Witnessing the World:

Journalism, Skepticism, and Information Literacy

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Given the vital role mass media in disseminating timely information, offering checks on governmental abuse, and promoting an informed citizenry capable of exercising their rights in a participatory democracy, it is critical that college students learn about these outlets so that they can become effective consumers of news information. But to what extent are our students being taught how to access, evaluate, and understand this kind of information? Do faculty instructors and librarians address mass media sources or media literacy concepts in their teaching? Little research exists addressing these questions, but discussions within the literature of higher education and library science suggests that media literacy is not receiving widespread or consistent attention.

Hans C. Schmidt found that, although most faculty members agreed media literacy is important for their students, most did not address it within their own courses.[1] After reviewing two national reports on the state of media literacy in higher education, Paul Mihalidis concludes that there is a lack of awareness and understanding surrounding media literacy and that since the term was introduced, the US has lagged behind other countries

in implementing a curriculum that addresses it.[2] Mihalidis finds "vague and somewhat disparate understandings of what media literacy education is and how it functions in a university classroom" and suggests that the adoption of media literacy into the curriculum has been "constrained."[3] Likewise, librarians appear to be less likely to address news outlets than other, more scholarly sources in their library instruction sessions. In a recent survey, 39.1 percent of librarians indicate that they address non peer-reviewed sources like newspapers in their sessions. However, when asked to rate the amount of time devoted to various information literacy topics, the plurality of respondents (14.6 percent) indicated that they spend the least time on that topic and 13.5 percent stated they do not cover the topic at all.[4]

The Case for Media Literacy

Media permeates every aspect of our lives, and as such, people need to develop the skills and competencies to interact with the information they receive from these many outlets on a continuous basis. On a broad level, mass media plays an important role in participatory government, based on the philosophy that citizens need to be well informed in order to form opinions, make decisions, and otherwise fully participate in their own government. By investigating and reporting on political and government activities in an objective manner, and thereby providing citizens with information and a forum for public discourse on policy issues, journalism and news reporting are central to the functioning of a democracy.[5] Sometimes referred to as the fourth estate, mass media and journalism are seen as a potential check on the excesses or abuse of government by investigating and reporting on those excesses and abuses.[6]

However, media consumers need to be critically evaluative of information and its sources to determine what is trustworthy and what, ultimately, to believe. Mass media outlets tend to focus on current events and report on stories as they unfold. They lack the time and distance to offer a "long view" of events, and when stories are being covered in the moment, pieces of information may get reported that will later be shown to be inaccurate. The Newtown shootings at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 offer a grim example of just such misinformation, including reports that the shooter's mother was a teacher and was one of the victims at the school.[7]

While such mistakes are usually corrected, there is a difference between correcting text and correcting the information that someone has already absorbed. Indeed, misinformation and inaccurate reporting can have lasting and detrimental effects on the public. For instance, John M. Budd, Zach C. Coble, and Katherine M. Anderson found that researchers continue to cite scientific and medical journal articles even after they have been retracted, thereby perpetuating the incorrect information.[8] Such practices can contribute to the continued influence effect, whereby people continue to believe the information they received first, even after they have been presented with the corrected version.[9] One method for combating the effects of misinformation is to teach people to evaluate the information and its sources as they receive it, in other words to be skeptical of information, which can reduce people's susceptibility to misinformation and lead to more accurate understandings.[10]

Media literacy, a set of competencies related to but distinct from information literacy, can nurture these skills in students and make them less vulnerable to media bias.[11] The Partnership for 21st Century Skills identifies media literacy as an essential competency for students to master.[12] Sonia Livingstone argues its importance, suggesting "the promise of media literacy, surely, is it can form part of a strategy to reposition the media user—from passive to active, from recipient to participant, from consumer to citizen."[13] Similarly, Mary Lou Galician contends that Americans are largely illiterate with regard to media and strongly asserts "it is high time that we make the research, teaching, and practice of *media literacy as a lifelong endeavor* a personal and national priority in our mediated global village."[14] The rest of this chapter offers a brief overview of the possible place of news sources and media literacy in the curriculum, along with suggestions for librarians and faculty to integrate media literacy into their instruction.

Defining Media Literacy

Before faculty and library instructors can move forward to integrate media literacy into their teaching, they need to agree on a common definition and learning goals on which to focus. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills defines media literacy as students

- understand[ing] both how and why media messages are constructed and for what purposes;
- examin[ing] how individuals interpret messages differently, how

values and points of view are included or excluded, and how media can influence beliefs and behaviors; [and]

- apply[ing] a fundamental understanding of the ethical/legal issues surrounding the access and use of media.[15]

The Kaiser Family Foundation draws on the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy to define the concept as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of forms."[16] Finally, Livingstone lays out a comprehensive definition centered on the core areas of access, analysis, evaluation, and content creation.[17] Librarians will readily see the overlap with the definition of information literacy created by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), which similarly focuses on issues of location, access, and evaluation of information.[18]

Areas of Knowledge and Competence

In addition to defining the concepts, instructors need to determine learning outcomes, or what they want students to know, understand, and be able to do as a result of their interaction with mass media outlets. While the specific outcomes will vary depending upon the particular courses, departments, and individual instructors, there are certain areas that are likely to be common across different areas. As noted above, evaluation of media information and sources is crucial, and indeed a recent survey of faculty from several different disciplines indicates that they are concerned with students' ability to uncover bias and evaluate the credibility and authority of information. Further, many faculty members identified the teaching of evaluation of information as a role librarians could play, using their expertise to help students sift through results and dig deeper into source material.[19] One interviewee described this process as turning students into skeptics.

Production Cycle

In order to evaluate media outlets, students should be familiar with the publication and information life cycles of the different news sources and formats. For instance, they should understand the difference between a news stories that are fact-checked, produced, and disseminated through a journalistic process as opposed to opinion pieces, commentary, or content created in social media

that often bypasses these processes. Students should question how each type of production or creation cycle affects the story. On the one hand, produced news pieces have been through an editorial process that is meant to ensure a certain level of quality and accuracy. On the other hand, the production cycle might slow down reporting in some cases, and by necessity media outlets have to make choices about what stories to report, meaning some stories go untold. Similarly, students must learn the difference between current news that is reported as it unfolds as opposed to investigative journalism that might be built on weeks or even years of research and the processes that support each. Even the word "research" as it is applied to journalism and mass media is problematic as it differs from scientific research. Students must understand what journalistic research is; what it entails; and how to assess whether a journalist has been thorough, unbiased, and ethical in his or her research.

Authority

Related to how a journalist researches and builds a story is the question of authority. Traditional approaches to evaluating authority tend to focus on author credentials. Instructors often tell students to look for signs of authority such as the degrees that the writer holds, former publications, or other outward signs of expertise within the field. However, when the writer is a journalist or staff writer, whose academic training might not reflect the content area on which they are reporting, how should a student proceed? Often, once students learn about peer review and the basics of authority evaluation, they might be likely to simply exclude news media sources from their searches as untrustworthy, and indeed, they are often at least subtly encouraged in this practice by librarians who focus almost exclusively on peer-reviewed sources when teaching searching. Amy K. Hofer, Lori Townsend, and Korey Brunetti suggest teaching authority as something that is both constructed and contextual.[20] In other words, what constitutes authority can vary based on format, sources, research processes, and so on. Although this approach is more complex, it allows students to engage with a wider range of resources and move beyond the "checklist" approach to assessing authority.

Bias

Bias is always a concern when evaluating information and sources, and the intricacies of authority and production in news media can make it especially difficult

to assess. One issue that is of concern to many news consumers is the issue of media ownership and consolidation. Most of the mainstream media outlets are for-profit entities often dependent on advertising dollars and therefore might be pressured by the interests and opinions of their owners and advertisers. Students need to be aware that when editors make decisions as to what is "newsworthy," or what to include and exclude in terms of news stories, as well as how to report those stories, their decisions can be influenced by their larger organization. Another issue is the consumer-driven nature of many media outlets. In an effort to keep listeners and readers, some outlets might pander to their audience and provide them with stories or slants that support their particular worldview.[21] Various news outlets accuse each other of having biases, and many conservatives broadly paint the media as having a liberal bias overall. News consumers must question the purpose, sources, and audience of the story to determine whether bias exists.

Visual Content

Unlike scholarly journal articles, news sources and mass media information often contains a strong visual element such as photographs, maps, or videos. Decoding visual information requires a different set of skills from those needed to evaluate textual information. In fact, some proponents argue that visual literacy comprises yet another, separate literacy.[22] ACRL defines visual literacy as the ability to "understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials."[23] These competencies include the ability to understand the physical and content aspects of images and the elements of production and to distinguish between originals and reproductions. Like textual information, visual images are meant to convey meaning and may be manipulated, distorted, or misrepresented. Students and information consumers need to develop the specific skills necessary to make sense of, interpret, and evaluate such imagery.

Mass Media and the Curriculum: Approaches and Ideas

There are many ways that news sources can be integrated into courses and curricula for a rich learning experience. To begin with, it is worth considering that

news stories can be used as both primary and secondary sources, depending on the context. For instance, interviewees in the study of faculty perspectives on information literacy offered examples of news stories in both roles. A biology professor described using media outlets, such as the BBC or CNN, to introduce certain stories to her classes, and then having them discuss media coverage of scientific stories and what is represented well and what is not. Another interviewee asserted that anthropologists use newspapers to keep current, and this instructor likes to have students read current news articles with the perspective of an anthropologist to discern what the stories reveal about the society in which they are printed. This anthropological use of newspapers begins to move from news as a secondary source to news as a primary source. Other disciplines went even further with the concept. A political science professor discussed having students use historical newspapers as primary sources to understand the thoughts, opinions, and reactions of people at the time.[24] In each case, whether as a primary or a secondary source, news stories are providing students and media consumers with a particular lens onto the world. With practice the students can begin to understand how that lens was constructed and by whom and how the lens then colors the particular picture of the world it is representing. Following are some specific ideas for lessons on news media.

Content Analysis

In January 2013, the author worked with faculty members from computer science and communications in an interdisciplinary team involved in teaching an undergraduate course on analyzing news media. The course was an experiential learning seminar, in which students were faced with the current issues and challenges surrounding mass media, including consolidation, bias, and audience-driven programming, and tasked with developing solutions to these problems. Before students could delve into the issues, it was necessary for them to understand how news media outlets operate and to develop and practice their media literacy skills. The faculty members chose content analysis as a methodology for examining and evaluating news. More than just a close reading, content analysis is a rigorous and systematic examination of resources, including its origins, authors, and intentions.[25] Practitioners must consider and question each aspect of the resource and look for repetition or patterns across resources. In addition to quantitative counts of words or images, researchers might use contextual clues to make qualitative judgments about aspects like

tone, emphasis, and attitude. For instance, researchers might try trying to gauge whether the source has a bias toward immigration reform by the use of terms such as "illegal immigrant" versus "illegal alien" versus "undocumented worker." They could look for other contextual clues as well, such as whether accompanying pictures and captions focus on, for instance, groups of families or fences and barbed wire. Readers could also examine the amount of text devoted to numbers of undocumented workers and the cost of illegal immigration compared to the amount of text focused on the effect on families or success stories.

In the above course, students were introduced to the methodology through an in-class demonstration followed by a series of individual and group activities. To begin with, the instructors displayed a series of publicly available images from magazine covers to demonstrate how content analysis could be used to assess the portrayal of women in men's magazines. In this example, the instructors focused on visual analysis, using cover photos from *Esquire* magazine. Photos were displayed on-screen, and the class worked together to analyze aspects of the image, including facial expression, type of clothing (or lack thereof), setting, props, and so on to set up a codebook. (A sample of the codebook is included in Appendix 19A.) Students noted patterns such as the number of models wearing underwear or bikinis as opposed to those wearing dresses or business attire; the number of models smiling, pouting, having parted lips, or biting something; and the number of models standing, sitting, squatting, or lying down with descriptions on how their arms were positioned. Finally, the class looked at the completed codebook and discussed what inferences or conclusions might be drawn from the data.

Students were then assigned a series of images to code on their own using the existing codebook. During the next class session, it was revealed that groups of students had been assigned the same set of images. Students then met with their groups where they compared their coding and discussed discrepancies. Finally, students were placed into different groups and given several weeks to locate news stories on a specific topic, develop a codebook, and code the stories. By the end of these activities, students demonstrated increased ability and confidence in analyzing news stories and images in a critically evaluative manner.

Checklists and SMELL Tests

As described above, content analysis is an intensive process and could take

more than a one-shot session to carry out. However, other frameworks exist for teaching critical evaluation of information and sources that lend themselves to one-shot sessions. For instance, the Kaiser Family Foundation offers a set of generic questions that could be applied to nearly any news information source or format:

- Who created this message and why are they sending it? Who owns and profits from it?
- What techniques are used to attract and hold attention?
- What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in this message?
- What is omitted from this message? Why is it left out?
- How might different people interpret this message?[26]

John McManus, a journalist, professor, and founder of a consumer report for news sources in California, developed what he refers to as the SMELL test. Like the questions from the Kaiser Foundation, this framework offers a checklist of points and questions packaged around a conveniently memorable acronym:

S stands for Source: Who is providing the information?

M is for Motivation: Why are they telling me this?

E represents Evidence: What evidence is provided for generalizations?

L is for Logic: Do the facts logically compel the conclusions?

L is for Left Out: What's missing that might change our interpretation of the information?[27]

Even in a one-shot session, instructors could introduce these questions and have students apply them to various news stories in class then encourage them to return to those questions each time they encounter new stories or information. (Appendix 19B offers some sample activities for longer sessions.)

Conclusion: A Call to Action

For many librarians and faculty the case for media literacy might seem obvious. The challenge is to underscore that students are not learning these skills simply to meet the demands of an assignment or a course. Rather, critical consumption of information is an essential skill for success beyond school, in both their personal and professional lives. By teaching them information and media literacy skills, we are giving them the necessary tools to succeed in an

information economy. By teaching them to be critical and even skeptical of the information they receive, we are arming students to protect themselves against the continued influence effect and to base their opinions, beliefs, and decisions on reliable information.

Further, however, we are sensitizing students to the broader social justice implications of information access and information literacy in society. James H. Kuklinksi et al. contend that factual information is the currency of a democracy, and citizens must have access to credible and authoritative information to support their decisions.[28] Similarly, the American Library Association asserts that information literacy is "central to the practice of democracy" and suggests that the ability to access, evaluate, and interpret information can allow people to improve socioeconomic imbalances, sentiments that have been echoed more recently in the Alexandria Proclamation, which asserts information literacy is a basic human right.[29] Through information literacy education, we can alert students to inequities in access to and understanding of information as well as the detrimental effects that such inequities can have in terms of depriving people of the ability to make sound decisions. Once students have gained this understanding, they might not only guard against their own vulnerability to misinformation and propaganda but work to facilitate access and understanding for others. As Heidi L.M. Jacobs reminds us, "The work we do is part of a broader educative project that works to empower individuals both locally and globally."[30]

We are bombarded with media stories every day, whether through more traditional news sources or through newer media. As pressure mounts for outlets to get news out fast, fewer stories are subjected to the rigorous fact-checking that might have been assumed at one time. At the same time, because of the quick turnaround on news stories, they are often the first contact that students and the general public have with new information. If students are not given the tools to critically evaluate the news they receive, they are at greater risk of basing decisions and beliefs on inaccurate information and of falling prey to the continued influence effect. While most educators seem to acknowledge the importance of media literacy, it is unclear the extent to which it is being addressed in any systematic way within higher education curricula. By ignoring or superficially covering news media in library instruction sessions and in the larger curriculum, we are failing to acknowledge the prevalence and influence of these outlets, and we are doing our students a disservice. Rather, we should find ways to incorporate news media as part of a larger framework

of information literacy. As information specialists, librarians may be in a unique role to promote the integration of media literacy on their campuses by emphasizing the critical role it plays not only in students' educational success but to their personal and professional success beyond their education.

Appendix 19A: Sample of Codebook for *Esquire* Magazine Covers

Image Number		Image 1	Image 2
Gender	Male		
	Female	X	X
Clothing	Sports attire		
	Swimwear	X	
	Suit/Business Attire		
	Underwear		X
	Naked/Covered by towel/sheet/etc		
Facial Expression	Smiling	X	X
	Lips parted		
	Licking lips		
	Laughing		
	Eating/licking food		

Appendix 19B: Sample Media Literacy Activities

If instructors have more time, they might consider building sessions or assignments around the following ideas:

- Have students review a single news story from multiple outlets, including some considered liberal and conservative as well as outlets from different geographic regions inside and outside the US. In addition to analyzing the internal content of an individual story, students can look for patterns and differences across the sources and determine whether the portrayal of the story is consistent, and if not, whether they can determine what factors might be influencing the portrayal. For instance, students could review different coverage of the Trayvon Martin story, specifically of George Zimmerman's trial and acquittal. Are there differences in the way "liberal" and "conservative" outlets such as MSNBC and Fox News cover the story? In what ways is the coverage consistent, and in what ways is it different? Are there differences in how various geographic regions cover the story? In particular, are there differences in states that are pro-gun or have "stand your ground" laws compared to those that do not? Have students look for patterns in how the Zimmerman and Martin are portrayed and what words are used to describe or refer to them. How does the mainstream media coverage compare to social media reports? Are certain outlets leaving out or glossing over some points? How does that affect the story? Is that evidence of bias?

- Have students trace the evolution of a story over time. For instance, have them follow the story of the Boston Marathon bombing. What is the first or earliest mention of the bombing? What "facts" are being reported in the early stories? How does later coverage compare to early coverage in terms of tone as well as specific details and facts? Does the amount or tone of coverage vary by geographic region? Have them compare the early news stories and details about the suspect to the later cover story in *Rolling Stone* magazine.[31] Does the lapse of time seem to affect the story? How does time and distance affect the tone of a story, if at all? (*Rolling Stone* was accused of being sensationalist and insensitive in running that cover story.) Have students weigh in on those accusations based on their content analysis

and comparison to other coverage. How does the depth and breadth of the *Rolling Stone* article vary from the earlier news coverage? Explain how the type of journalism and story plays into these differences. Many of the stories offer "facts" about the events, the victims, and/or the suspects. Where did the reporters get their information? Does it seem reliable? Why or why not?

- Marshall McLuhan famously said, "The medium is the message."[32] Ask students to explain what that means in their own words and give examples from mass media that illustrate their point. Next, have students look at the coverage of the same story in several different formats, including audio, video, photographs, and text. For instance, have them examine Miley Cyrus' 2013 Video Music Awards performance and reaction to it in various formats. How do their reactions to and understanding of the story change with the different formats, if at all? Is the message affected by the format? How so? Does one format seem more effective? Why? Have them analyze several sources that offer negative and positive reviews of the performance. Are there any patterns as to who is critical and who is supportive? Why might that be? Is that evidence of bias?

- Have students trace the evolution of a story that has been shown to be distorted or false such as the toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in Firdos Square (where original pictures were angled to make the crowd look larger and more engaged than it actually was), the story linking the MMR vaccine to autism, or reports of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Begin by having students look at the contemporary pictures or reports as primary documents. What are they saying? What was the reaction? Next have them trace the changes in the story and look at the contrasting developments. What has changed with regard to the original story? Why did the original story change—was it bias, misinformation, falsifying information, poor research, etc.? Has the opinion or reaction changed along with the story? Is there evidence of the continued influence effect?

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