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How to get smart: News literacy programs train readers to look beyond infotainment

By [Kathleen Parker](#), Published: July 17, 2012

Few instances are more refreshing than the sound of a politician leaving office.

This isn't because we want to see them go, necessarily (though this, too, can be delicious), but because they tend to speak truthfully upon their departure.

One such delectable nugget tumbled recently from the lips of retiring Democratic Rep. Gary L. Ackerman of New York. Reflecting on his 30 years in Washington, Ackerman was asked to comment on the relative lack of comity on Capitol Hill. Did it ever exist?

Not really, he said, but at least Democrats and Republicans used to be friends. Today, crossing the aisle is tantamount to treason. The problem isn't only Washington but society as a whole.

"I think the people have gotten dumber."

Let's pause for a moment to savor that rare morsel. Even Ackerman acknowledged that "I don't know that I would've said that out loud pre-my announcement that I was going to be leaving."

Extrapolating, might we conclude that extreme partisanship is a function of . . . dumbness? If so, then whose fault is that? Education's? Surely, at least in part. But the problem is broader than a single institution. Dumbness permeates every aspect of our lives, including, dangerously, our media.

Ackerman put it well: "We now give broadcast licenses to philosophies instead of people. People get confused and think there is no difference between news and entertainment. People who project themselves as journalists on television don't know the first thing about journalism. They are just there stirring up a hockey game."

I may have to lie down for a few minutes to regain my composure. Oh, if only more Congress folk would retire so that we might wallow in such forthrightness.

Ackerman is, of course, correct. Most political talk shows have little to do with journalism — getting at objective truth — and everything to do with advancing an agenda. Many, if not most, talking heads come not from the reportorial trenches but from politics, think tanks or, increasingly, a prosecutor's office somewhere. (Does anyone actually practice law anymore, or are law degrees merely licenses for "experts"?)

This isn't to say that such people shouldn't have a voice or a forum. Many make valuable contributions to our understanding. But the distinctions should be made clear, and viewers (and readers) need to be better informed about sources and the integrity of their contributions.

Not so easily done. People of a certain age, who may also have read a book or two, are more likely to recognize the difference. But what about rising generations who have spent a frightening percentage of their lives consuming data in a random world of tweets, blogs and food-fight commentators, for whom fame is a goal and reality a show? Once accustomed to such high-velocity infotainment, how does one develop tolerance for the harder reads and the deeper conversations?

These questions are at the forefront of a growing news literacy movement aimed at teaching young people how to think critically and judge the quality of information. Two leaders in the movement are the [News Literacy Project](#) (NLP), led by Alan Miller, a Pulitzer Prize-winning former Los Angeles Times investigative journalist, and the [Center for News Literacy](#) (CNL) at Stony Brook University.

The NLP (whose board I recently joined) focuses on school programs for middle and high school students. The group's staff includes 22 news organizations and 200 journalists who donate their time and talents to work with students. Both groups try to answer the question: How do you find the truth?, and the CNL identifies news as "the oxygen of democracy." Indeed, without a well-informed public, you get . . . what we have: a culture that rewards ignorance and treats discourse as a blood sport.

All freedoms depend first on freedom of speech, but not all speech is equivalent, no matter how many hits a Web site boasts or how many viewers ages 25-54 tune in to a given TV show. By such measures, the sensational will always trump substance. Unfortunately, the so-called "mainstream media" — that is, old media — have suffered a crisis of confidence, deservedly in some cases. But in most real journalism institutions resides a dedication to providing reliable information according to universally accepted standards and practices. Without them, our news would be limited to stories about sex, lies and the madam next door.

News literacy programs provide some hope at least for a more sophisticated consumer. It's a modest start, but learning to read critically is no less important than reading itself — a simple truth with which even incumbent politicians could agree.

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