News Literacy and a Civics Model for Journalism Education

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In the shadows of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, there has been much discussion in the popular press and academic circles concerning what to do about "fake news." For many, fake news campaigns spearheaded by Russia and click bait entrepreneurs tainted the election and arguably tipped it in favor of Donald Trump by spreading disinformation across social media news feeds and into popular culture (2017; Lazer et al., 2017; McCoy, 2016). Yet to President Trump and many of his supporters, CNN and other established news organizations are examples of fake news (Bauder, 2017; Nazaryan, 2017). While there is no widely agreed upon definition of fake news, there appears to be consensus that fake news means false information or outright hoaxes that masquerade as "real news" in form and structure. Even though Facebook and Google have taken steps to combat fake news (Bell, 2016; Doctor, 2016), the responsibility of determining what is fake and what is real news rests primarily on citizens in the social- and mobile media-driven digital age. Therefore, one possible solution to the fake news problem is to educate news audiences about the principles and practices of the press through news literacy instruction.

Loosely defined, news literacy is an ability to assess the veracity of information and the quality of news stories (Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2013; Fleming, 2015). News literacy instruction represents the convergence of multiple disciplines, media literacy and journalism education most prominently (Mihailidis, 2012). Media literacy is a catchall term that describes an ability to identify, evaluate, analyze and create media messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993). Analysis of news messages has long been part of media literacy instruction, but news literacy education began to become a distinct field and focus more intently on the accuracy of information and an appreciation of high quality, fact-based news in response to the work of two former journalists, Howard Schneider and Alan Miller.

Schneider, a former *Newsday* editor, is the founding dean of the School of Journalism at Stony University. Schneider is credited with helping to popularize the term "news literacy" through his news literacy fundraising, instruction and expansion efforts (Fleming, 2016). Long before the phrase "alternative facts" became commonplace in American political discourse, Schneider (2007) argued that the truth was in trouble in the digital age because the "pathological" lack of accountability online might "easily spread a virus of confusion and disinformation" (p. 66). For Schneider, the antidote to an anything goes, multidirectional digital information ecosystem where the lines between fact-based journalism and everything else was news literacy education grounded in journalistic methods and mindsets.

A similar sentiment prompted former *Los Angeles Times* investigative reporter Alan Miller to create the News Literacy Project in 2008, which was around the same time Schneider

was building his news literacy program at Stony Brook (Fleming, 2016). The News Literacy Project focuses on teaching and learning modules designed for middle and high school students, and it facilitates outreach programs that bring practicing journalists into classrooms to teach news literacy lessons. In addition, the organization launched an e-learning platform in 2016, and it became part of the $14 million News Integrity Initiative in 2017. The purpose of the initiative, which is housed at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism and funded by Facebook, the Ford Foundation and others, is to advance news literacy and increase trust in journalism (Dunkin, 2017). Around the same time the initiative was announced, a consortium of journalism educators and student press advocates joined forces in support of news literacy education at all levels (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, National Scholastic Press Association/Associated Collegiate Press, Journalism Education Association, & Student Press Law Center, 2017)

In this essay, I will focus on the potential of news literacy instruction in college journalism programs. Specifically, I will argue that the time is right for college-level journalism educators to broaden the purpose and function of their programs by educating future journalists through traditional skills-development courses *and* schooling the general student body on the principles and practices of the press through news literacy instruction. By integrating news literacy courses into their curricula, journalism educators could become key players in local and national discussions on how best to educate citizens in an age of information overload, fake news and alternative facts. I will first explore briefly the history of journalism education in the academy. Next, I will discuss my experiences developing and teaching a news literacy course at California State University, Long Beach. I will conclude with a call for a new, civics model for journalism education.

Journalism Education and the Academy: A Professional Preparation Tradition

A "built-in" tension between an instructional emphasis on the development of skills needed for success in journalism industries and the pull towards a more traditional academic experience grounded in the liberal arts and sciences has plagued journalism education in the academy since its beginnings (Reese & Cohen, 2000, p. 221). The skills development tradition at the college level can be traced to the late 1800s when courses in typography, stenography, and bookkeeping were introduced as part of journalism curricula at Washington College, which is now Washington and Lee University (Crenshaw, 1969). Similar courses, most often associated with English departments, began appearing at other state universities (Medsger, 2005), but it wasn't until notorious newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer sought to transform the journalism trade into a learned profession through an investment in education that the field began to be taken seriously by the academy.

Pulitzer wanted to legitimize journalism as a new area of study and rebuild a tarnished reputation from his yellow journalism days by attaching his name to an Ivy League institution. Even with the lure of millions of dollars in endowment funds, it took Pulitzer more than 10 years to convince Columbia University to start a journalism program (Boylan, 2003). Scholarly critics were against the move, arguing that the university was no place for professional education, while newspaper workers of the period attacked the idea on the premise that the best place for aspiring journalists to learn journalism was on the job. Pulitzer (1904) responded to his critics, arguing that journalism learned in the office was incidental learning, instead of intentional education. The best kind of intentional education for journalists, according to Pulitzer, was education designed

to develop character and an appreciation for the public good. Columbia endowed Pulitzer's $2 million gift following his death in 1911; journalism classes began the next year. Today, the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism offers one of the most-coveted journalism degrees in the world, and the Pulitzer Prize, which was also part of Pulitzer's early 20th century bequest, is arguably the most prestigious award in modern journalism.

While journalism was gaining popularity as a subject of study among students in the first few decades of the 20th century, it still lacked legitimacy as a discipline among intellectuals. It was not considered a subject in the humanities because it lacked history and depth, and it did not qualify as a social science because it lacked rigor. Former journalist turned academic Willard Bleyer sought to change that perception at the University of Wisconsin in 1927. He envisioned a curriculum organized around the liberal arts that would turn journalism into a systematic body of knowledge—a bona fide social science (Bronstein & Vaughn, 1998; Zelizer, 2004). Other scholars including Clarence E. Cason, who founded the Department of Journalism at University of Alabama in 1928, welcomed Bleyer's commitment to bring the academic and professional together. Cason (1930) urged institutions to resist the "grave danger" of vocational training and instead focus on the "infinite opportunities" available if journalism is viewed and taught as a social phenomenon (p. 313). Wilbert Schramm further solidified journalism and media studies as areas worthy of social science standing in the 1950s and 1960s under the umbrella of communications studies.

Even with a research footing in the social sciences and a curricular foundation in the liberal arts, vocational training remains the implicit and, at times, explicit goal of journalism programs (Christ & Hynes, 1997). One needs to look no further than journalism textbooks to discover that skills development dominates the way educators teach journalism at universities. In an analysis of dozens of textbooks published in the 1980s and 1990s, Brennen (2000) uncovers ideological uniformity: All of the texts examined emphasize news gathering, they present technological innovation in news as positive developments in human progress, and they share an "unshakable" belief in the watchdog function of the press (p. 110). Brennen adds that the ideological perspective identified in her analysis has not fundamentally changed since the first modern journalist text, *A Teacher's Manual of Exercises, Suggestions, and Bibliographical Notations to Be Used in Connection with Interpretative Reporting,* was published in 1938.

Even with the digitization of content, the disintegration of newsprint as a popular form of news, and the dominance of social and mobile media in the production, distribution and selection of news, a preliminary review of popular journalism texts suggests that the ideological prism of professional preparation persists well into the 21st century (Barnas, 2017; Halpern Wenger & Potter, 2014; Harrower, 2012; Rich, 2015). Mensing (2010) argues that a continued emphasis on teaching skills to serve the journalism industry—an industry that has been in flux for close to two decades—leaves journalism education programs unprepared to respond effectively to the "deeply structural" changes in journalism (511). For Mensing, the structural changes in news provide opportunities for journalism programs to go in new curricular directions and shift from industry-centered models to community-centered philosophies.

Schneider (2007) makes a similar plea to journalism educators, only the new direction he proposes is grounded in civics education. Schneider argues that news literacy courses designed for all undergraduates—not just journalism majors—represent an instructional solution to the dilution of press influence and disappearance of clearly defined boundaries between journalism and other types of information sources. According to Schneider, students in news literacy classes

designed and taught by journalism faculty would acquire a "lifetime asset: the ability to assess what to trust and distrust in the news media, when to act on information and when to suspect it, whether in choosing a President, a controversial medication, or a news 'brand.'" Schneider's belief in the power and potential of news literacy led him to suggest that journalism schools now need two missions, not one: "Our first mission was daunting enough: to train the next generation of reporters and editors in a period of media transformation. But the second mission was of equal—perhaps greater—importance: to educate the next generation of news consumers" (p. 67).

News Literacy at California State University, Long Beach ("Long Beach State")

Around the same time Schneider starting experimenting with news literacy at Stony Brook, I was also toying with ideas about how best to teach non-journalism students about journalism at California State University, Long Beach ("Long Beach State"). Long Beach State is a large comprehensive public university about 25 miles southwest of Los Angeles. With more than 35,000 students, it is one of the largest and most popular campuses in the 23-campus California State University system. I am a faculty member in the Department of Journalism and Public Relations—a department with about 500 majors and another 100 or so students pursuing minors in journalism or public relations. Similar to Schneider (2007), my interest in what I referred to as "news media literacy" at the time emerged from my experiences in an introductory mass communication class. The class is typically made up of students from other disciplines— students with little knowledge about nor experience in journalism.

To make the news literacy class I was developing attractive to students outside of the major, I needed to secure General Education status. Long Beach State has numerous general education categories including written communication, oral communication, critical thinking, arts, languages, humanities, sciences, mathematics/quantitative reasoning, social sciences and citizenship, to name several. The category that fit the best with the learning outcomes of news literacy as I conceptualized it was critical thinking. Critical thinking courses at Long Beach State should develop abilities to analyze, criticize, and advocate ideas; to reason inductively and deductively; and to reach well-supported factual or judgmental conclusions.

Three levels of curriculum review—the department curriculum committee, the curriculum committee of the College of Liberal Arts and the General Education Governing Committee, a university-level entity that sets and enforces general education standards on campus—approved JOUR 160/Understanding News Media. I opted for a news literacy course at the freshman-level for two reasons. First, all critical thinking courses on campus had to be at 100-level. Second, I wanted students to take the knowledge and skills gleaned from the course into other undergraduate classes, given instructors from across the disciplinary spectrum often integrate news stories into their lessons. I called the course "Understanding News Media" instead of "News Literacy" because I wanted to communicate that the course was less about reading news and more about understanding the processes involved in the production, consumption, selection and interpretation of news in the age of social and mobile media. This approach is consistent with Potter's (2016) stance that the most effective media literacy instructional strategies focus on personal consumption and interpretation habits.

Enrollment in "JOUR 160/Understanding News Media" lagged for the first few years, primarily because of state budget problems that restricted enrollment growth across campus. JOUR 160 has since evolved into one of the most popular critical thinking courses at Long

Beach State, with almost 400 students taking it each year through a variety of formats—large lecture, small group discussion, online, hybrid and the university honor's program. This figure could be larger if administrators allowed the department to increase enrollment and gain access to additional large lecture (80+ students) classrooms; however, enrollment at Long Beach State is managed and priority is given to required classes for majors. In addition, a popular general education offering in one department might draw enrollment away from smaller programs that depend on general education courses for survival. At Long Beach State, the program I am referring to is philosophy, which used to monopolize the critical thinking category. The category opened up to other disciplines about ten years ago, and the philosophy program has struggled to attract students since. In short, student interest in news literacy is robust at Long Beach State, but structural constraints limit its enrollment to several hundred students each academic year.

Beyond the enrollment ceiling, the main challenge I experienced developing and teaching "Understanding News Media" has been finding an appropriate, college-level textbook. I believe it is essential that news literacy instruction in universities is grounded in theory, research and practice appropriate for college-level teaching and learning. Textbooks written for college audiences generally provide that grounding. Given news literacy pedagogies created by journalists are relatively new and media literacy texts and resources, in my experience, lack an emphasis on the veracity of information, I experimented with numerous books that touched on important themes relevant to news literacy. The books include: *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (Carr, 2011), *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society* (Manjoo, 2011), *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007), *Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload* (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011), *The News: A User's Manual* (de Botton, 2014), *Tell Everyone: Why We Share and Why It Matters* (Hermida, 2014) and *The News Media: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Anderson, Downie Jr., & Schudson, 2016). I do not have a favorite; each has its own on strengths and weaknesses, although my main critique of all of them is that the examples cited become dated quite quickly. Regardless, each addresses the primary learning outcome of the course, which is to teach students how to identify, evaluate, analyze and appreciate journalism in the digital age.

To achieve this outcome, I also have used materials developed at the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy, which can be accessed through its Digital Resource Center (Center for News Literacy, 2017). The Digital Resource Center provides free sample syllabi, week-by-week lessons and lectures, multimedia examples and discussion prompts. I recommend the digital resource center to everyone who asks me about news literacy teaching and learning tools. I also am a fan of select resources published or shared by the News Literacy Project. Potter (2016) includes several chapters dedicated to understanding and analyzing news in his text, *Media Literacy*, which I have found helpful. Schudson's (2008) work on journalism and democracy can be dense for freshman students, but I have used *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* when I teach a section of JOUR 160 as part of the university's honors program. Fittingly, there is a growing number of resources online. I integrate results from the annual State of the News Report (Pew Research Center, 2016) into all of my news literacy classes, and I regularly refer students to fact-checking web resources such as Snopes, PolitiFact, Factcheck.org, American Press Institute, and *Washington Post* Fact Checker.

News Literacy and a New, Civics Model for Journalism Education

Building and teaching a news literacy course at Long Beach State was an easy sell, especially to those outside of the journalism department. Almost everyone I spoke with from across the disciplinary spectrum agreed that a critical thinking course about news for all students was a good thing. I faced the most resistance from journalism colleagues who seemed stuck on the traditional model of journalism education, the professional preparation prism—a prism reflected in standards assessed and enforced by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (2013). A compromise at the department level meant JOUR 160/Understanding News Media could not count towards any major requirements, even as an elective. I was comfortable with the compromise because the course was supposed to be for the general student body in the first place. Fast forward ten years and the fake news infested 2016 presidential election, and now there is considerable interest in pedagogies at Long Beach State and nationwide that aim to teach students how to assess the veracity and quality of news sources, to be news literate.

For example, the librarian for journalism at Long Beach State created a fake news online resource shortly after the election (Perruso, 2017), the *New York Times* featured news literacy scholar and educator Paul Mihailidis (Ember, 2017), and a consortium of foundations and technology companies including Facebook, the Craig Newmark Philanthropic Fund, Mozilla and the Democracy Fund has dedicated $14 million to the News Integrity Initiative. The CUNY Graduate School of Journalism will administer the initiative, which was created to advance news literacy education and increase trust in journalism (Mullin, 2017). In addition, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, an organization founded in 1912 to advance journalism as a field of study and an area for research, joined forces with other organizations including the National Scholastic Press Association/Associated Collegiate Press, Journalism Education Association, and Student Press Law Center, to call for the advancement of news literacy education. Their joint statement to President Donald Trump outlined their positions on a variety of issues concerning journalism and democracy, the First Amendment, transparency and the discipline of verification. The paragraph about news literacy read:

> We support the teaching of news literacy – not just to journalism students but to all students. As young citizens and future leaders, our students must be able to discern fabrication from fact, to evaluate the evidence and sources of claims, to recognize the inevitable biases in themselves and in others, and to understand the economics of news media and all public communications (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication et al., 2017)

If preeminent journalism education organizations and some of the biggest names in technology are calling for news literacy, then what is stopping college-level journalism educators from integrating news literacy courses into their programs? Immediate answers to this question could include time and training—faculty are often stretched thin with research, teaching and service commitments, thereby most do not have the time to develop a new course, especially a course outside of their area of expertise. Other reasons include politics and resources. General education categories can be political on some campuses because a successful general education course can mean more resources for the host department and, in turn, less resources for other departments. This makes it hard for a newcomer like news literacy to be accepted as an area of

inquiry worthy of general education status. A final reason might include the steadfast focus on skills development and professional preparedness that has dominated journalism education in the academy for more than a century (Brennen, 2000).

In response to digitization and the resulting crisis in newspapers, the "teaching hospital" model became a buzzword in journalism education circles. The teaching hospital model is a metaphor for a philosophy of instruction that mirrors how young physicians are trained: student journalists learn and practice journalism on the job while covering and thereby serving often underreported communities (Ellis, 2013; Lemann, 2009). Mensing and Ryfe (2013) argue against the teaching hospital model suggesting that it delays effective curricular responses to dramatic shifts in the production, distribution and consumption of news because it focuses exclusively on the supply/production side of journalism. Instead, they suggest journalism schools should become more entrepreneurial.

Mensing and Ryfe's (2013) entrepreneurial model of journalism education aims to reflect the multidirectional flow of information in the 21st century, hence they argue curricula should focus on the needs of professional content producers *and* citizens, companies and institutions that make up the social and mobile media empowered audience. The advantage of this approach, according to Mensing and Ryfe, is that it allows for young journalists, and journalism educators, to be more responsive to what is going on at the audience level—their interests, needs and information habits. In addition, course sequencing in entrepreneurial journalism programs is fluid and not always directly tied to a traditional editorial category such as print journalism or television news or radio production. Mensing and Ryfe also recommend redefining internships and allowing for "consultancies" that allow students to work for start-ups and other non-traditional news organizations. The final shift in thinking needed in the entrepreneurial model of journalism education model is media literacy instruction. Mensing and Ryfe (2013) suggest that teaching non-journalism majors about journalism or media generally represents an opportunity to demonstrate collaboration between citizens and journalists and to stress "a conception of journalism as a social practice, rather than an exclusive professional activity" (pp. 13-14).

Mensing and Ryfe's focus on the audience is reminiscent of Schneider's (2007) plea to journalism educators to teach news audiences about how to identify, evaluate, analyze and appreciate high-quality journalism through news literacy instruction. Additionally, Mensing and Ryfe's call for journalism educators to embrace media literacy reminds one of the arguments of media literacy advocates through the years. For example, Christ and Potter (1998) suggest that media literacy courses in journalism programs are valuable assets because they challenge the training-for-employment mode that has dominated journalism education for more than a century. Mihailidis (2008) also urges journalism instructors in universities to frame their programs or scholarly agendas around media literacy's potential connection to the citizen.

The emphasis on citizenship in media literacy and the historic connection between journalism and democracy reveals a weakness with the entrepreneurial model for journalism education. While Mensing and Ryfe argue entrepreneurialism means change, too often it is associated with business, profits, unfettered individualism and neoliberalism. Therefore, many scholars might view entrepreneurial instructional models in name and/or in practice as anti-intellectual. Not to mention, journalism education focused on change for the sake of change misses an opportunity to ground itself in democratic principles that have been at the heart of journalism professional practice for centuries. For this reason, I suggest reframing the model and refining its philosophy concerning media literacy. Specifically, I suggest a new name, the civics

model for journalism education, and an unapologetic focus on news literacy instruction based on journalistic methods and mindsets.

The "civics" model of journalism education more clearly connects the active role citizens play in news production, distribution and consumption in the 21st century; it reflects the tie between news literacy education and citizenship instruction; and, it effectively communicates the importance of journalism to democracy. Many journalists view themselves as members of the fourth estate of power, and they often view their work, investigative pieces in particular, as essential for democracy to function well. The *Washington Post's* new slogan, "Democracy Dies in Darkness," echoes this philosophy (Rehagen, 2017). Schudson (2008) notes that journalism's commitment to fact-finding and truthtelling is integral to its democratic mission, and he argues that there is civic value in a vocation that strives to operate outside power that is dedicated to "institutionalized truthtelling and independent judgment" (p. 2). Civics, the public good, watchdog journalism, fact finding and freedom of expression guide journalistic decision-making, yet who is educating news audiences about these principles? And if no one is teaching young citizens accustomed to Instagram images and Snapchat exchanges about high qualify, verified, fact-based news sources, how will they be able to identify them in the anything goes digital information ecosystem? Simply put, high quality journalism in an age of seemingly unlimited information choices, demands a news literate audience, which is an audience that can identify, evaluate, assess and, to some degree, appreciate verified, independent and accountable journalism (Fleming, 2013).

To conclude, the time is right for college journalism programs to inject civics education for all students into their curricula and the easiest way accomplish that goal is news literacy. Interest in news literacy education has been high since the 2016 presidential election, as demonstrated by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication's (2017) commitment to it, the $14 million News Integrity Initiative, and numerous articles in trade and popular press positioning news literacy as an instructional solution to alternative fact- and fake news-filled social media feeds. In addition, news literacy courses based on journalistic principles and practices and offered by journalism programs are effective in helping students understand and interpret news, and they increase student interest in journalism overall (Maksl, Craft, Ashley, & Miller, 2016). Most importantly, news literacy courses provide opportunities for journalism educators to move beyond the dated professional preparation and hospital instructional models and into the realm of civics education, which would directly connect journalism education to the democratic mission of the profession and the social, citizen-building function of the university.

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