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## Tom Eblen: News Literacy Project helps students sort media fact from fiction

By Tom Eblen

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Tom Eblen

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Before he retired and moved back to Lexington, John Carroll spent five years as the top editor of the Los Angeles Times, leading a newsroom staff that won 13 Pulitzer prizes.

Websites, blogs, niche cable TV networks and talk radio shows were beginning to become significant players on the media landscape then, and Carroll noticed a phenomenon he hadn't seen before in his long journalism career.

"We would get 1,000 emails, 'Why didn't you cover this? You're covering up!'" he said. "I was just shocked at the misinformation that people were calling us with and emailing us with, and it was obviously coming out in mass form, because you would get 20 or 50 or 10,000 queries about certain things that were not true."

The proliferation of new digital media and the changing nature of traditional media have resulted in many more sources for news, information and commentary. But some of what is masquerading as journalism is really propaganda, marketing, entertainment or simply nonsense.

How do you know what to trust? It is hard enough for adults; what about kids? One of Carroll's Pulitzer-winning reporters decided to take on that issue.

Alan Miller, who had been an investigative reporter in the Times' Washington bureau, left the newspaper in 2008 and started the News Literacy Project, a nonprofit educational organization. Carroll now serves as chairman of the organization's board of directors.

The project developed a media literacy curriculum now used by teachers in middle and high schools in the New York, Washington and Chicago areas.

"We're teaching critical thinking skills, so if you find out something online ... it gives you critical tools for deciding whether this is a good source of information and whether something is true or not true," Carroll said. "The way we teach it is fun. It has a lot of practical exercises."

The News Literacy Project also has enlisted dozens of journalist volunteers — including big names such as Gwen Ifill of PBS, James Grimaldi of the Wall Street Journal and Eric Schmitt of the New York Times — to speak in schools.

The curriculum was designed with help from trained educators to be compatible with the new Common Core standards, said Miller, the project's president and CEO. Independent assessments have measured student learning and helped refine the program's effectiveness.

So far, nearly 10,000 students have taken the courses in those three metropolitan areas. The long-term goal is to reach every student in every American school, and a digital version of the curriculum is being developed and tested.

Miller said some videos and other resources, such as a "teachable moments" blog reacting to current events, will be made available free to schools everywhere in October on a redesigned version of the project's website, [thenewsliteracyproject.org](http://thenewsliteracyproject.org).

Plans call for a full, free digital curriculum to be offered online beginning in the fall of 2014. Teachers can use the lessons as a separate social studies unit, or integrate them into their other curricula.

So far, the project has been funded mostly with grants from media companies and major foundations. Plans call for additional revenue to come from supplementary services to schools in major metropolitan markets, Miller said.

The curriculum teaches students to think critically and question the sources, accuracy, fairness and truthfulness of information they encounter in all forms of media. They also are encouraged to get their news from a variety of sources.

Miller and Carroll said the courses have been popular with both teachers and students, and assessments show they have increased students' interests in news and public affairs. The project has received little criticism from partisan or ideological groups, which frequently claim media bias left and right.

"We are rigorously nonpartisan," Miller said.

Even more than that, Carroll said, "We encourage (students) to pay attention to media they disagree with, because another characteristic of the modern era of media is that people have created gated communities for themselves; they listen to only the things they want to hear. Sometimes the people they don't want to hear have something significant to say."

The project's goal is to create not just more savvy media consumers, but more well-informed and engaged Americans.

"It's important for this next generation to know how to make good use of the media and not to be used by the media," Carroll said. "Our fondest hope is to reach every young person in America, and that as a result of that they will become more sophisticated citizens and voters and discourse about public issues will be improved."

Tom Eblen: (859) 231-1415. Email: [teblen@herald-leader.com](mailto:teblen@herald-leader.com). Twitter: @tomeblen. Blog: [tomeblen.bloginky.com](http://tomeblen.bloginky.com)

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