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The future of media is here

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A movement's moment?

Common Core opens the door for news literacy to expand in the classroom

By Ben Adler

The news-literacy movement was born in the middle of the last decade, in response to the challenges news consumers face in the digital age. In fairly short order, the longstanding brands that had delivered the news in established formats had become part of a cacaphonous and uneven information ecosystem in which partisans, charlatans, experts, and amateurs of all stripes and competencies deliver a daily torrent of "news" and commentary, via myriad channels. Much of this information has never been vetted, or even sourced.

How is a reader or viewer—especially one not weaned on the old-media standards—to know what information, or outlet, is trustworthy? That was the fundamental question that animated the news-literacy pioneers.

The larger context for the creation of news literacy was rising concern over American ignorance—of not only the wider world but also the basics of life in the republic. Surveys regularly showed that most young adults could not find the latest country we were bombing on a map. News illiteracy threatened to worsen the situation.

Howard Schneider, a former editor at Newsday, took the first step in 2005, creating a news-literacy class for undergraduates at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. After launching the university's journalism school, Schneider realized that too many of the students knew too little about how journalism worked to go straight into training as reporters. The news-literacy curriculum he developed teaches students how to separate ads from editorial content and opinion from straight reporting, and how to determine the accuracy of sourcing. And, perhaps most important, why all that matters. Today, not just the journalism students, but roughly one-third of every freshman class take the news-literacy course.

Three years after Schneider built the Stony Brook program, Alan Miller left his job as an investigative reporter at the Los Angeles Times and founded The News Literacy Project (NLP), which brings professional journalists into classrooms, physically and digitally, to teach students how to separate the informational wheat from the chaff. NLP has since formed partnerships with the Chicago public school system, schools in New York City, and the suburbs of Washington, DC.

One of the challenges for these programs has always been a limited reach. NLP to date has reached more than 10,000 students, which is still just a tiny fraction of the American student body. Digital technology may allow them to find a much larger audience: NLP hopes to expand dramatically online, and teachers are beginning to incorporate news-literacy strategies and projects into general-education classes. Every summer, Stony Brook's Center for News Literacy trains roughly 20 K-12 teachers how to incorporate news literacy into English, history, and other classes. And Newsela, a startup founded last year, offers digital news-literacy curricula and lesson plans.

But news literacy remains marginalized in the sprawling and emotional debate about how to fix what ails America's system of education.

That may be about to change. The Common Core standards, released in 2010, are a state-led effort to create ambitious national benchmarks for English language arts and math. They have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia. For most states, 2014-2015 will be the first year that they take effect. The English standards broaden expectations in nonfiction reading and critical-thinking skills. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Bush administration's signature education reform initiative, was widely criticized for its narrow focus on math and reading comprehension. English exams focused on the technical components of language and the basic meaning of a passage. The Common Core standards, by contrast, would have students engage with the quality of an author's argument or analyze how the narrator's point of view affects his or her perception. They do not require news literacy per se, but many proponents and educators believe news literacy programs—which are fundamentally about critical thinking—will grow in popularity as a way of teaching the skills that Common Core demands.

"There is an increased, broader interest in media literacy," says Joe Kahne, director of the Civic Engagement Research Group at Mills College, referring to news literacy's more established academic ancestor. "And a significant portion of that is increased interest in news

literacy. Common Core is one of the drivers of that interest because it emphasizes the ability to make sense of information."

NLP's Alan Miller puts it more succinctly: "We're really swimming with the educational current now."

Bonnie Mary Warne, who teaches at South Fremont High School in St. Anthony, ID, attended the Stony Brook summer program and now deploys news literacy in her 10th-grade language-arts classes. "Right now, I'm teaching students that they need to have evidence to back up their claims," she says. For example, Warne will give her students an article that prompts a public-policy question and ask them to assess whether the story's sources have legitimate expertise to answer it. "The Common Core standard requires students to write counterarguments, so in their counterargument they can express their opinion of why the other side is inaccurate or too biased to be a reliable source."

Unfortunately, there has not been a national survey tracking news-literacy programs over time, because they are so new. And the Common Core is even newer, so it is simply too soon to measure whether the Common Core is leading to more news-literacy lessons in the classroom.

The interest in news literacy is certainly there among teachers. The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University recently conducted a national survey of high school civics and American government teachers, and found the overwhelming majority devote at least one class to "critical analysis of news coverage" and nearly 23 percent of those surveyed said it is "a major emphasis of the whole course."

Other experts are more skeptical. The Common Core-aligned standardized tests being developed by Pearson will be released in the spring and implemented in the fall. There is a limit to how much the Common Core will provide incentives for news-literacy education if it isn't in the tests. "The Common Core could have a positive effect on news literacy, but I'm not sure it will," says Diane Hess, senior vice president at the Spencer Foundation, which supports educational research. "We don't know if [the tests] will have anything in them that is aligned with the goals of news literacy."

Jay McTighe, an educational author and consultant and a former schoolteacher and state education administrator in Maryland, stresses that just because there is an opportunity for news literacy to expand doesn't mean schools will get on board. "Schools are often slow to change," he says. "There may be an increase of critical reading that relies not on news media but on traditional textbooks," for instance.

Whether or not schools pursue news literacy also depends on which critical-thinking skills are emphasized and how they are applied. "The Common Core is very promising for civics but not really sufficient by itself because it tends to put almost all emphasis on understanding texts as writing or communication and not on understanding things like institutional context," says Peter Levine, director of CIRCLE. In other words, the Common Core curriculum increases the likelihood that high school students would watch the president's State of the Union address and read coverage of it in news outlets. But the skill set being emphasized by their teachers might be focused on rhetoric: How did the president try to communicate different concepts and how effective were his different approaches? So a commentator saying she is impressed, or not, by the president's speech might be used to understand political communication, rather than the news media's coverage of the speech.

It is also worth remembering that information technology is changing so quickly that no one can project what digital news media will look like in five years, never mind how news-literacy education will have to evolve to keep pace. In the last decade, when the rise of partisan news bubbles and untrained bloggers had journalistic graybeards wringing their hands, one would have taught students to not automatically believe everything they read on the Drudge Report or some random blog. Now, students must be taught not to believe everything being shared on social-media networks. Think of the Twitter hoaxes during Hurricane Sandy, or the missing Brown University student, later found dead, who was incorrectly identified as a Boston Marathon bomber by Reddit users. These are examples the News Literacy Project brings to classrooms, but they must inevitably play catchup. As this issue was going to press, for instance, a reality television producer tweeted a false story of an altercation he claimed to have been involved in on an airplane. It went viral on Twitter, and news outlets repeated the story, including a BuzzFeed item that got 1.4 million readers, before it was revealed to be a hoax.

Technological change is just one of the cultural shifts that bedevil anyone trying to teach news literacy. Teaching students to assess a source's credibility presumes they will recognize the legitimacy of traditional credentials. In this ideologically polarized era, will students from some conservative families dismiss a source's doctorate as evidence of liberal academic indoctrination rather than objective expertise? So far, news-literacy educators say they haven't encountered that situation, but they acknowledge that such challenges may arise as the programs reach a broader audience. Still, they are confident that they will soon be lucky enough to have such a problem.

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