

**A Resource for Media Literacy:
Why Journalism Education Matters More than Ever**

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Project
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Introduction

The idea for my project in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning program began in 2005 with an interest in learning about the curious news consumption habits of my journalism students. I wanted to know where my students obtained their news, because upon entering my journalism classes—with presumably an interest in the subject—they were remarkably uninformed about important current events. Soon after I began my project I realized there was already an existing body of research that, along with confirming my suspicions, sufficiently answered the question. The reality is: Young people do not read newspapers, and they are not as informed of the day's news as older generations. This lack of young readers is in large part responsible for the newspaper

industry's decline. In 1990, the daily newspaper circulation in the United States was more than 60 million. Today it is about 50 million (Project for Excellence in Journalism). An example widely used to illustrate the grim reality of young Americans' relationship with the news media is a Pew Research Center survey that revealed young people were relying on Comedy Central's *Daily Show* for news of the presidential election (Pew). Educator and former journalist David T.Z. Mindich writes that there is "unequivocal" evidence of the discouraging news consumption habits among the younger generations. "When young people are asked about current events, particularly political affairs, they are *far* less likely to know the facts than their elders are—and further, young people are far less likely to care about their lack of knowledge. This runs alongside a declining interest among young people in the consumption of the various news media, from newspapers to radio to television" (12). Most recently, Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government released a study stating: "The evidence shows that young Americans are estranged from the daily newspaper and rely more heavily on television than on the Internet for their news... Unlike most older Americans, many young people find a bit of news here and there and do not make it a routine part of their day" (Patterson).

This is not an encouraging state of affairs for a journalism professor who hopes her students will find professional success and personal satisfaction while working in a field critical to preserving our free society. And yet, this troubling situation is contradicted by conditions that could be viewed as signs of hope. In the face of a declining news industry, students are flocking to journalism and mass communication programs. As of 2004, enrollment in these programs nationwide was in its eleventh

consecutive year of growth (The Data Page). In addition, the newspaper business on college campuses is far healthier than in the mainstream: 76 percent of the country's six million full-time undergraduates read their campus newspaper at least occasionally ("Campus newspapers"). In fact, in 2006 The Wall Street Journal reported that the vibrancy of college newspapers has attracted major national advertisers. "College newspapers have held steady readership in recent years while big newspapers in general have seen theirs shrink" (Steel). And while even the mainstream newspaper industry is indeed shrinking, it is far from dead. More than 50 million newspapers are sold every day in America.

A common response to the situation in journalism today is cynicism. This is understandable because there are endless reasons to support a cynical view of the press, including—as journalist Bill Moyers documented in his 2007 PBS program "Buying the War"—the invasion of Iraq, which was sold to a supportive public by a dishonest (or, some may argue, misinformed) government that used the press as an unquestioning accomplice. The danger presented by this widespread cynicism of the press was made clear to me one day last fall when I ran into someone with whom I had worked in the newspaper industry many years ago. Upon hearing that I now teach journalism at a community college, she expressed astonishment at the futility of my endeavor. "Why?" she asked. As in, "Why bother?" This cynical question helped bring the goal of my sometimes nebulous SoTL project into clear bas-relief. I finally concluded that journalism education—which inextricably includes a strong and free student press on campus—is the most effective way to achieve media literacy among young people and to teach the priceless value of the free press in a free society.

The Case for Media Literacy

During my seven years teaching journalism in community college, I have been struck by one common view held by my students: They consistently are under the impression that the United States government does or should control the media's journalistic outlets far more than the government actually does or has the right to do.

While this notion is troubling because it illustrates wide-ranging ignorance among my journalism students about the right of the free press, it is also, in some ways, understandable. Why? Because my students' misconception also reflects their sense that some larger, controlling force is manipulating the media that they consume. And on this point, they are indeed correct.

Consider the current conditions in the media landscape: Just a few mega-corporations own most of the media outlets in the world today, and they continue to expand what is arguably already a monopoly. For example, as I write this, one of America's largest independent and most respected newspapers, *The Wall Street Journal*, is being targeted for purchase by right-wing media magnate Rupert Murdoch, whose News Corporation is the world's third-largest media company. Murdoch already owns the Fox news and sports television networks; dozens of affiliate television stations throughout the United States, including more than one station in each of the following major markets: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, Orlando, Dallas, Houston, Phoenix, and Minneapolis; 20th Century Fox and Fox Searchlight movies; DirecTV satellite system; Myspace.com; newspapers in England, the United States (including *The New York Post*), and 20 newspapers in his native Australia; HarperCollins

and other publishers; and several radio stations and magazines, including partial ownership of *TV Guide* (Columbia Journalism Review). Also consider that during the current era following Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" during the halftime show of the 2004 Super Bowl, the Federal Communications Commission—the government agency responsible for regulating broadcast media—has loosened media consolidation limits while tightening control of content on the airwaves. In addition, there is the "synergy" practiced by corporations, which pressures their media holdings to serve as promotional outlets for products manufactured by their other divisions. For example, Jack Welch, then head of General Electric, which owns NBC, instructed NBC's *Today* show weatherman to encourage viewers to buy GE light bulbs (Croteau 46). Add to this picture the realities of "infotainment" and political agendas, and it is understandable why my students have, at best, a cynical, and, at worst, a thoroughly misinformed opinion of why the free press matters.

But before we explore in more detail the troubling nature of today's media industry, we should start at the beginning, with the first provision in the Constitution's Bill of Rights. The First Amendment guarantees five important rights to Americans: freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, right of assembly, and the right to petition the government.

According to the 2006 report *State of the First Amendment* released by the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, only 13 percent of Americans surveyed could identify "freedom of the press" as one right guaranteed under the First Amendment. According to the same report, 40 percent of survey respondents said they believe the press has "too much freedom to do what it wants" (First Amendment Center).

If American citizens are not aware of even their most basic rights, how can those rights be defended? If Americans do not strongly support a free and independent press, how can it survive? And how does a journalism educator address such a problem, which, if ignored, threatens the future viability of the First Amendment? The situation became more alarming to me when I realized that incoming college-level journalism students—those who profess at least an interest in the workings of journalism—were apparently no better informed than the average American when it came to the rights of the free press.

Education, of course, is the answer. And there is a great deal of discussion in today's journalism community about how to teach the journalists of tomorrow. Some argue for throwing out the standard Watergate-centric, newsprint-based syllabus in favor of instruction on how to produce digital, web-based content. Others argue that journalists need better training as critical thinkers. Still others contend that the core skills of reporting, writing, and telling a good story are what journalists need most.

Teaching Journalism to Journalism Students

As journalism educators know, many of our journalism students are drawn to our classes because—hooray!—they love to write. Professor Lee Becker of the University of Georgia, who conducts an annual study of journalism students, confirmed this anecdotal impression when his recent survey revealed that half of the students interviewed chose journalism as a vocation because of their desire to write (Vaina). But this does not mean they arrive knowing how to write journalism. A junior at Northeastern University told Becker: “I’ve been writing stories, poems and essays since I was seven. Since creative

writing isn't the most lucrative of fields, I figured I would try journalism." These students' love of poetry or other forms of creative writing often only adds to their frustration in learning how to write in the spare, direct language of journalism. They also often resist the necessary act of reporting—gathering information, interviewing strangers—in favor of the solitary activity of surfing the Web or exploring their own opinion of things. Because of this, the argument to remain focused on the fundamental skills of news writing and reporting obviously has a great deal of merit. This is especially true when also considering that the tradition of internships and practice-oriented training remains strong in journalism education. Most journalism students across the country have the opportunity to work on their college newspaper or intern in a professional newsroom during the first years of their studies. If they do not learn basic news writing skills early, they simply cannot do the work and develop their skills.

I also argue that journalism educators should not ignore the lessons of Woodward and Bernstein and the culture of newsprint in favor of teaching students how to blog from home. While it is a fact that the newspaper industry is shrinking, I argue that print journalism is still the most influential form of media, and it is no doubt the venue for the best examples of high quality journalism.

Yet much needs to be addressed in today's journalism classrooms. Students arrive not understanding the basics of the industry and the profession that say they want to enter. This situation was evident in interviews I conducted with my journalism students during the 2006-2007 academic year. I asked them to reflect on how studying journalism affected their ability to be informed citizens and how they compared themselves to their peers in this regard.

One student said: “I generally have a clearer sense of what’s going on. [My peers] get it through the grapevine. I have more of an in-depth understanding of the news... I didn’t read the newspaper much before I started studying journalism. Before that, I never had any clue about what was going on around me.”

Another answered: “I’m much more skeptical than the average person. I don’t think that I know more, I’m just skeptical... [Before taking journalism courses] I was not aware of the disparity in quality” [between print and broadcast journalism]. To reinforce that in young people is critical. [Without journalism education] I’m not aware there is any other way a young person is going to learn that.”

Another replied: “Before your class, I did not pay attention to politics. I didn’t know any senator or anything. I knew we had free speech, but...I didn’t know that newspapers aren’t regulated. I didn’t know they could just print anything. I look at [the journalism profession] more critical now. I try to catch things, [such as journalists] putting their opinion in. Since I’ve taken the class I think: ‘I can’t believe she’s saying that.’ I’m more interested... I have one friend who goes to college, so I’m way more informed [than most of my peers]. They’re like, ‘How the hell do you know that?’ ... I want to have my own radio show [or be] the next Barbara Walters. I could see myself as a reporter, too. I was a cheerleader for ten years. My interest is to speak my mind and have other people hear it. I’ll tell you how it is.”

With this freedom for journalists to “tell you how it is,” comes enormous responsibility. While good news judgment (not to mention the basics of libel law) can be taught in a variety of ways in the classroom—for example, by examining specific news values (such as timeliness, conflict, and impact) and exploring ethics—some journalism educators have also embraced the more intellectual pursuit of critical thinking.

Journalism’s roots are proudly in the hands-on tradition of journalism as craft rather than profession, but many argue that the field has evolved into one that requires more than objective observation and efficient writing. One of the first major steps Columbia University President Lee Bollinger took during his new administration in 2002 was to push the Ivy League university’s venerable journalism school to be more than just a facility in which journalism students practice a craft. “The educational goal,” he wrote in a statement on journalism education, “ought to be to develop a base of knowledge across relevant fields that is crafted specifically for what leading journalists need to know: for example, a functional knowledge of statistics, the basic concepts of economics, and an appreciation for the importance of history and for the fundamental debates in modern political theory and philosophy” (Bollinger).

But this call for a shift toward a more intellectual, expert class of journalists has met with some resistance. Professor Bill Kirtz of Northeastern University’s School of Journalism responded to Bollinger with a warning that his plan will lower journalism school standards rather than raise them. “Diluting practical offerings threatens to send journalism programs further down the slippery slope toward scholarly arcana,” Kirtz wrote in *Editor & Publisher*. “Many j-departments — whose goal of producing

professional writers and editors has never fit comfortably into the traditional academic mold — have already been closed or merged into communications programs.

The more emphasis on ‘academics,’ the more slots for teachers fascinated by ‘the qualitative paradigm of descriptive and interpretive epistemology’ (the subject of the first paper listed in the newspaper division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication's meeting this month). Just as qualitative paradigms don't help on deadline, editors and publishers don't need what President Bollinger wants to give them” (Kirtz).

Still other educators argue that journalists should be prepared to do more than master the basics of accurately and objectively informing the public, and instead should also instruct the public on how to engage in society. Professor Jay Rosen of New York University writes in his book What Are Journalists For? that we need journalists “to be timely and accurate in telling the story of events. But along with this information, we need an invitation to join in those events... Like the information it conveys, the invitation the news contains should be current, in the sense that it speaks to our daily lives and present troubles. And it should prove accurate, as fact, but accurate also as a map, guiding us toward the places where public challenges are found” (297).

Rosen sounds the alarm about the future of journalism by quoting some of the industry’s most respected journalists, including Robert MacNeil, anchor of PBS’ former *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour*, who stated: “Let us take back the name of journalist. Let’s try and rescue some young journalists before they run away with the media circus, or join the cult of infotainment and are beyond deprogramming” (286). Rosen uses MacNeil’s statement to highlight a distinction between journalism and the media. Rosen later adds:

“The United States makes media well, so well we market it to the world. But can it still make journalism well? There is no longer any point in confusing the two” (294).

And yet, one driving concern behind my research is that I find there is indeed still confusion between the two—perhaps not among journalism professionals or academics, but among the general population and especially among young people. My students seem to lack a basic form of media literacy. While this is thankfully remedied with even just Journalism 101, I wonder about the vast majority of students who do not enroll in a single journalism course.

Achieving Media Literacy in Non-Journalism Students

In fall 2006 Stony Brook University announced it would offer the nation’s first university-wide “news literacy” course in recognition that all students need to be taught how to judge the quality and credibility of journalism. Howard Schneider, dean of Stony Brook’s School of Journalism, told *Editor & Publisher*, “There is great confusion in the public’s mind as to what journalism is and what is fake journalism—what is entertainment and what is news. The sheer quantity of information that is descending on us each day is blurring those lines, and that is dangerous to the news consumer” (Crane). The recognition of the need for media literacy among non-journalism students is gaining support. And it makes sense that established journalism and mass communication programs would be the resource for providing this education to students in the wider college community.

What is media literacy? Generally, educators view it as a specific critical thinking skill—one that enables students to recognize and evaluate the relentless flow of mass communication messages they receive every day. I argue that, at the college level, media literacy cannot be fully achieved unless the student becomes educated about the history and the current state of the various media industries, how and why these industries are regulated, and how journalism is (or at least should be) a specific, distinct kind of media that is different from the discrete arenas of entertainment, art, public relations, advertising, academic research, and other forms of, or influences on, mass media. If consumers cannot distinguish between entertainment, such as *The O'Reilly Factor* on FoxNews, and journalism, such as *The News Hour* on PBS, how can the public be prepared to demand high-quality journalism? How can they make an informed choice about where to obtain legitimate news in order to be productive citizens?

The Center for Media Literacy suggests five questions to consider when consuming media: “Who created this message? What creative techniques are used to attract my attention? How might different people understand this message differently than me? What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message? Why is this message being sent?” These are valuable questions, but they will fall short of preparing a young person to fully understand how the media machinery works, and, as citizens, how to fight against media consolidation and advocate for independent media ownership. It promises to be a tough fight. Professor Eric Klinenberg of New York University says media corporations are pushing for deregulation in the Federal Communications Commission’s ownership laws, and they are winning. “The FCC is a captured agency—captured by the industry it’s supposed to be regulating.

We've seen the FCC cave in to demands from big media conglomerates on issues across the spectrum. It seems to me that the FCC has forgotten its public interest obligation. It acts as if its job is to promote the interests of a small number of giant corporations" (Klinenberg). And yet, one area where the FCC did exercise its power was in the wake of the 2004 Super Bowl half time show, during which Janet Jackson's breast was exposed while she performed a musical segment. CBS and its affiliates were slapped with a \$550,000 fine, prompting outcries that strict interpretations of "indecentcy" would inhibit free speech on the airwaves.

At the very least, a person literate in the mass media should understand that the question, "Who created this message?" does not usually have a simple answer. When a student checks her email at AOL.com and, upon opening the homepage to the site, sees a photo of Harry Potter with link to a Harry Potter feature, does she know that America Online is owned by Time Warner, which also owns Warner Brothers Studios, which produced the latest Harry Potter film? Does she know that Time Warner also owns *People* and *Time* magazines, which no doubt will publish Harry Potter covers, and is part owner of Amazon.com, which will prominently feature Harry Potter books, and eBay, which recently offered nearly 10,000 Harry Potter-related items for sale? She probably does not know this. Most people probably don't. And yet, Time Warner has an enormously powerful presence in our society.

Time Warner, which also owns or partly owns CNN, HBO, Hewlett-Packard, Citigroup, Ticketmaster, American Express and Sony among the three hundred companies it controls, is the largest of the "Big Five" media corporations that own most of the media products we consume (Bagdikian 27). Does it make sense now why there

was so much hype—everywhere—about the Sopranos finale on HBO? Was the media acting in the interest of the public or in the ubiquitous interests of Time Warner?

The second among the Big Five is the Walt Disney Company, which, in addition to the Disney empire, owns Touchstone, Miramax and other movie studios; ABC, ESPN, A&E, the History Channel, and other television and cable networks and all their related websites; thirty radio stations; eight book publishers; thirteen international broadcast channels; live theater productions including *The Lion King*; fifteen theme parks; a cruise line; and the Mighty Ducks hockey team. Disney has part ownership of the Anaheim Angels and Bass oil and gas, whose processing facilities are owned by a subsidiary of Exxon Mobil Corporation. Ben H. Bagdikian, dean emeritus of the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley, writes, “Like all other dominant media corporations, Disney takes on cartel-like character through twenty-six joint ventures with other corporations, most of them media companies that constitute Disney’s main ‘competitors.’” Disney’s partners include the likes of General Electric, which owns NBC, which is a “competitor” ABC (36).

The last two remaining in the Big Five—after Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp., which I referenced earlier—are Viacom and Bertelsmann. Viacom, built by Sumner Redstone, owns CBS, Paramount Pictures, and more than a dozen cable channels including MTV, VH1, Nickelodeon, Comedy Central and Showtime. Bertelsmann is a German publishing company run by the Mohn family whose holdings include a large overseas broadcasting division; many publishing houses, including Random House, Ballantine, Bantam Dell, Crown, Doubleday, and Knopf; dozens of newspapers and

magazines, including *Family Circle* and *YM*; and BMG music, whose labels include Arista, RCA, and Windham Hill.

Bagdikian says these media corporations act as a unified cartel to protect their own financial interests and to influence the political process. “Their steady accumulation of power in the world of news, radio, television, magazines, books, and movies gave them a steady accumulation of power in politics. Political leaders and parties know that the news media control how those politicians are depicted to the voting public; the more powerful the leading media, the more powerful their influence over politicians and national policy... It is not surprising that a country with 280 million people living in more than 100 million households is a marketplace that has led ambitious entrepreneurs, no longer inhibited by former government rules, to congeal into a small handful of corporations. The fewer the owning corporations, the larger each one’s share of the annual harvest of the billions of consumer dollars” (29-30).

Some observers fear we are headed toward conditions similar to those in George Orwell’s novel *1984*, in which the government controlled the media in order to maintain absolute power and perpetuate an endless war. Others point to a more chilling true example of government-controlled media, such as the Nazi regime’s use of propaganda—including Leni Riefenstahl’s highly influential *Triumph of the Will*—to foment hate against a minority and generate adoration of a tyrant. But the conditions we see today are somewhat reversed. Bagdikian argues that it is the media industry controlling the government. Taking it a step further, one could argue that mega-corporations from all sectors of the marketplace—media, finance, oil—control the policies and actions of the government. Our capitalist economy is supposed to have protections against monopolies,

but if the government gets what it wants from monopolies and vice versa, who is going to correct the situation? If citizens do not know any better, why would they complain that such a system existed?

This dynamic serves the interests of a controlling elite, an idea that seems in opposition to our up-by-the-bootstraps American ideal of independence and opportunity, but one that, in reality, most Americans will recognize. Early 20th century American author and journalist Walter Lippmann said that by “manufacturing consent” an elite class could control the public, which he called “the bewildered herd.” Noam Chomsky, a leading and controversial American intellectual, says Lippmann’s idea hinged on the premise that a healthy democracy needs elites need to lead “the stupid masses toward a future that they’re too dumb and incompetent to envision for themselves.” Chomsky says this situation exists today, arguing that the elites who control democratic societies are in some ways no different from totalitarian leaders in how they control the public. Chomsky says, “In what is nowadays called a totalitarian state, or a military state, it’s easy. You just hold a bludgeon over their heads, and if they get out of line you smash them over the head. But as society has become more free and democratic, you lose that capacity. Therefore you have to turn to the techniques of propaganda. The logic is clear. Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state. That’s wise and good because, again, the common interests elude the bewildered herd. They can’t figure them out” (14-21). Chomsky’s ironic tone belies his argument that democracies are not being run by the people, for the people, but rather by an elite class for their own interests, and that the small number of elites rely on propaganda to control the public masses.

Some critics of the war in Iraq say propaganda was used to generate public support for the U.S. invasion. At the very least, the failure of the mainstream press to uncover the falsehoods spread by the administration of President George W. Bush have been well documented. In either case, the press clearly did not do its job in providing truthful, accurate reporting during the run-up to the war in Iraq. Filmmaker Danny Schechter in his 2004 documentary, *Weapons of Mass Deception*, explains how sports metaphors and high-tech graphics were used by broadcast journalists to present the war as nothing more than sport. He argues that war coverage in the mainstream press was overwhelmingly pro-war. The anti-war movement in the United States and worldwide—including massive citizen protests—were not represented and disturbing images of dead and injured Iraqi civilians and children were underplayed or not broadcast at all. Another method of maintaining public support for the war came in the form of the celebrated toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein, which Schechter documents was nothing more than a staged event organized by the U.S. military. Schechter theorizes that young people started turning to alternative sources of news—including Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show* on Comedy Central—out of frustration that mainstream news outlets were not reporting the truth.

While it could be an encouraging sign that young people are rejecting the poor quality journalism offered in the mainstream press, handing over the job of informing our citizenry to Comedy Central is not a solution. There is simply too much at stake. As the recent Harvard study (referenced in my introduction) contends, “Careful assessments of young adults’ news habits are essential. Young people’s interest in news will affect the

economic vitality of news organizations and thus their ability to invest in quality journalism. Also at stake is the grassroots health of American democracy.”

So far we have established that young people do not follow the news, that the right of the free press provided in the First Amendment is widely misunderstood and undervalued by the public, and that the independent press is being swallowed by giant corporations whose financial interests are blurring the lines between journalism and entertainment. Educating young people about journalism and the media will be critical to producing an informed public capable of understanding our society now saturated with media messages. Because of this, media literacy education should be provided to all students, not just those with an interest in journalism or communications. Established journalism and mass communication programs—with their growing appeal among students and their vibrant student newspaper environment—should be considered the best resource for providing this core competency to students across the college. Journalism education is the most effective way to address the increasing need for media literacy among our students.

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