

A Campus-Wide J-School: News Literacy as an Avenue for Journalism Schools to Connect with New Students and a New Generation

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The digital age has created an existential crisis for news media, with legacy outlets trying to reinvent themselves in order to remain profitable and relevant in a rapidly changing information ecosystem. They are trying to adapt their traditional business and journalism models to situate themselves within a new reality, one in which legacy media – the traditional news gatekeepers – must compete with a multitude of new voices that are creating and sharing news.

It follows that journalism schools must adapt their old curricula to prepare their own students to be successful news producers, and to prepare the wider student body to be critical news consumers.

To that end, journalism faculty should reach beyond the confines of journalism schools to help students develop news literacy skills so that they become critical news and information consumers. News media products are part of students' everyday lives. That is why those products are often used in media literacy classes as part of textual analysis. That connection to students' lives outside school is very much part of the Dewey (1929) model of education, which attempts to link students' out-of-school lives with their in-school experiences so that they succeed not only in school but also in real life (Eisner 1967). Journalism schools have been training journalists for decades to develop an engaged, critical citizenry through their reporting. Journalism faculty should now reach out to those news consumers that their journalism students have been trying to reach for years, and do so with help from other faculties.

Masterman (2001) argued that media educators should work with journalists to enhance media literacy education and to further media literacy goals. The same is true for journalism educators: they should avoid isolating themselves on the university campus and instead broaden their mandate and reach out to non-journalism students to talk with them about news and media.

The changes in the news media landscape over the past decade have only increased the need for journalism schools to pay as much attention to developing news-literate citizens as to training industry practitioners (Reese 2012). The time to reach out and create news-literate students is now.

In this paper I begin by summarizing the debate within the emerging news literacy field over how to define news literacy and what a news literacy curriculum ought to include. I then outline reasons why journalism programs might be best situated to offer news literacy instruction and discuss the results of interviews with five Ontario journalists regarding what they think news literacy education should look like in Canada.¹ Finally, I suggest what Canadian journalism schools should do, based on the views of those five journalists (Press 2011).

What is News Literacy?

Defining the academic and pedagogical boundaries of news literacy is increasingly difficult. At the National News Literacy Summit held in Chicago in mid-September 2014, journalists, educators, academics, and administrators gathered to discuss the state of news literacy education and future directions for the field. Among the issues identified during the two-day conference were these: there is a lack of consensus on the central learning outcomes of a news literacy curriculum; curricula rely heavily on lectures and group work as instructional methods (as opposed to, for example, project-based learning, where the student decides on the issue to explore and the teacher acts as the educational facilitator rather than the instructor, possibly ending with the student creating an educational game, a dramatic video, a play, or a spoken-word presentation such as a rap or a poem); and curriculum designers are taking a paternalistic approach, setting a top-down method of instruction akin to the Tyler rationale, which is an ends-means model of curriculum that emphasizes identifying goals or objectives and then creating a curriculum to meet those goals (McNeil 2009, 118). One criticism of the Tyler rationale that is relevant to this discussion of news literacy is that it does not provide a way to balance biases that appear at various points in the curriculum design process, nor does it resolve political conflicts in curriculum policy design even when the actors involved can agree on common values (McNeil 2009, 120). In the case of news literacy, the actors at the conference couldn't agree on common values or a way forward for news literacy as a field or discipline. Those who identified themselves as news literacy educators seemed offended that media literacy educators were intruding into their field, or attempting to take it over outright. What should be the basis for a curriculum? How should the subject be taught? And how is news literacy different in its scope

and objectives from media literacy education? There seemed to be no consensus, just more questions.

One Definition of News Literacy: The Center for News Literacy

The centre of the news literacy movement in the United States is Stony Brook University on Long Island. There, the news literacy curriculum is boiled down to four lessons: identifying various types of information, what the faculty call “knowing your information neighbourhood”; evaluating sources of information and sources within news stories; identifying news and opinion; and understanding and identifying media bias as well as understanding how the biases of news consumers influence how they decode media texts (Press 2011). The curriculum, much like media literacy curricula, also requires students to create news media. In this way, news literacy becomes a combination of critical reception and critical production (Schwarz 2011).

There is little in Stony Brook’s course that wouldn’t be found in media literacy courses in an Ontario high school or on a university campus. The reason? Much like media literacy, news literacy taps into the following concepts: that all media messages and products are constructed using creative production techniques; that messages can be decoded differently depending on the different schemas people hold; that bias plays a role in the encoding and decoding process; and that media messages are generally created for profit or to exercise power (Thoman and Jolls 2004, in Craft, Maksl, and Ashley 2013). The media, then, “provide us with selective versions of the world, rather than direct access to it” (Frau-Meigs 2006, 19). In that sense, the news is never a perfect reflection of reality, nor do the media provide perfect methods of narrative telling (McLuhan 1994). So, people must learn how to critically analyse texts.

Despite this link to media literacy, news literacy educators seem opposed to allowing media literacy practitioners to shape the definition of news literacy.²

So how should news literacy be defined?

It should start with an acknowledgment that news literacy is a subset of media literacy and should borrow its theoretical underpinnings from media literacy, but focus it through the lens of the news. Media literacy is defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication and information in a variety of media (Aufderheide 1993; Frau-Meigs 2006). News literacy can and should be defined in the same way, with a few additions, such as the ability to recognize and critically examine hidden meanings in news media; to identify sources of information in the news media, including sources cited in news media texts; and to develop an understanding of news media consumption habits (Fleming 2010). These additions to the generally accepted definition of media literacy help put some meat on the bones of Aufderheide’s

definition, which Martens (2010) criticized for lacking specificity in that it “cannot provide much detail to people who want to design educational strategies” (Martens 2010, 2).

There is evidence that to become news literate, one should have an understanding of news media ownership (Ashley, Poepfel, and Willis 2010). While this has long been viewed as of great importance in the United States, where there are “blue” and “red” media, the issue of media ownership – more specifically, the concentration of ownership – has become a greater issue in Canada in recent months. Shortly before this paper was written, the federal Competition Bureau approved the sale of Quebecor’s 175 newspapers in the Sun Media chain to Postmedia Network Canada for \$316 million.³ These kinds of lessons in a curriculum would begin to probe power relationships within news media, as well as the power relationship between news consumers and news producers that frames critical discourse. Journalism schools with faculty who have real-life experience dealing with owners are best situated to add richness and expertise to this portion of an education in news media.

Canadian journalism schools should use these elements as the basis for an operational definition of news literacy. Canadian journalists themselves have suggested a similar operational definition of news literacy (Press 2011). Other faculty on campus may be more willing to allow the ink-stained wretches of the world into their classrooms if they are coming with a generally accepted media literacy educational pedagogy.

This leads to the next question this paper seeks to answer: Why teach news literacy at all?

Why Journalism Schools Should Teach News Literacy

University students are exposed to more news media than ever before (see Foehr, Rideout, and Roberts 2010). Queen’s University media professor Sidneyeve Matrix has described Canadians as “‘infovores’ who spend much of their time online perusing news websites” (Perreux 2010). But it is not clear whether their news literacy skills are advanced. A 2008 report from the British Library concluded that while the “Google Generation” found it easy to access media, they possessed limited ability to critically analyse media texts (cited in Considine, Horton, and Moorman 2009). Research has also suggested that Canadian students may be less than knowledgeable about news media ecosystem. Ashley, Maksl and Craft (2013) noted that post-secondary students were “highly knowledgeable about commonly held attitudes about news media” but not “knowledgeable about how the news media system actually works ... Considering how pervasive media are, it is not surprising that students have been exposed to and developed a variety of attitudes about media without factual knowledge about the media system.”

This is the first place where journalism faculty can step in. Research suggests that elementary and high school teachers in other disciplines sometimes feel ill-equipped to teach students about news media; the result has been different experiences with news literacy (Ngomba-Westbrook 2013). Journalism faculty have the above-mentioned “factual knowledge” about how the media system operates. They have been – and often still are – part of that system as producers of news media products, and they are just as likely to be active news consumers. On top of this, they are steeped in educational pedagogies and teaching experience. So these faculty are well-suited to prod students into a critical analysis of journalism, besides being well-placed to bring non-faculty journalists into the classroom for added lesson depth.

In my own research, Ontario journalists showed an intense interest in teaching young students about journalism and news literacy skills. They lamented the lack of knowledge about how the news media actually work. One participant spoke of being a print-based reporter and having an interviewee ask whether the interview would be on television that night. A general theme emerged among participants that journalists need not do something magical in teaching news literacy – they need only demystify the journalistic process and engage in critical dialogue about the craft itself. Once they had done these things, students would be in a better position to understand and partake in the social process that creates news media texts and gives them meaning. All were willing to go into classrooms, or had already done so, to be guest speakers for elementary and high school students.

This leads to the final question this paper seeks to answer: How should Canadian journalism schools teach news literacy?

How Journalism Schools Should Teach News Literacy

A review of the literature suggests that educators and journalists should work together to further media literacy and news literacy goals (Masterman 2001; Hobbs and Jensen 2009; Press 2011). These goals should include building critical thinking, oral, written, and multimedia communication skills, and a more engaged citizenry. A news literacy curriculum should avoid perceptions that it is attempting to build audiences for traditional or legacy media. The way to avoid this is to have journalism educators – former print and broadcast journalists themselves – work with educators from other academic fields to develop lessons and curricula. It should be a uniquely Canadian model that does not entirely replicate the Stony Brook model.

The Stony Brook model is tough to digest academically. The course has twelve lessons, starting with an introduction to news literacy and a discussion about why news literacy can be considered important in the digital information age. Students are then exposed to the reasons why

people follow the news; what makes the news different from other sources of information such as advertising, publicity, and entertainment; and the philosophical and practical pillars that hold up the American press, such as the First Amendment. Next comes a lesson on the journalistic process. This includes understanding how some information becomes news; what the difference is between news and opinion; what the difference is between fairness and balance in media coverage; what journalistic truth actually means; how to evaluate sources of information and sources within news stories; how to understand the power of images; how print news differs from broadcast news; what issues are unique to online news; and, finally, what the future of the news may be, which includes an overview of the structures of media ownership. In short, there is a lot to learn, but much of it has to do with planting information in students' minds and then testing their ability to apply what they have deposited there.

The Stony Brook curriculum has been criticized for focusing too much on the craft of journalism and not enough on the theory of news media production (Hobbs 2010). The instructors are mostly former professional journalists, many of whom spent most of their working lives in print or broadcast journalism before entering post-secondary education. I once watched them put together a final lecture, and saw how they added or removed slides in the same way that they would have inserted news stories into or removed them from a broadcast line-up or print page.

Even so, these staff members added to the students' learning experience. Fleming (2014) found that students in the Stony Brook news literacy program responded favourably to the professional journalism backgrounds that educators brought to news literacy lessons. That the journalism school provided hands-on knowledge about the journalistic process may well have enhanced the study of news media across the university campus, besides bringing some real-world practice to theories of news media production from different academic disciplines.

Results from the participants in my study overlapped with several aspects of the news literacy curriculum at Stony Brook. One participant's "concentric circle lesson"⁴ – which links news items to various circles of influence that lead back to the individual consumer – could be used to teach students why it is important to follow the news. Others talked about understanding and evaluating media bias, fairness, and journalistic truth, as well as understanding audience bias and evaluating sources during the consumption of news.

Participants placed greater emphasis on the roles social media play in the news ecosystem, be it as platforms for news delivery or as means to connect journalists to sources. A more recent issue has been how algorithms for sites like Facebook influence what users see in their news feed and thereby influence their clicks. Teaching about this will not be easy and is best

suiting to a student-centred teaching approach because of the ever-changing social media landscape, in which new tools, sites, and platforms rapidly appear and disappear.

There is another issue that needs to be addressed about the Stony Brook model, which has been successfully exported to campuses across the United States and to institutions overseas. Its success is partly the result of strong fundraising. In all, four foundations have granted the school almost US\$3 million to help it build a curriculum, assess student outcomes, and export the course elsewhere. The faculty themselves have been entrepreneurial when it comes to attracting first-year students on campus away from traditional liberal arts courses, such as psychology and sociology. In my visit to the school in the spring of 2010 as part of my own research, the instructors explained to me how they worked to put the idea of the news literacy course in front of first-year students during orientation week when they were selecting classes. This combination of financing and salesmanship likely contributed to its success. Also, the possibility of grants has lured traditional media literacy educators to start dipping their toes into the news literacy field – something that likely added to the tension on display at the news literacy summit in the fall of 2014 in Chicago.

Canadian universities looking to replicate the Stony Brook experience are likely to find themselves short of major granting partners, such as the Knight Foundation or the McCormick Foundation. There isn't the same history of journalism funding foundations in Canada as there is in the United States. Overcoming this financial obstacle will not be easy in an age of belt tightening in the public education system.

So what can be done?

The place to begin is by drawing on the resources currently available on campus to enhance the news literacy education already taking place in various courses. A start could be reaching out to, for example, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and economics professors to identify lessons that could be enhanced by importing the expertise that only a journalism school faculty member can bring. Embedding news literacy ideas in the curricula of other disciplines – an approach that has shown promise in furthering news literacy instruction (Fleming 2010) – should not be about dispelling sometimes negative evaluations of news media texts, but about adding greater context and critical expertise. As Hobbs (2010) rightly argues: “news literacy programs must have, as their primary learning outcomes, a focus on building learners' critical thinking and communication skills in responding to news and current events in today's world, warts and all.”

The thoughts of professional journalists are a place to start when considering which concepts to enhance in other curricula. The journalists who took part in a study on news literacy

education (Press 2011) believed it should include a discussion of the social process that creates news – a process impacted by media bias and audience bias – with journalistic objectivity as the yardstick. They believed that news literacy requires elements of information literacy as well as elements of digital literacy, especially when it comes to the roles social media play in news production and consumption. There was also mention of philosophical discussions with students about ethical journalistic practices.

What they left out was a focus on the role of free speech in society – likely because Canada does not emphasize the Charter right to free speech as strongly as Americans do their First Amendment. Participants in the study also did not explicitly state that students should be required to learn about the *mission* of the press, which is part of the curriculum at Stony Brook.

Journalists in the study identified a hands-on approach to teaching news literacy, one that would call for students to do more than talk. Such an approach would require teachers to guide the students through questions about how news media affect them. This might involve less-structured lectures or project-based learning. For post-secondary education, journalists in the study suggested that teaching should focus on theoretical debates within news gathering and production – for example, the ethics of anonymous sources, and the messages sent by shot selection in a broadcast or video report – as opposed to the basics of being a journalist. In short, the journalists tapped into a constructivist paradigm, often without realizing it.

But these journalists were also aware that their domain expertise was limited to journalism, much as reporters in a newsroom will defer to the beat reporter whose expertise in a particular subject area – education or health, for example – exceeds their own. This unexpected finding in the data suggested that they wanted to work with other faculty and teachers rather than try to teach news literacy on their own.

It would be wise for Canadian journalism educators to reach out to other disciplines to embed news literacy in curricula. Reaching out to the wider campus would also meet the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities 2001 policy on general education, which outlined how courses should “identify and deal with issues of societal concern in a manner relevant to the lives of students” by guiding students through the issue’s historical context, theoretical bases, and application to modern life. All courses, the ministry wrote, should help students with their personal growth; help them become informed citizens; and prepare them for future learning.

News literacy meets these ideals while also providing an evolutionary step for the journalism school. No longer should journalism schools think only about preparing the next generation of journalists to report the news – schools should also help prepare the next generation of news consumers to navigate the modern news ecosystem.

NOTES

¹ The study involved one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with five Ontario journalists in late 2010 and early 2011. All were employed with either a news outlet, a journalism association, or a journalism education program. I then used a phenomenological and narrative analysis to evaluate each participant's interview.

² For more on the issues identified at the summit, see this response from Sherri Hope Culver, president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education and director of the Center for Media and Information Literacy at Temple University: <http://centermil.org/2014/09/16/thoughts-on-the-news-literacy-summit>.

³ Disclaimer: I was employed at the *Ottawa Citizen*, a Postmedia newspaper, as a parliamentary reporter when I first began work on this paper. As of June 2015, I am no longer a Postmedia employee, having voluntarily left for a position at The Canadian Press.

⁴ It is best to picture an archery target to understand the concentric circle lesson. The circle in the middle is for news about the circle of influence closest to the student: their immediate environment, such as their neighbourhood, school, or family. Every circle beyond represents more distant news – the local, provincial, national, and international – that the student finds a way to connect back to himself or herself. The participant who discussed this lesson plan referred to it as a concentric circle lesson, and I have decided to use his words whenever I describe it.

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