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The First Step is the Hardest: Finding Connections in Media Literacy Education

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Abstract

Through a series of focus groups, this study explores how students, at the conclusion of a university-level media literacy course, see media's necessary role in democratic society. It is a narrative inspired by the core belief of the media literacy discipline that if people are effectively taught the critical skills to access, evaluate, analyze, and produce media¹ they will better understand media's roles and responsibilities in civic life. Initial findings show that while media literacy may indeed enable for critical analysis skills, it carries the potential to breed cynical outcomes if not taught in a holistic manner.

Keywords: Media Education, News Media, Critical Thinking, Media Literacy, Focus Groups

Introduction – Media Literacy and Healthy Skepticism

In, *UnSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation*, Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson caution their readers to “be skeptical, but not cynical when consuming media”:

*The skeptic demands evidence, and rightly so. The cynic assumes that what he or she is being told is false. Cynicism is a form of gullibility—the cynic rejects facts without evidence, just as the naïve person accepts facts without evidence. And deception born of cynicism can be just as costly or potentially as dangerous to health and well-being as any other form of deception.*²

The promotion of healthy skepticism—consistent inquiry concerning how media portrays cultural, social, political and economic issues,³ coupled with a general understanding of the media's role in civil and democratic society⁴—is at the center of media liter-

ate learning outcomes. Media literate individuals, it is often purported, should be open to different ideas, demand evidence for certain claims, and approach information with a keen sense of interest, independence, and awareness. In this sense, if media literacy is to enable a healthy skepticism towards media and information, it must not only teach the skills of critical analysis, but also teach how those skills are purposed around modes of general inquiry.⁵ This centers on making media literacy *purposive* by highlighting the connections between media analysis and a nuanced understanding of media's role in community, civic life, and democratic society.⁶

Despite the general aim to enable such learning outcomes, few inquiries on any level of education have explored how such outcomes are attained, and what attributes “media literate” individuals should embody.⁷ Exploring the outcomes of media literacy initiatives can offer insight as to how students express their thoughts about media and its role in their lives at the conclusion of a media literacy lesson, course, or curriculum. Furthermore, data on media literacy learning experiences may also help educators better understand the connections between media literacy and attitudes towards the media environment in an information age.

*The data presented in this study is part of a larger multi-method study combining a quasi-experiment with focus group sessions. That study is published in full as a dissertation by the University of Maryland, and excerpts of the study will also appear in other reports and academic journals.

This study explores how students, at the conclusion of a university-level media literacy course, see media's necessary role in democratic society. It is a narrative inspired by the core belief of the media literacy discipline that if people are effectively taught the critical skills to access, evaluate, analyze, and produce media⁸ they will better understand media's roles and responsibilities in civic life. What are students learning about media's role in society? About media's role in a democracy? How effectively are students learning about the complexities of the media landscape? Such questions serve as an entry point to explore how students, at the conclusion of a media literacy course, are able to make the connections between media, citizenship, and democracy.

Making Connections in a Media Literacy Curriculum

In 2000, Harvard Sociologist Robert Putnam published his seminal text *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, in which he wrote: "at an accelerating pace throughout the century, the electronic transmission of news and entertainment changed virtually all features of American life."⁹ Putnam's treatise exposed media, specifically the television, as a harbinger for the changing notion of community. Putnam, while lamenting television as "bad for both individualized and collective civic engagement,"¹⁰ clearly exposed the connections between greater time spent with information and the changing ways in which individuals spend time with family and in the community.

Scholars¹¹ have built on Putnam's work to offer extensive prose on the media's socializing effects for youth, commonly replacing more traditional pillars of the community, such as family, church, and school.¹² There is little doubt that in this present climate, youth of all ages are spending more time with media. A 2005 Kaiser Family study noted that the average young adult (18-30) spends approximately 6.5 hours per day with media outside of the classroom.¹³ A more recent study released by the Council for Research Excellence found that the average American is exposed to "screens" on average 8.5 hours of any given day.¹⁴

With the fast growing presence of media in everyday life, media literacy is increasingly seen as the educational response for an information age. Scholars have recently begun to explore the connections between media education, civic knowledge, and democratic outcomes. A 2006 study by Jerit et al. titled

Citizens, Knowledge, and the Information Environment demonstrated that education was a strong predictor of political knowledge.¹⁵ This result was even more apparent when the political issue had greater exposure in the mass media. Such connections further highlight a need for education that addresses media's role in civic democracies that exist in information societies.

Studies by McDevitt and Kiouisis in 2005¹⁶ and Kiouisis, McDevitt and Wu in 2006¹⁷ found that the development of political attitudes in adolescents could be affected by education. Using the 2002 US elections as their base, the authors found that various curricular programs that include media can actively better youths' civic socialization and awareness.

At the same time, a growing number of studies are also focusing on the outcomes of media literacy education in the classroom. A 2006 study by Erica Scharrer, Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts - Amherst, posited that students would attain critical thinking abilities through "demonstrating the ability to analyze the degree of social responsibility in media as they express their attitudes regarding how television should show violence and about media regulation."¹⁸ Scharrer's results suggested that after a media literacy experience, students were more critically inclined to ask the "right" questions about why violence is shown on the television. A 2008 study from Duran et al. titled *Holistic Media Education* found that a college level media literacy course did heighten its students' awareness of media's role in civil society as compared to a control group.¹⁹ Past studies by Hobbs and Frost (2003),²⁰ Quin and McMahon (1992),²¹ and Arke (2005)²² also showed positive correlation between media education and heightened abilities to critically analyze media messages.

As evidenced in past studies and curricular initiatives, media education has often made its priority to teach students to be critical thinkers of the media,²³ to analyze the contours of media messages, and to deconstruct media messages in the search for intent, perspective, and point of view. The tangible outcomes of such an inquiry can be seen in how students decode messages, find angles and frames, and see common practices of information manipulation. What is perhaps more difficult to notice are the narrative outcomes of a media literacy curriculum. What does a media literate student sound like? How do they understand the connections between media and democracy? In what ways are their opinions and values influenced

by critical media inquiry? These questions, while difficult to quantify, are essential to experiential media literacy learning outcomes.

If students can critically analyze media messages without being able to see the larger connections between the message, their lives, and their society, then what is the point of approaching the message in the first place?

Students must be able to apply newly gained knowledge to their everyday habits of inquiry. Emphasizing this outcome can help students make the necessary connections between media and community in current hyper-media societies. The following inquiry explores university student dispositions, at the conclusion of a media literacy course, on the connections between media, citizenship, and civil society. The study is not meant to provide definitive data on best practices or outcomes of a media literacy curriculum, but rather provides a running narrative of student opinions on media literacy as a bridge to a more holistic understanding of media's role in their lives, communities, and democracy.

Methodology²⁴

This study employed three focus groups to explore student attitudes towards media. The focus group has served as an effective research tool for over fifty years, and more predominantly in academia over the last twenty years.²⁵ A focus group is broadly defined as "a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research."²⁶ The main aim of the focus group is to attain an open level of interaction between participants, drawing upon their beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and experiences.²⁷ This is what differentiates the dynamic of the focus group from the interview, ethnography, or participant observation.

Main limitations of focus group research include biases, difficulty in distinguishing between individual and group views, difficulty in making generalizations, difficulty of analysis and interpretation of results.²⁸ These characteristics were minimized through careful and meticulous transcription and analysis. Furthermore, the group sessions for this study applied a level of "produced informality."²⁹ The moderator created a relaxed atmosphere in which the participants were encouraged, through informality, to participate in an open and free manner.³⁰ This enabled

vibrant, diverse, and thoughtful discussions of media's role in society and democracy.

The Sessions

Three focus groups were conducted at the conclusion of the *Journalism 175: Media Literacy* (J175) course offered by the University of Maryland's College of Journalism. Two sessions (n=10, n=8) were conducted with students from J175 and a third focus group (n=9) was conducted with students from the education group consisting of students from the University of Maryland's College of Education, who were predominantly freshmen and sophomores enrolled in the Education Human Development course, *EDHD230: Human Development and Societal Institutions*. None of these students had taken the J175 course, or any courses in journalism and/or communication studies. Conducting focus group sessions with separate J175 and education groups allowed for qualitative comparisons of the values, beliefs and general assumptions between students enrolled in the J175 course and those who were not.

The researcher facilitated the focus group discussions. As the researcher did not teach in J175, this had no impact on the dynamic of the session. Furthermore, the focus groups did not impact the grades of the students, as they were offered as extracurricular activities. Participants were offered a small financial compensation for their participation in the discussions. This limited self-selection bias, in that grades and interest in the topic were not motivating factors in student participation.

The focus group sessions were structured in two parts. The first 45 minutes of the discussions dealt with media's role in society, specifically addressing *relevance, credibility, and students as news media consumers* (see table 1). This part of the discussion entailed the bulk of the students' views on the media industry, its functions, patterns, and influences. The last fifteen minutes of each session were devoted to *media literacy*. These concluding discussions centered on the possible influences of formal education about media and aimed to explore what students personally took away from the J175 course beyond critical media analysis skills.

Table 1 – Focus Group ProtocolRelevance and Credibility (45 minutes)

Relevance: Do media do a good job in providing relevant information for Americans?

Credibility: How credible, unbiased, and neutral are media in the United States?

Student attention to news media: How much time do you spend with news? Do you think it has affected your views, opinions, outlooks?

Media Literacy (15 minutes)

What do you think being a media literate person entails? Considering how much time you spend with media, do you think learning about media functions and practices would affect how you interact with media?

The Course

Journalism 175: Media Literacy was first offered in the fall of 2004, and soon became one of the more over-enrolled courses offered at the University of Maryland. J175 is a *CORE Interdisciplinary & Emerging Issues Course/CORE Diversity Course*, meaning that the course satisfies a core general undergraduate degree requirement. The course overview states that J175 provides:

An analysis of the information, values and underlying messages conveyed via television, newspapers, the Internet, magazines, radio and film. [J175: Media Literacy] examines the accuracy of those messages and explores how media shape views of politics, culture and society (Philip Merrill College of Journalism).³¹

Dr. Susan Moeller, Associate Professor at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism and the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland, is the lead professor of the J175 course. Professor Moeller has taught J175 since its inception in 2004. Additionally three-to-five teaching assistants each teach multiple discussion sections once a week.*

The course follows a lecture/discussion format. Professor Moeller lectures once a week to all 170 students, and then students attend discussion sections once a week, which max out at 25 students per session. Students are asked to complete weekly assign-

ments, which are in the form of small papers, oral presentations, media critiques, group work, quizzes, and so on. In addition, students take a mid-term and final exam. Both exams combine essay reflections on current media issues with real time critique of news clips, and short answers that cover theory and terms. Students are taught critical media analysis skills, centering predominantly on comprehension (summarize the message), evaluation (how does the message inform the topic? and what you think about the topic?), and analysis (Who is the message aimed at? What is omitted from the message?). These terms and questions were stressed while exploring various content.

Week-by-week, J175 covers general trends in media (business & ownership, history, the First Amendment), media themes (global news, politics, gender, race/ethnicity, sex), and specific “mediums” (print, radio, television, the Internet). The course approached these topics in a critical way, exposing students to the ubiquity of advertising, body image, media violence, war coverage, propaganda, public relations, political campaigns, and so on. The course also attempts to infuse in the students an understanding of their use of media and be more aware media consumers.

During Fall 2006, when this study was conducted, 170 students were enrolled in the *Journalism 175: Media Literacy* (J175) course. These students were predominantly freshmen (46%) and sophomores (26%), with 53% females. All but five of the students were between 18-24 years of age. All students, except those younger than 18 years of age, were offered participation in focus groups.

The researcher of this study was involved in the creation of the course in 2004, which included elements encapsulated in the traditional definition of media literacy—critical skills to access, evaluate, analyze, and produce media.³² The course was also built after a surveying other media literacy course syllabi in U.S. universities. J175 students were expected to gain the critical media analysis skills to be considered “media literate.” This particular inquiry grew from a curiosity about whether or not the skills taught in the course translated into an overall awareness and engagement with media’s role in civil and democratic society.

* This number has fluctuated based on class enrollment and available assistantships. During the data collection for this dissertation, there were four teaching assistants assigned to the J175 course.

Focus Group Narrative: Hard Steps to Healthy Dialogue

The J175 focus groups and the education focus group elicited interesting dialogue.³³ Many similarities and differences were apparent in their discussions. Perhaps the most evident difference was the negativity with which the J175 groups discussed media. Throughout both J175 focus groups, the students uniformly displayed a resistance towards media that bordered on cynicism. Their discussions were subsumed with criticism and distrust of media, and an air of superiority over what they deemed was the constant manipulation techniques of the media industry.

Reasons for the J175 groups' negative responses can range from their heightened critical inquiry into media through the J175 course to a general cynicism towards media functions by younger generations. Nevertheless, these sessions evoked interesting questions concerning the negativity displayed by J175 students. Did the media literacy curriculum reinforce and exaggerate cynical and pessimistic ideas already instilled in students' minds? Were the students simply unable to connect the skills they attained with a substantive understanding of media's democratic and social roles? Or is the critical first step to becoming media literate a process that includes negativity, cynicism, and resistance?

Such attitudes towards media could have been formed by inadequacies in the way that media literacy is taught, too often focusing on content alone and not on audience and reception. Or such attitudes could represent a critical first step in the civic socialization of young adults trying to make sense of what is a complex and often paradoxical environment.

Topic One: Media's Role in Democratic Society

"All news is biased news." — Student, J175: Media Literacy course

At the beginning of each focus group, the students briefly introduced themselves and spoke about their personal media use. The discussions then shifted to media's role in society. This part of the session was introduced through a brief overview by the moderator, followed by substantive discussion revolving around *relevance, credibility, and attention to news media.*

Relevance

I've never turned on the news and been like, wow, glad I watched that, made

my day a whole lot better...or, like, felt informed about something relevant."

— Student, J175: Media Literacy course

Media relevance is a qualitative construct, subject to a variety of definitions. "Relevance," as used in this study, is meant to speak to American media's role in providing its public with a diverse and wide spectrum of information from which they can make informed decisions. In the focus group discussions, students were asked about the relevance of media in society as a subset of how they viewed media in a broad and general sense. This topic was intended both to allow them to critically think about media's role in society, and to attempt to locate their opinions on how media influences values and viewpoints concerning civic issues.

The general consensus among both J175 groups and the education group was that media outlets rarely provided relevant information. "News outlets don't want to show you things that make the country look bad or themselves look bad," said a student from the J175 course. This was followed by another student stating: "I think the American people are just settling for what's on the television...they aren't going to dig deep to find more information if they aren't satisfied. They may complain and say, oh this isn't what's real, but they aren't going to go investigate it more. Everybody does this...so it doesn't really matter." Another student then stated: "I think media companies are concerned about losing viewers and money. They feel they can't make everyone happy, so they just pick a side and topics and gain those viewers."

The discussions on relevance predominantly focused on the business of the media industry, "real" versus entertainment news, and general public disinterest towards news media. During the discussion, a trend developed: the J175 group discussions grew more negative towards media. The education group discussion, meanwhile, was less substantive but also less pessimistic.

Business and politics

Students from both groups mentioned media's profit motives and political connections when discussing how and to what extent media cover events. The students continuously referred to the idea that profit and business models ruled news production to an end. This underlying theme quickly became a strong predictor of the overall negativity expressed in the group

discussions. Remarkd one student from the J175 group: "America is a capitalist system, which is all about getting a better living status...They [the media industry] make more money the more people watch. It's not really what people need to watch or know, it's what they are going to watch that matters." The media industry is not exempt from profit models and motives in a free market society. In this light the student was entirely correct. What was interesting, however, was the tone with which he expressed a rather dreary train of thought. In discussing media relevance, this participant seemed content with the idea that relevance is not on the radar of mass media outlets.³⁴ This may indeed be the case, and perhaps this view is the beginning of a media literate understanding of media industries. However, without further developing this line of thought, students may be left with incomplete understandings of a complex issue at the conclusion of a media literacy course.

The education group discussion echoed the J175 groups' thoughts on profit motives in media: "But sensational headlines grab people's attention... They [television news media] will wait until the end to show the really important stuff," said one participant, "The stories will be placed as actual news to get our attention, we'll see other stories about 'real' issues. Or they will throw the 'other' stories in between 'real' stories to grab peoples' attention." Added another student, "even CNN is now getting into the entertainment news, so that people will start to pick it up: Britany Spears, Brangelina, Kramer, they need to make money and keep audiences." Both groups' discussions were defeatist in a sense. There was little reflection or critical discussion about why profits were so central to media practices. One student from the education group, recapping a recent interaction with news media, stated:

Last week I watched news for an hour and a half, because before each commercial they showed a story about a deer who jumped through a window and attacked a family. And I watched traffic and weather and local news and stuff I really don't care about...just to get to the end and see the story about the deer. They hooked me in. It may not be right, but it's smart.

This student described a process used by television news media to keep her attention. She was cognizant of this action, and admitted that it was "smart" for the

program to do so. Understanding such media workings and their rationale is a key to understanding the nuances of media and their intended effects. This type of acknowledgement and acceptance was rarely noticed in the focus group discussions. Students chose to simply state profit motives as negative influences on media, but rarely did they express why and to what effect these practices were put into place. Even after additional prodding by the moderator, the students responded by stating more examples of profit motives in the media industry to justify their outlooks.

When the conversations shifted from profits to politics, students from J175 groups and the education group used politics to discredit relevance in media coverage and news reporting. Said one student from the J175 course about the political relevance of news coverage:

I have this theory that the media is much more about money and control than anything. For example, they will tell you about local shootings to scare you and keep order, to vote for the representative who will fight crime. And not care about Darfur, because that means we have to care more about foreign diplomacy and cut back on military spending and stuff.

A student immediately followed this statement by asking the group if they had "ever visited a web site that lists the top 100 media companies in the U.S. and how they are connected to politicians. The majority of the largest corporations are connected."³⁵ While such ideas and opinions should be part of any discussion on media relevance and news selection, they should not be the dominant and lone point of a discussion on media's relevance to society.

One particular discussion thread by a J175 group began with intelligent and sharp introspection. Said one student: "I mean, I do care, but I think people are ostracized because of politics getting in the way of news. CNN probably didn't support Kevin Sites [of Yahoo News's *Kevin Sites in the Hot Zone*]³⁶ because of the political implications." Another student followed this by stating:

I mean it's just that the media is owned by so few. I think its like six corporations or something. So when Disney tells you something, you're going to hear it on all their media stations. And the majority of the news stations don't

want to hire Kevin Sites, who's going to film people shooting people, and news that people may really care about.

In this short conversation, participants from the media literacy class engaged in analytical critique and thoughtful discussions. In discussing the global reporting of journalist Kevin Sites, students began to question why such journalism was rarely if ever part of the mainstream media. They pondered why this type of investigative reporting was reserved for niche markets and highly specialized audiences. The students, however, quickly reverted back to acrimony towards the media-political complex. In the midst of the Kevin Sites discussion, one student remarked: "I think the government holds back a lot of information, because of fear of public reaction." Another student echoed this idea: "I think our government knows a lot more about Iraq than they tell us. I think the government has a foot in every major corporation out there. Media corporations."

While comments on Iraq and the media-political-economic nexus may have much truth to them, the context within which they were stated was more impulsive and rash than thoughtful and reflective. Students did not speak about the complex but necessary relationship between the media and the government but instead, it seemed, fell back on the idea that media were corrupt and only out to make money. They displayed a confidence in their cynicism—as if media literacy had provided them the critical skills to effectively defend themselves against media's manipulations and misrepresentations.

Such ideas could simply be a product of youthfulness, or signal the beginning of a nuanced understanding of media's role in politics and business. Within this train of thought, there remains room for discussion to move beyond criticism and towards a more substantive discussion. Ensuring that discussions move beyond criticism needs to be an essential component of any media literacy curriculum.

The education group discussion approached the role of politics in media in brief, and with less negativity. "You can have smart guides for news media, but there is always going to be the money and the corporations, and you won't be able to separate those things. Politics and religion are always going to be involved, *but we know that, so we have to see it...* [emphasis added]," stated one participant. The conversation shifted after this comment, but its weight was felt in the classroom, as many of the participants nodded

in agreement. Perhaps the education group did not touch upon the subject of politics because they were not exposed to such critical sensitization to media as students from J175. This idea may hold merit as a key indicator for the difference in the scope of discussion, and negativity expressed between the J175 and education groups.

News vs. entertainment

As the conversation shifted from business and politics to entertainment in news coverage, the J175 students spoke primarily about what they correctly perceived to be increasingly blurred lines between news and entertainment. Said one J175 student:

I think the coverage is irrelevant and almost pathetic. Things like Darfur get overshadowed by topics like OJ Simpson, Dick Cheney shooting his friends, or Clinton/Lewinsky. I mean, no one knows about Kosovo, but everyone knows who Monica Lewinsky is. That's what the news talks about every hour of every day. You can't watch an hour of CNN without them covering entertainment news. And people don't care, that's what they want.

News is largely based on proximity. That Monica Lewinsky is covered in light of her relations with the former President of the United States is neither negative nor irrelevant. However, the extent and scope of this coverage is what should be questioned. While this student's comment is an accurate reflection of news practices today, his/her inclusion of "coverage is pathetic and irrelevant...people don't care...and that's what they want" is somewhat reflective of a natural disposition to lay blame somewhere rather than ask critical questions.

The J175 group students also alluded, accurately, to the idea that entertainment stories were used to offset depressing coverage. "I think real news is pretty depressing. Everyone wants to turn towards some type of entertainment just to take their mind off of all this depressing news," said one student in response to the extensive coverage of Britney Spears on major network news outlets. Another student followed this by abruptly stating, "Mainstream news is, like, so harsh and depressing."

Generally, news is often "harsh and depressing." The J175 group students were not wrong in emphasizing this idea. Nor were they wrong in alluding to possible reasons for the growth in entertainment

news. This is perhaps a positive sign of early engagement with critical inquiry into media messages. What was absent from this discussion was dialog about why this exists, about the possible reasons for the depressing nature of news, and how such coverage influences the American public—fundamental outcomes of media literacy. Even when prodded by the moderator as to why news was so harsh and depressing, and often sensationalized, the students fell back on simple assertions.

On speaking about entertainment-driven stories in news media, students from the education group were also critical. Remarked one student: “I don’t think it’s [entertainment] relevant for us to know, but it’s relevant to get our attention, and keep it.” This comment is not very different from the J175 student’s comment about entertainment. However, it signaled acknowledgement of the techniques used by mainstream media to grasp audience attention—part of the critical understanding process.

When discussing whether news/entertainment blurring was more positive or negative, the following small exchange ensued in the education group discussion:

Student1: *I think it’s a common thing.*

Student2: *I think it’s sad that it has to happen, but its smart.*

Student3: *I think it depends on what the other news is...The news comes on, and a liquor store is robbed, and the cops shot someone, and someone fell off the bridge. What is this? How come the only news is about bad things? Is there no happy news? Is there nothing good you can put on TV?*

Student2: *Which is why entertainment news that you can joke about may be a good thing.*

Student3: *I think on the morning news they always throw in the happier stories...like a single mother of ten wins the lottery! Something good to start your day, maybe?*

Student2: *Is that because nothing bad has happened yet today?*

Through the questioning of news choices, the students began to offer positive examples of “good” news practices to counter his negative claims. This was a key difference between the J175 and education groups. Perhaps the J175 group, already sensitized to basic media criticism, did not feel the need to acknowledge such basic media techniques as attention getting, and so they chose to focus mainly on criticism. But even

if this was the case, criticism alone should not be the final outcome of media discussions after acknowledgement.

Credibility

I personally always try to assume that journalists are going to try and tell us the truth because of their code of ethics, but I also understand that people are people. So they’re going to have biases whether they try as hard as they can to be fair or not.

—Student, education group

In all three focus groups, after discussing media’s relevance in delivering information to the public, the conversation shifted to credibility in media coverage. The conversation began not through the moderator asking, “How biased is the media industry?” but by probing students about the depth and credibility of media coverage of news.

“I just think everything has a strong bias. I believe that a lot of things we hear today are just what the government wants us to hear. Everyone talks about the propaganda that Hitler used, and I’m not comparing anything to Hitler, but I think this government uses as much if not more propaganda as Hitler,” said a J175 group participant. Comparing current U.S. media systems to Hitler is not unfounded in terms of political media use and propaganda. Such a comparison could even be used to elicit substantive learning experiences. However, as was the case with the earlier discussions, the student made this comparison the end of his point. He had no larger implications for this comparison. Nor did he attempt to reflect on what it meant for media in present day America. No other students commented on or refuted this claim, even when asked by the moderator to elaborate.

“It’s all bias, some networks are more subtle, but I still think it’s all biased. Fox news is less biased...” said one student just before the Hitler comment. Another student disputed the assertion about Fox News: “Bill O’Reilly is ridiculous. Everything he says is completely biased.” These comments began to reveal a trend in the discussions: the students’ distrust of media became a defense mechanism. Are students taught critical media skills to understand what Fox News’s “Fair and Balanced” motto is attempting to

achieve? Or are they simply taught about the contradiction in terms of Fox's slogan and impending biased points of view?

Partisan news networks have also significantly contributed to the evolution of so-called "fake" news³⁷ shows—such as Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report* and Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*—becoming accepted as safe havens for younger generations to receive news. Stated a J175 group student:

Stephen Colbert is sarcastic, not biased. And Jon Stewart knows what he's talking about. He's, in my opinion, one of the most intelligent people in television. He has his opinions, it's just that he happens to be a comedian and does it in a funny way. That's how he wants to do it. He doesn't like the Six O'clock news, or watching Katie Couric tell you about Iraq.

These two programs constantly shift between "fake" news/comedy and reporting of news events. The evolution of such shows is partially a result of increasingly partisan news outlets over the last several decades. All the students involved in these focus group discussions are products of this generation. They admitted watching these two programs to find news, albeit in a comical way. No student, however, discounted these outlets as less credible than major news outlets. That they think of these sources as equal to network news in terms of credibility is a reflection of the general climate for younger generations' views towards major network news outlets. These discussions revealed three key insights about the students' negativity towards network news media.

First, "fake" news programs have become viable alternatives for those who have little trust in real news networks. An Annenberg study conducted in 2004 reported that *Daily Show* viewers had strong knowledge about the presidential campaign.³⁸ One student from the J175 course strongly believed in the credibility of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*: "I think both shows are credible. Because they draw in a different audience and still get the facts across, and they do it in an entertaining way. So a lot of people watch it and the points get across." Another student in the J175 group, agreed: "It's news. Most of the time, they talk about stuff that's happening, like current events..." Students from the J175 course generally considered "fake" news as more credible than "real" news. These students engaged

in arguably their most critical thought and analytic discussion of the entire session while speaking of *an abandonment of viewing and believing network news*. As one student stated, her "trick" is to see all sides:

I look at Jon Stewart like I look at Hardball on MSNBC. I think most talk shows, even though they don't like to admit it, are biased to the right, and Jon Stewart is biased to the left. So I think if you watch both, you will get a pretty good idea of both sides.

This discussion thread reflected an ability to engage in strong critical discussion about media. Students did seem reflective and understanding about the role of such shows in the U.S. media climate for younger audiences.

Second, it is apparent that most students had little faith or trust in news networks, believing that because they are either politically or financially motivated, they do little to provide relevant and credible information. This is either reflective of increased partisanship in network news, the increased availability of alternative news gathering methods, or a general aversion to a news environment focused more on attaining viewers than the content of their stories.

A third possible reason for the aversion towards major network news is the increasingly indistinguishable division between real news and entertainment news. Networks, to compete for ratings, infuse more glamour and celebrity to attract wider audiences. As a result network news, while still overwhelmingly popular for older generations, takes on a different identity for younger generations born with the Internet and seemingly endless options for information. The education group students did not mention "fake" news in their discussion about credibility in media reporting. Rather, they chose to focus on ways in which media could be more credible. "Everything is going to have a bias no matter what. I mean we're never going to go over to Iraq and see what's happening, so it's good to have a discussion about these things. To question things," an education group participant pointed out. Another student used Hurricane Katrina to talk about media bias: "With Hurricane Katrina, they only showed the bad things. But there were also good things that happened down there, like all the volunteers, and the work of the Coast Guard." One education group discussant concluded the discussion with a quote indicative of the overall tone of the discussion:

I understand where it's all coming from, but with programs like Fox News, I mean that's a massive conservative news outlet. For every conservative person they put half a liberal. It's very skewed and I think people need to know that. I'm not saying that's the only network like this, but it's one of many that people need to know about.

The discussions on credibility in reporting led to interesting possible reasons for what was perceived as more cynical views by the J175 students and more diverse conversations by the education group students. First, the media literacy groups were much more uniform in their thought, which was most likely due to the fact that they were all in the same class and exposed to critical media analysis twice a week. Second, and perhaps most important, this difference was either a red flag for the way in which students approach critical engagement with media, or an indictment on the education group students for not adequately critically engaging with media.

Students as Media Consumers

Information has the biggest impact on democracy. People will say this is a Christian nation and our morals are built on Christian values. That's the traditional value, and it's a very big thing. Other than that, the media is how we grow up. TV is a new thing, from the 60's on. It's our generation. More than just who we vote for, more than how we view politics, but about the way we think. Since we were kids, media is how we grow up.

— Student, J175: Media

Literacy course

Before the sessions shifted to discussing what being informed and aware of media meant, the students were asked how much attention they paid to the news media, and the role they thought it played in their lives.

“I mean, it's always important to hear about things, but I only care about stuff I want to care about. If it's important to me, I'm going to care about it,” said a student from the J175 group. Another student offered a confession, albeit justified by his/her personal admission as to why he/she did not choose to vote

in 2006: “I mean, this is horrible, but I didn't vote. I felt I wasn't informed enough to make a decision...I was informed on some things, but I didn't have time.” Another student followed this by stating: “It depends on who you are and what your goals are. I follow news all the time...I think you have to go out of your way to be informed.”

Such discussions reflect an ability to critically think about media's role in civic life and what it means to be informed. Stated another student: “In an age when technology has become so vast, you can't really be expected to stay completely informed...I mean, I make an attempt of course, but I don't think anyone can really be informed completely.” An interesting dichotomy within the J175 group discussions began to emerge at this point. Students negatively disposed to media just minutes earlier began to speak about attempting to be informed, and of the importance of understanding the numerous sides to a story.

The education group students were somewhat hesitant as to how they felt about their interactions with media. Their discussion ensued with a bit of self-deprecation: “I knew way more in high school than I do in college...I'm in a bubble now,” said one participant. “Not at all,” echoed another. Another student from the education group offered his take on how informed he feels: “skim the headlines, look at the pictures, and then move on.” This was rather indicative of the group's overall opinion on how informed by media they felt. Aside from one student saying, “if something's really interesting to you, you're going to find out more about it. That's how I am,” the group chose not to discuss, but instead fell back on the idea that they were not, or were not yet required to be, informed.

As will become evident in the next section, the views expressed towards media literacy expose a rift in the connection between media literacy skills attainment and a nuanced understanding of media's role in society. The J175 group students, cynical in their personal views about media, could not stop praising the benefits of media literacy and the new knowledge it brought to their daily lives.

Topic Two: Seeing the Media – Being Media Literate

After spending approximately 45 minutes discussing news and media, the students were told to begin to think about the term media literacy.³⁹ The intent

was to follow up the discussions on media practices with a short conversation about media audiences.

Learning about Media

Media education raises awareness, and to some extent it takes away ignorance. Because it makes you look at things differently and analyze things more than just soaking everything in. Everyone says the media is just sending information and everyone just accepts it. Media literacy makes you analyze it more.

— Student, J175: Media Literacy course

The J175 focus groups were unanimously positive in their discussions about the media literacy course and its effect on their relationship with media. Students spoke of their newfound ability to look deeper at the news, discover the “true” aspects of a story, and locate different perspectives in the retelling of an event. “Before I took this class,” said one student from the J175 group, “I accepted what I saw. Now I realize I have to look deeper to really understand what’s going on. I think the past election is an example of how looking deeper into the speeches and ads makes a big difference.” “Before I would just watch TV,” said another student, “Now I actually find things I’ve learned in television. The stereotypes especially stick out for me.” Another student followed this by stating, “I’m glad I was able to learn about things, especially about how stereotypes were really reinforced through the mainstream media.”

Students’ positive statements about the benefits of media literacy were an encouraging sign for the outcomes of the course as they perceived it: “I know a year ago I didn’t pay attention to the news at all. Now, I’m much more into it. It matters a lot more,” said one female in response to a question about the effects of knowing more about media functions. “I feel like I learned to pay attention more to the little parts of information that are used to help you understand things,” echoed another.

The most optimistic quotes of the media literacy discussion were expressed through examples of the media’s coverage of Hurricane Katrina. One student from the J175 group stated: “I find myself trying to find out the story much more than before,

like the coverage of the black and white victims of Katrina ... since then I look more closely into things.” Another female followed this by stating, “After seeing the black and white coverage in Katrina’s aftermath, it made me realize that you have to look at things hard, and really question coverage.” One female student noted that her personal activism emerged from understanding events as portrayed through media:

After seeing the Yahoo reports of the different race reporting by the media, I joined the alternative spring break, and we are going to stay in the ninth ward and actually talk to the people. And seeing that coverage made me want to do this. Stuff like this touches me.

Student responses to the influences of media literacy were considerably positive. At the conclusion of the session, both J175 groups even mentioned how sessions like the focus group discussions had furthered their media savvy. They seemed empowered both to use media to become more aware and informed, but also to use cynicism as an explanation for their personal disappointment with media.

Why the sudden change of heart?

Students continuously exposed to examples of media influence and persuasion may be affected in the same way that advertisers target their audiences. Young minds are often sensitized and influenced by the ideas expressed in the classroom. In this specific case, students increased their critical skills and knowledge about media practices. How such skills were taught to the students and with what specific content may have significant implications for their negative personal dispositions towards media. While the specific reasons for such negative views are often difficult to isolate, the overwhelming evidence points to a media literacy experience that effectively taught the students skills to critically view media, but not how such critical viewing should be couched in media’s larger civic roles and responsibilities. Students’ critical skills should, according to general media literacy theory,⁴⁰ enable such ideas to permeate students’ critical media viewing. This is an important first step. But if the media literacy learning experience ends here, the consequences, as evidenced in this study, can overshadow real learning experiences.

In response to questions about media education, the education group took a categorically different approach to the topic. They began to discuss what it means to be informed, and how media can offer a plat-

form for this to occur. The students openly discussed the virtues of opinion-formation and different ways to become a savvy-news consumer.

“I don’t form my opinions from just what I hear on the news. I get different pictures and sources and stuff...I try to get an informed opinion on issues. I take all views into account, and that’s how I get an

informed opinion,” stated one student. Another education group student followed those sentiments with a lengthier comment:

You have to take in all the different views to be informed. You see a bunch of different sources, and put them together to form an opinion. I will listen to exactly what George Bush is saying, and then make an opinion on it...once Joe liberal and Joe conservative start analyzing, I know they have agendas and they are trying to persuade. I can formulate an opinion on what GW is saying because I have basic facts that are un-arguable...I can formulate a real opinion without being swayed by either side.

This portion of the discussion was surprising in that the education group students went beyond simply speaking about looking “deeper” at media, and discussed how education about media can actively influence and inform students. One education group student summed up the discussion by providing a somewhat philosophical conclusion to the session: “Maybe I have a certain opinion on something—the war for example—but its not set in stone because everything is always changing. There is always room for change and flexibility in your views. And the stations you watch will also change, and how you view them will also change...”

A statement as such encapsulates the paradox that emerged in the results of the focus groups. The education group seemed to express less negative and burdened views of the media. Were these students more enlightened, or rather, is ignorance bliss?

Discussion: Building Connections into Media Literacy Education

Jacques Ellul, in *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (1973), alluded to the idea that the educated were the most vulnerable. Ellul speculated

that those educated in media functions, who believe they are superior to media influence, became subject to media persuasion by not interacting with media in a way that may hold the media industry accountable for its actions.⁴²

Ellul’s theory lends keen insight into the reaction of the J175 group students to the conversation about politics in media. The students’ discussions about politics and media were grounded, reasonable, and somewhat expected. The students did, however, give the impression that they felt superior to “the media.” They spoke negatively about how media influences society while at the same time absolving themselves of any responsibility because knowing about it seemed to make them content with their assertions. Media literacy education should make students feel that they are smart enough to intelligently understand media’s influence on society. However, it should respond to Ellul’s theory by also providing the fundamental awareness students need to be educated and not vulnerable. When asked about the importance of being educated about media, the students from the J175 group began to praise media education, not for its tangible influence on them, but for its ability to make them more *media literate*. They expressed the connection between media literacy and protecting oneself against media manipulation. Why such a disconnect? Are the students to blame? Were they missing the key learning points of media literacy?

There are no single answers to these questions. Young adults, in learning about media’s role in civil and democratic society, discover the many complex and paradoxical intricacies at work in media systems. Heavy sensitization to media may elicit initial attitudes towards information that are negative but part of the normal developmental trajectory of adolescent socialization. Perhaps the J175 students’ reaction, upon first exposure to media literacy, is wholesale critique. The education group, in contrast, perhaps had not yet considered themselves stakeholders in the socialization process, and didn’t feel a need to be active news consumers.

If indeed this interpretation does lend itself to the results found in this study, then the next step would be to call for a more vibrant and integrated media literacy curriculum in universities. Most university students do not have the pleasure of enrolling in multiple courses in any subject outside their major. If more media literacy is need to move beyond the initial wholesale critique to balance negative observa-

tions with positive ones, media literacy on any level of education still has far to go. The results of this research point to a need to rethink each media literacy course to better reflect a more diverse and reflexive approach to media literacy that focuses not only on media content, but also on the citizen as the nexus of the information world.

These focus groups cannot be generalized to make any larger claims about media literacy as a whole. They are a small number of students from one media literacy course. This study would have benefited from more rigorous explorations into the quantitative learning outcomes of the J175 course, and included a greater number of focus groups to garner more student voices. Nevertheless, the themes evident in this exploratory narrative call for further and larger inquiry into how media literacy courses engage students with critical inquiry and what connections they make between media and their lives as individuals, community members, and citizens.

Future studies should take this inquiry as a starting point to ask what media education curricula are teaching students beyond critical skill attainment. This study could produce larger inquiries using both quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a more holistic picture of media literacy outcomes in the university. Other studies may also look to develop specific curricula inquiries looking at ways to build learning platforms that enable the connections between media literacy and an understanding of media's role in civil society.

How can media literacy education channel negative responses into concrete learning experiences? The results of these focus group discussions point to a media literacy experience that at present is succeeding in sensitizing students to the complex media environment, but perhaps not going beyond media criticism. Focusing on content alone leaves a void in the learning process. Students who are not asked to reflect on their own attitudes towards media, and to see information in terms of values, associations, and extensions of themselves, are free to critique media from an objective perch. If media literacy doesn't ensure that such discussions occur, students leaving the halls of academia may not fully grasp the importance of understanding media for lives of active and inclusive citizenship.

Notes

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⁸ See note 1.

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¹¹ See Putnam, *Bowling Alone The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

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²¹ See note 7.

²² Edward Arke, "Media literacy and critical thinking:

Is there a connection" (Doctoral Dissertation, Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program for Education Leaders, Department of Education, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA), 2005.

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²⁴ This exploration is part of a larger study conducted by the researcher in the 2006/2007 measuring the learning outcomes of the J175: Media Literacy course through a controlled experiment. The data extracted for this paper highlights the experiential data and student thoughts at the conclusion of a media literacy course.

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²⁶ Jon D. Goss and Thomas R. Leinbach, "Focus Groups as Alternative Research Practice," *AREA* 28, no. 2 (1996), 116.

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³⁰ Claudia Puchta and Jonathan Potter, *Focus Group Practice* (UK: Sage Publications, 2004).

³¹ Philip Merrill College of Journalism. Journalism 175: Media literacy course overview. University of Maryland, College Park. Retrieved on 4 February 2007 from <http://www.jclass.umd.edu/j175/> (user name: j175, password: moeller).

³² See note 1.

³³ J175 refers to the two focus groups conducted from the J175: Media Literacy course. *Education* refers to the focus group conducted with students from the University of Maryland's college of education course in Human Development.

³⁴ This may not be a reaction to media *per se*, but more a general disposition towards corporate business practices. In an age of Enron, Tyco, and a general wave of corporate corruption, the students seemed to have developed a pessimistic view of the profit motive in general. This is somewhat ironic. While they blamed media for seeking profits, they expressed profit motives as the main incentive for media companies, and as personal incentive for them to gain a university degree.

³⁵ The student called the site "theyrule.com." This site

could not be located by the researcher

³⁶ See <http://www.thehotzone.com>

³⁷ For lack of a better separation, and for oft self-exclamations by both Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, this dissertation will refer to their programs as “fake” news. This is not intended to assert that their news is, in fact, fake, but to facilitate the key differences in student opinions of news credibility. In the same way, “real” news will refer to major news outlets.

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⁴¹ A small consolation prize, however, was offered by one student through the following snippet: “And media literacy is interesting. It’s not completely boring like most other college lectures.”

⁴² Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (NY: Vintage Books, 1973).