based on the overall lack of skills that those students exhibited, the need for either an across-the-board curriculum rich in news literacy was desirable in high school and even the middle and elementary grades.

One reason students do not always think critically about what they read is that the purpose of the content is not always immediately apparent.

### **Information Neighborhoods**

News literacy aims to help students read between the lines and take account of context in order to identify an author's goals. In other words, news literacy aims to help students identify different styles of information, known collectively as "information neighborhoods." The various types of "information neighborhoods" include news, propaganda, advertising, publicity, entertainment, and raw or unfiltered information. Quite frequently, all of these different types are presented in the same manner as news, the purpose of which is to inform. The teaching of critical thinking skills, therefore, begins with teaching the differences between the "information neighborhoods."

Students sometimes do not realize that the objectives of non-news neighborhoods may run in opposition to strictly informing. Raw or unfiltered information bypasses editorial guidelines, thus failing to ensure the important qualifications of journalistic truth: verification, independence and accountability.

When students are introduced to examples from the various information neighborhoods, they are led to an understanding that news is generally the domain of journalists, while the other neighborhoods employ practitioners such as advertising or public relations specialists, politicians, singers and actors. Without understanding the diversity of characteristics among the information neighborhoods, it is no surprise that our young people are often easily misled.

### **Transparency=Truth**

Transparency, or the disclosure of how the reporter knows what s/he claims to know, is an important news literacy concept, frequently cited in news reports or broadcasts. Few readers, regardless of age and education, think to incorporate transparency as criteria for evaluating truth. Having students actively search for the appearance of transparency in any reading, as well as identify verification and prove independence and accountability, often leads to a detailed and robust discussion of the reliability of information in the reading.

In addition to producing more critically thinking students, these kinds of discussions can empower students. It has been my experience that the structure provided by news literacy terminology gives even the quietest students confidence to successfully articulate what is being learned.

The same may be said for the evaluation of sources. The MAVIN acronym is a wonderful springboard to provoke classroom discussion and is especially valuable for students needing a concrete structured technique of evaluation:

- Multiple Sources are better than single sources.
- Authoritative sources are better than uninformed sources.
- Verified sources are better than sources who assert.
- Independent sources are better than self-interested sources.
- Named sources are better than unnamed sources.

This simple acronym again provides a structured technique to regularly apply to situations where students need to weigh the value of individual sources in order to properly evaluate information.

Last year, one of our innovative participants developed a unit that applied news literacy skills to her Spanish class. Students took an important contemporary topic—Mexican immigration to the United States—and were exposed to reports from both the U.S. and Mexican press. This activity extended to a rich utilization and reinforcement of reading, writing, and conversational Spanish, while exposing the students to a variety of perspectives and an excellent reinforcement of the history of Mexican-American relations. The unit included reading of scholarly and popular journals, viewing of video documentaries, the creation of a Spanish glossary significant to the issues, Spanish journal entries, and poetry. The idea of obtaining truth by following a story over time is greatly emphasized as well as the recognition of the information neighborhoods that are being read.

Discussion questions included:

- What was missing from the article that would balance the article's assertion?
- Are all interested parties fairly and accurately represented?

- What additional points and sources could the article have addressed? |
- Is the evidence verified or asserted? |
- Identify each source. |
- Are these sources independent or self interested? |
- Determine reliability of the website used regarding: authority, point of view, and currency.

The unit readily demonstrates how news literacy is a most important and valuable tool for the educational, motivational, and assessment needs of even the most specialized subject areas. Many students have expressed to my colleagues that news literacy is one of the most valuable courses they have taken. One even stated, “I’m going crazy since I took the course! I can’t stop deconstructing (evaluating) news stories!”

### **Next Steps** |

All educators have the means to be news literacy instructors. Critical thinking is an end teachers hope to achieve, regardless of content area. Unfortunately, we too often demand critical thinking from our students before we’ve provided enough of a cognitive architecture—in the form of skills and vocabulary—for critical thinking. It has been my experience as an educator at primary, secondary, and collegiate levels that asking students to read between the lines, decipher a point of view or determine the relative strength of sources is critical to their active engagement in society. Perhaps creating media through youth media programs is the next critical step for a teen to put the lessons of news literacy into practice.

*Stephen Shultz is an adjunct professor as well as the lead teacher and coordinator of the Stony Brook University Center for News Literacy Teacher Institute. A former Social Studies teacher and supervisor in New York City and Suffolk County, New York schools, Mr. Shultz was honored as the 1987- '88 New York City High School Social Studies Teacher of the Year. He has been a contributing writer for a number of textbooks, has authored teachers' manuals in both Global and U.S. History, and continues to write articles pertinent to Social Studies educators.*

## **Teaching Journalism and News Literacy**

By: Esther Wojcicki

Published: June 24, 2010

Category: [Perspectives](#)

Not all school years are good news years for student journalists, but 1996 was a banner year in Palo Alto. In that year, the Palo Alto High School student newspaper *The Campanile* published an investigative story that made big local news and resulted in some significant resignations. The story was about a topic that most kids would find boring: a school board meeting.

However, it was anything but boring when the student reporter Ben Hewlett uncovered some shocking facts. Ben, in reviewing the minutes from the meeting, questioned why the board had reopened a closed board meeting at 10:30 pm, kept it open for only three minutes, and passed several resolutions in that three minute time period. All of the resolutions pertained to salary increases for district office administrators.

What was the board discussing in closed session for several hours prior to their reopening of the board meeting at 10:30 pm? Why was it passing financial resolutions with no prior discussion? When Ben looked carefully at the minutes, it looked like the board had been discussing financial issues behind closed doors which is a violation of the California Brown Act which requires public entities to have open meetings when discussing financial issues.

After further investigation, Ben wrote the story. The student newspaper *The Campanile* published it on page one. Within two days of the publication, the board held an emergency session and retracted the raises. Within two months, after the publication of a follow up investigative story, the superintendent resigned. Within a year, multiple other district officials had also resigned.

The day after the story was first published it was picked up by the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *San Jose Mercury News* as well as on Channels 4 and 5. The local press, the *Palo Alto Weekly* and the *SF Chronicle* both wrote supporting editorials.

There are many stories like this from the Palo Alto student press. Six years prior to the 1996 school board story, back in 1990, *The Campanile* wrote an expose about the ineffectiveness of the counselor program at the school and within a few months it was dismantled and replaced with a "Teacher Adviser" program that still exists today, recognized nationally for its excellence.

In 1991, *The Campanile* students published a front page story alerting the community to the prevalence of unsafe sexual practices among students. That story became the basis for the formation of a *required course* teaching safe sex and other important social and health topics for all students in the Palo Alto School District.

Almost every year for the past 25 years, students have written one story per academic year that has had a profound impact on the community. The impact doesn't stop with graduation. Many of these students have gone on to careers in the professional press. Just to name a few, Gady Epstein is head of the Forbes bureau in China; Ben Elgin is a lead reporter for *Business Week*; Rachel Metz writes for *Associated Press*; Tim Dickenson writes for *Rolling Stone*, among others. Several students have started magazines at Berkeley, UCLA, and other universities.

Students with non-journalistic careers have kept their journalist experiences with them. The overarching idea is to empower students through giving them the writing skills and tools to express their views and the platform to be heard so they can pursue any career they choose.

These stories show the positive power that the student press can have on students and the community when teachers and administrators respect students' First Amendment Rights.

The philosophy behind the Palo Alto High School journalism program is that students learn by doing, not by watching. Like in youth media programs focused on print, journalism, radio, and web, students get passionate about journalism and writing when they are given the freedom to write about issues of importance to them. In the process, they learn how to write well and become more interested in the world around them and at the state, national and international level.

Today we have more than 500 students enrolled in journalism courses such as magazine journalism, newspaper journalism, broadcast journalism, web journalism and video production and beginning

journalism. All the courses are computer-based and the publications are available online at and in print, recognized by National Scholastic Press and Columbia Scholastic Press.

I am a strong advocate of making programs like the Palo Alto student journalism program available to all students. Today we have a nation of citizen journalists who are blogging, posting, and commenting on sites all over the web. Students are posting to *Facebook* and *Twitter*, but in time they will be posting to other sites and writing blogs or contributing to citizen news sites.

From a teacher's perspective, news literacy is helping students become more aware of current events and developing strong technical, writing and collaboration skills—essential for success in today's world. But teachers must also be trained to incorporate news literacy teaching. Traditionally, education schools focus on the teaching of fiction and five paragraph essays and poetry, neglecting the teaching of non-fiction or journalistic writing styles. This issue needs to be addressed from many angles, but in college education programs specifically.

Ideally, news literacy should be a required course for all students in the U.S.—a course in which students not only learn how to write for a publication online or in hard copy, but also learn how to be critical readers of web-based materials. We don't need anymore studies of how the schools are failing; we need resources to get students engaged in their learning and excited about the world around them. From a high school teacher's perspective, journalism and youth media are doing just that.

*Esther Wojcicki was awarded a Knight Foundation grant to coordinate the writing of a Web-News Literacy program that will be called 21st Century Literacy. The program will have a variety of modules that teachers can use either in an English class or a social studies class. The units can be used individually or as the core of a semester class. Some of the units will be novel based; others will be article based and some will be project based.*