

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

The future of media is here

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Leap of Faith

Inside the movement to build an audience of citizens

By Megan Garber

What inspired you to become a journalist?

I always liked writing, and I was also into photography. And I knew that the way I grew up was different from the way I was told I grew up—I wanted to figure out what the difference was. Also, I couldn't imagine working behind a desk from nine to five each day, wearing a tie.

What if a source lies to you?

Sometimes you'll hear a great story, right, and you'll really want to believe it. But you have to check things out—the line in journalism is, 'If your mother says she loves you, check it out.'

What happens if you make a mistake in a story?

One of the hallmarks of a good newspaper is that when they make a mistake, they admit it. A good paper will try to explain not just that they made a mistake, but how they made it. It's part of our contract with our readers.

David Gonzalez, a metro reporter and columnist for *The New York Times*, stands in front of a history class at the Williamsburg Collegiate Charter School in Brooklyn. More precisely, he is pacing, energetically, as he responds to questions fired at him, with equal energy, by a roomful of eighth-graders.

Do you ever use anonymous sources?

Where are corrections printed?

How do you find your stories?

Smiling—beaming—in the back of the classroom during the press-conference-in-reverse is Alan Miller, a former *Los Angeles Times* reporter—he won a 2003 Pulitzer for his series on the defective Marine Corps' Harrier attack jet—who is also responsible for today's class. In early 2008, Miller founded the News Literacy Project, a program that mobilizes journalists both practicing and retired to share their profession with young people—to get them excited about journalism, and to help them navigate through the sea of news and sort the good from the bad. "I spoke about journalism to my daughter's sixth-grade class," Miller explains, "and was really surprised by what they didn't know about the basics of journalism." Positive student feedback from that talk convinced Miller of the need to teach students what standard history and civics classes generally don't: how to be savvy consumers of news.

Having just completed its pilot phase, the project has brought journalists from *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *USA Today*, NPR, *60 Minutes*, and other outlets to schools in New York City and Bethesda, Maryland. Miller hopes to expand to classrooms nationwide—he is exploring the prospect of launching a pilot in Chicago this fall, and in Los Angeles in 2010.

One of the members of the project's board is Howard Schneider, the former editor of *Newsday* and the founding dean of the School of Journalism at Stony Brook University. Schneider, too, saw the need for news-literacy education, as he explained in the Fall 2007 issue of *Nieman Reports*. "The ultimate check against an inaccurate or irresponsible press," he realized,

never would be just better-trained journalists, or more press critics and ethical codes. It would be a generation of news consumers who would learn how to distinguish for themselves between news and propaganda, verification and mere assertion,

evidence and inference, bias and fairness, and between media bias and audience bias—consumers, who could differentiate between raw, unmediated information coursing through the Internet and independent, verified journalism.

Most journalists, Schneider noted, largely ignore the issue of educating consumers, focusing instead on the supply side of the journalism equation. To combat that, Schneider and his Stony Brook colleagues created a fourteen-week news-literacy course at the university, which addresses such topics as objectivity, fairness, sourcing, and navigating the Web. To date, more than three thousand undergraduates have taken the class—and not just journalism students.

Both the Stony Brook course and the News Literacy Project are getting high marks from students. “Now I get the gossip, and everything else that everyone’s saying about the world,” says Daysha Williams, an eighth-grader at Williamsburg Collegiate who took the NLP pilot course this winter. “It’s like, okay, cool, but do you really know about it, or did you just get that from someone else?” Her teacher, Ryan Miller, sees the change, as well. “Three weeks ago, a lot of my students didn’t know what to look for in a newspaper article, or what Google actually did. Now they do, and I can build on that in class.”

That building-up is crucial. According to David T. Z. Mindich, a journalism professor and the author of *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don’t Follow the News*, “It appears that if you don’t get into the news habit by your early twenties, you’ve missed the boat.”

‘Reach Them Where They Are’

The crisis facing journalism, though we often affix the word “financial” to it, is best understood in the context of an even more expansive problem: the broad decline of civic engagement. *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam’s 2000 study of the dissolution of civic life in America, owes much of its instant-icon status to the fact that the data it aggregated proved what many Americans already sensed: that we’re increasingly isolated from one another, and increasingly disillusioned about politics and other features of civic life. The downward trends are so familiar, at this point, they hardly need detailing: declining participation in civic events, declining newspaper readership, declining knowledge about American democracy and the current events that inform it. And those declines are particularly precipitous among young people. The average newspaper reader is fifty-five years old; less than a fifth of Americans between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four claim to read—or even look at—a daily paper. As Evan Cornog put it in a 2005 essay in *CJR*, “When only 41 percent of teenagers polled can name the three branches of government while 59 percent can name the Three Stooges, something is seriously amiss.”

Yet there’s reason for optimism amid all the statistical gloom. Some brighter stats, courtesy of a December 2008 Pew study: during the 2008 presidential campaign, 33 percent of Millennials (the generation born between 1977 and 1996) interacted with a 2008 presidential campaign—by visiting a candidate’s Web site, trying to convince family or friends to vote for a candidate, or visiting a candidate’s page on a social-networking site—while only 29 percent of Baby Boomers, and 26 percent of Gen Xers, did so. CNN’s viewership among the eighteen-to-thirty-four demographic shot up from 60,000 a night in February 2007 to 218,000 a night in February 2008—a jump likely fueled by the historic nature of the presidential campaign.

And it’s not merely the excitement of politics that engages young people: volunteerism, a classic measure of civic sensibility, is also on the rise. “New evidence from multiple sources confirms that those Americans who were caught by the flash of September 11 in their impressionable adolescent years are now significantly more involved in public affairs and community life than their older brothers and sisters,” Robert Putnam and Thomas Sandler wrote in a 2005 *Washington Post* op-ed. Young people also consume news in a more broadly “civic” setting than their parents and grandparents did. Millennials are more likely to get their news indirectly, via e-mail forwards, Twitter links, and the like, than they are from news outlets themselves. Ubiquity, though, has a way of compromising responsibility. Thus, the resonance of the quote, from a college student participating in a 2008 focus group: “If the news is that important, it will find me.”

We have, then, something of a paradox when it comes to young people’s civic engagement: they are reasonably engaged socially and politically, yet they too often lack the information necessary to translate their interest into a deeper, more substantive form of civic engagement. Young people are more socially connected, and have at their disposal more news and information than their parents could have imagined during their own youth. Lacking, however, is their knowledge of—and appreciation for—the kind of civic-minded news and information that a democracy requires, and that journalists produce. “Two out of ten times, I’m blown away by how well the kids articulate something they know,” says Audrey Harris, a social studies teacher at Williamsburg Collegiate who has been using Alan Miller’s curriculum with her seventh-graders. “And eight out of ten times, I’m horrified at what they *don’t* know.”

What’s to be done? The news-literacy programs that are currently in their gestational phases are certainly a start. But such projects are limited in their reach. The numbers in question—the approximately 650 students reached by Alan Miller’s four-month pilot program,

Howard Schneider's three thousand students—are admirable; set against the vast backdrop of young Americans, though, their impact is negligible. To call the programs' effect on young people's civic sensibilities a drop in the bucket would be to overstate the matter.

The good news is that news literacy has the potential to transform itself from the cause of a committed few into a powerful national movement. But such a transformation will require its own brand of civic engagement: news outlets themselves will need to join the effort. "News organizations have a vital role to play in terms of educating kids," says Vivian Schiller, CEO of National Public Radio and the chair of the News Literacy Project board. "The trick is how you do it. Because you can't just beat them over the head and say, 'Oh, you must read this newspaper, or you must listen to NPR.' We need to reach them where they are." And *where they are* is in the schools. And on the Web. "Young people don't see digital news as a reformation or revolution," notes Caesar Andrews, who until recently was the American Society of News Editors' chair of audience development. "For them, it just is."

The bottom line: news organizations need to make a point of seeking out young people—and of explaining to them what they do and, perhaps even more importantly, why they do it. News literacy offers news organizations the opportunity to essentially re-brand themselves. Rather than contort their content to a focus-grouped perception of audience desires, they can begin to help educate those audiences about the value of public-service journalism. Advocacy has its limits as far as journalism is concerned. But news literacy is a different kind of advocacy, and we need, as David Mindich says, "to allow journalists to be advocates for democracy."

News Literacy v. Media Literacy

The news-literacy movement is in many ways an offshoot of the larger media-literacy movement, which focuses on the critical analysis of media messages to detect propaganda, censorship, and bias in those messages. Media literacy also focuses—and this is a big distinction between it and news literacy—on an appreciation of how the media's structural features (funding models, consolidation, commercial concerns) affect the information ultimately presented to the public. "You can't separate news literacy from advertising," says Renee Hobbs, a professor at the School of Communications and Theater at Temple University in Philadelphia and a leading proponent of media literacy education. "It's irresponsible to focus on the relations between reporters and sources and news value without positioning all of that in a larger context that has to do with increasing competition, the question of revenue streams, and the like."

Yet such a commercial focus can tend to emphasize rhetorical caricatures—liberal/conservative bias, corporate stoogery, etc.—over close reading of news items themselves. The best journalism has always been a deeply flawed effort to piece together a thorough understanding of the world. The goal of a good journalist—even one who works for a large corporation—unlike that of a good advertising executive, is to get at the most complete truth of a matter as is humanly possible. And taken too far, a focus on the commercial elements of the media can encourage cynicism rather than skepticism; it can breed a blanket distrust of journalism, rather than a healthy suspicion of its extremes.

News literacy, instead, is fundamentally about distinguishing—and appreciating—excellence. It's about telling students, says Alan Miller, "Here are the standards. Here's the ideal. This is what sets quality journalism apart." Teaching kids what makes good journalism and why good journalism matters, the thinking goes, will make them want to consume that journalism. "There needs to be an audience that recognizes good journalism," says Rex Smith, editor of the *Albany Times-Union* and education chair of the ASNE, "even when there's no longer a reflexive trust in the vendors of journalism." Underscoring that approach is the belief that excellence is self-reinforcing: quality will foster a large news audience—which, in turn, will foster more quality. "I used to read the *Daily News* or the *Post*," says Raquel Monje, a high school senior who studied the NLP curriculum at Manhattan's Facing History School this spring, referring to the city's sometimes sensational tabloids. "Now I read *The New York Times*."

The common ground uniting news literacy and its umbrella movement is their emphasis on the cultivation of savvy information consumers—and that shared mission is more urgent than ever. According to a recent study, fewer than a fifth of Americans say they can believe "all or most" media reporting—down from the already alarmingly low 27 percent that said the same five years ago. A large part of journalism's crisis in credibility—which is of a piece with its crisis in authority—comes from the poor job journalism has done to distinguish itself from "the media" more broadly. "The problem is that you see journalism disappearing inside the larger world of communications," the journalism scholar James Carey told Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach in *The Elements of Journalism*. "What you yearn to do is recover journalism from that larger world."

Reclaiming the Narrative

Journalism and those who practice it are—let's just say it—unpopular. Study after study confirms it. The extent to which journalists themselves are the victims or the cause is an open question, but the fact remains that our good name has been sullied since those halcyon post-Watergate years.

The news-literacy movement has the potential to begin to rewrite the unflattering narratives about the press that have become so

pervasive that we've nearly stopped questioning them—to remove the derogatory undertone from the phrase “mainstream media.” It has the potential to push back against the hijacking of the journalistic reputation—not only by a sustained and strategic smear campaign on the part of the political right (“the liberal media”), but also on the part of the political left (“the corporate media”).

Such rehabilitation is necessary, in part, because the journalistic establishment as a whole, whether out of naïveté or complacency or both, has largely failed to defend itself. “While all those voices shouting from the left and right kept complaining about professional journalism,” says Ellen Hume, research director of mit’s Center for Future Civic Media, “nobody *within* journalism has been shouting back. I hear journalists talking to each other, wringing their hands, feeling unloved—but saying, ‘We’re not the story.’”

Part of the problem, as Hume suggests, is journalism’s longstanding reluctance against advocacy. But part of it, too, is journalists’ assumption of the self-evidence of their own civic significance: *that the people shall know*, and all that. Newspeople often forget how little the public appreciates, in every sense of the word, the press’s role in democracy. A 2005 Knight Foundation report, which surveyed 112,000 students at public and private high schools nationwide, found a marked ignorance of—and, worse, apathy toward—the rights afforded by the First Amendment. Three-quarters of those surveyed thought flag-burning was illegal; half believed the government has the power to censor the Internet; and more than a third thought the First Amendment takes too many liberties, as it were, in its provisions of free expression. To teach news literacy is at once to highlight and fill a void in the journalistic reputation. As Nick Lemann, the dean of Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism, put it in a recent commencement address, “I spend a lot of my time these days talking to nonjournalists about journalism, and I can tell you that we all have to learn to make a more sophisticated argument for ourselves.”

If we can do that successfully, we might just foster the flip side of our audience’s respect: a respect *for* our audience. What if what audiences need is also what they *want*? The notion is not without precedent. A 2000 study of viewer trends in local TV news, conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, concluded exactly that: that excellence, on top of everything else, makes good business sense. “Quality is the best way to retain or increase lead-in audience,” the study asserted. And for that matter, “the surest way to lose lead-in audience is to trick up newscasts with easy gimmicks—eye candy, ratings stunts, and hype.”

And that’s not true merely of TV news. “Over the long term, the history of news economics favors quality,” Tom Rosenstiel, PEJ’s director, points out. In the 1950s, he says, “People didn’t know that it was going to be *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that were going to survive over the next fifty years.” Rather, many expected that it would be the tabloids—the papers with lower quality but larger readerships—that would be the future of news.

At a recent screening of the news documentary *East Harlem IS*—produced by students at the Citizen Schools after-school program in New York City, in partnership with the News Literacy Project and produced under the direction of The New York Times’s Jane Bornemeier—Amy Perrette, a Citizen Schools board member, noted, “It’s amazing what students can achieve when they’re held to high expectations.” And that goes for journalism’s audience, as well. As David Mindich puts it, “There’s a part of everybody that wants to be elevated, that wants to be challenged.” Excellent journalism, he notes, appeals “to the better angels of our being.” And it makes us want more of it.

(Re)building the Audience

In spring 2005, the Carnegie Corporation commissioned a report, “Abandoning the News,” which examined the impact of declining resources in American newsrooms. The problem wasn’t just one of resources—the supply side of news—the report’s author, Merrill Brown, concluded. It was also one of demand. “The future of the U.S. news industry is seriously threatened by the seemingly irrevocable move by young people away from traditional sources of news.” The media critic Dan Kennedy put it a bit more bluntly in a recent *Guardian* column: “If journalists don’t succeed at expanding the community of people who are interested and take part in civic life, then they are facing what will prove to be a hopeless battle.”

News organizations must start treating audience cultivation with a sense of urgency. Not merely as a matter of business—though that’s certainly part of the equation—but also as a matter of democratic duty. “My thinking on this has really evolved from being, ‘Hey, wow, this is really a great thing for building audience for the *Times-Union*,’” says Rex Smith, “to thinking that this is a way to sustain journalism for our democracy.” While tough times tend to breed short-term solutions, the survival of news organizations depends on the size of their audience nest egg. “That long-term planning—that long-term *planting*—is something that’s been lacking,” Mindich says. But “we *have* to see ourselves as part of the democratic process.”

The problem isn’t merely one of “citizenship,” that vague yet powerful concept. The problem is also one of our relationship to truth itself. Call it the *True Enough* syndrome: as Farhad Manjoo put it in his 2008 book, “The limitless choice we now enjoy over the information we get about our world has loosened our grip on what is—and isn’t—true.” The threat that slack suggests is no less urgent for its

Orwellian undertones: the fomentation, in Manjoo's phrase, of "a post-fact society." And of a media environment in which facts are increasingly assumed to be customizable—even optional. Think of cable punditry, where facts are so often fungible. Or that, according to a 2006 *National Geographic* poll, only 14 percent of Americans believe in evolution. Or that "swift boat" is now a verb. All that notwithstanding, truth isn't an opt-in/opt-out notion.

Which is much more than post-postmodernist balderdash. Citizenship relies on communally accepted modes of taking in and talking about the world—on a shared vernacular that is premised on a shared reality. ("There is a necessary connection between public associations and newspapers," de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*; "newspapers make associations and associations make newspapers.") Indeed, "shared" is a key aspect of news; vital to the oft-discussed relationship between information and democracy is information's communality—which is to say, its authority. When we can't agree on what the facts mean, what we have is vibrant debate; when we can't agree on what the facts *are*, what we have is cognitive anarchy. When James Madison declared that "a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives," we can safely assume that "knowledge," to him, was an empirical entity, not a cherry-picked cocktail of subjective "truths."

And yet. We are nearing a point—if, indeed, we're not already there—in which knowledge itself is becoming appropriated by the glibness of subjectivity. The Web's erosion of the storied "gatekeeper" function of the press, while it deserves celebration in so many senses, also creates a real danger for our democracy: through it, we now have nearly as many versions of truth—textual, historical truth—as we have news stories. Without a shared frame of reference—without the communal authority on which the power of the press has been predicated—we lose our bearings, stuck in the webs of our own comfort zones. While news will, of course, always have a subjective element to it—the very question of "What is news?," the sociologist Herbert Gans points out, is not merely definitional, but moral and political—we cannot allow news's humanity to overshadow its authenticity. News is neither sacred nor infallible; that doesn't mean it's not true.

It is only mildly melodramatic, then, to suggest that news literacy is an attempt to reclaim reality itself. Programs like the Stony Brook course and the News Literacy Project, paradoxically, validate the news precisely through the skepticism of it they aim to foster. Though their curricula examine varied platforms for information—newspapers, TV, radio, blogs, Wikipedia, YouTube, and the like—they still subscribe to "the news" as a singular cultural agent, definable and therefore manageable. They serve as a sieve of sensibility that can help us filter through the split-second news cycle and the journalism it produces—"churnalism," the British journalist Nick Davies calls it—and counteract the vagaries of information overload. The news-literacy approach, in its simple but rather profound focus on "knowing what to believe," fights against the choose-your-own-adventure approach to reality: it attempts to make quality journalism a normalizing—which is to say, connective—force in a world that is increasingly fast, furious, and fragmented. The varying news literacy programs and projects out there are contemporary responses to the declaration made by Walter Lippmann in 1920: for communities that lack the information to distinguish between fact and fiction, "there can be no liberty."

The Sitting Duck and the Missionary

The question that hangs over the various news-literacy programs is the same question that always hangs over such ventures: Can the results match the rhetoric? Similar efforts have, after all, failed to inspire a new wave of savvy newspaper readers. In the eighties, newspaper-in-the-classroom programs were widespread. High schools regularly offered journalism classes that taught, essentially, news literacy as they taught other journalistic skills.

But one benefit of crisis is its corollary of creativity: now more than ever, journalism has a marked opportunity to reinvent itself and its role in the community. "Tear up the current models that perceive journalism as a craft," declares Nieman Foundation curator Bob Giles. "Rethink the field as one of rigorous scholarship and practice. And build anew around one truth: journalism matters. Give students that, and they will find their way."

And—who knows?—they might just find their way to journalism. In his autobiography, *A Reporter's Life*, Walter Cronkite observes that "life and the course we take through it are affected by many circumstances." He is "inclined to think in those lofty terms," the newsman notes,

when I think of those events that followed upon meeting Fred Birney, a rather slight man of unprepossessing mien who, despite his glasses, always wore a frown, as if he were looking for something beyond his range of sight. He was an inspired teacher who directed the course of my life. He wasn't even a professional teacher, but he had the gift.

Fred Birney was a newspaperman who thought that high schools ought to have courses in journalism. That was a highly innovative idea at the time, but by presenting himself as an unpaid volunteer and the program as a virtual no-cost item, he

convinced the Houston school board. He spent a couple days each week circulating among Houston's five high schools preaching the fundamentals of a craft he loved.... I was a sitting duck for Fred Birney, missionary from the Fourth Estate.

more snaring

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