NEWS YOU CAN REALLY USE:
Thoughts from Ontario journalists about the what and how of teaching news literacy

by

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Abstract

Schools are a place to foster lifelong learning skills. Upon graduation, students continue to learn through the news. What skills and abilities are needed, then, to become news literate? By relying on in-depth interviews with five Ontario journalists, this study brings the voice of journalists into this academic discussion, a voice that has been largely neglected in the reviewed literature. This study finds reporters largely agree with educational theorists on the concepts and lessons underpinning news literacy curricula, although refine these ideas from the point of view of news producers. Several themes emerged through phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts, including news creation as a social process, deep questioning and curiosity in relation to critical thinking, the roles of social media in the modern news ecosystem, and understanding news as a narrative that we shape and are shaped by. Each theme defines what it means to be news literate from the point of view of journalists and gives a detailed view of the generally accepted academic definition of media literacy, which is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993; UNESCO, n.d.). Journalists acknowledged their domain expertise with the media and teachers’ expertise with education, meeting Masterman’s (2001) belief in the need for educators and journalists to work together to further the cause of media literacy. Educators looking for more detailed ideas for the construction of news literacy curricula can find those details in the thoughts, ideas and themes in this study.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

The concrete corridors and artificially lit classrooms on the second floor of the eastern wing of Duncan McArthur Hall receive little sunlight. Some days, the building is as dark as the coffee I sipped while discussing my first thesis proposal with my supervisor and committee members.

It had only been a few months since I started my graduate studies in education, a change of pace after four years of working in newspapers as a reporter. I had researched and reported on education issues during my more than three-and-a-half years at the Kingston Whig-Standard, but I was an outsider looking in; now I was an insider looking out. My first thesis thoughts swam naturally towards media literacy education, but I had focused on the path teachers were taking to the subject.

I was thinking in the dimly lit corridors.

After talking, discussing, dissecting, debating and wrangling with my proposal, I was asked to give my thoughts as a journalist on the future of the news. I did — passionately.

“Write about that,” I was told.

After that meeting on that cold winter day in 2010, the corridors of Duncan McArthur Hall seemed a little brighter.

Writing about news literacy from the perspective of journalists is missing in the reviewed academic literature, despite calls for such inclusion. Many media educators point to Len Masterman’s Teaching the Media as the foundation for modern-day media
studies curricula. Masterman (2001) argued that media educators would be well served to not isolate themselves from media professionals but work with journalists and broadcasters to further media literacy goals: “There are few developments which could have as important an impact on the future success and quality of media education than fruitful collaboration between media teachers, journalists and broadcasters” (p. 262). Media professionals have the current knowledge about media practices; teachers are the experts on educating youth and creating critical thinkers. Masterman argued the two parties should not be separated, and yet that is what appears to have happened.

For more than a decade, the news media have involved themselves in the debate about whether to teach media literacy. In 1994, when the Ontario government released a media studies resource book for teachers, there was some outrage from the news media community about how the document suggested teachers educate students about the media. As one journalism educator noted, media studies is a useful addition to the curriculum, but “it should go without saying that teachers responsible should know what they’re talking about. The fact that the individuals who designed Ontario's media literacy program so obviously do not is therefore worrisome” (Dornan, 1994).

Four years later, when the Mike Harris government decided to cut media studies as a high school credit, journalists raised concerns about the loss of the program as well as concerns about how the course was taught. In a column Naomi Klein (1998) wrote after visiting a media studies class, Klein noted that media studies can help students deconstruct media messages and help them become aware of their own decisions related to those messages. Klein also quoted one student who noted that if students did not become media literate, they “won’t ask questions and criticize the government, and if that
doesn’t happen then we will become like the mindless society members of *Brave New World*” (*Toronto Star*, Nov. 5, p. 1). Klein may have purposely used this quote to argue that without an effective media studies curriculum, it may become tougher if not impossible to develop a generation of media literate students. From an education perspective, media literacy can help build critical thinking skills in students (Cheung, 2005), more active and engaged citizens in a democracy (Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b), and build traditional literacy, math and problem solving skills. In short, media literacy can be seen as an avenue towards meeting several core educational goals with the key goal of creating critical thinkers at the top of the heap (Arke & Primack, 2009; Chu, 2009).

Being media illiterate may cause students to become disengaged media consumers and stop accessing information that is vital to understanding the world around them. Being able to navigate the miasma of information available through the news media is vital to creating a participatory democracy (Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b; Lewis & Jhally, 1998). Postman and Weingartner (1971) argued that being media illiterate also leaves students at the mercy of news and information producers who know the language of the digital, media and information universe. In this sense, news literacy goes beyond simply preparing students to dissect the news — it prepares students to handle the needs of everyday life, namely the critical thinking skills necessary to analyze, evaluate and come to a conclusion about a piece of information be it in a business context (see Thomson Reuters, 2010) or a personal situation.

What, then, would journalists have to say about this topic? How would they define news literacy? More importantly, would they be able to consider the theoretical
underpinnings of such an educational concept? These were all questions that sprang forth as the light slowly began to shine on the topic of news literacy. I did not know what I would find and so I have proceeded with an exploratory study whose main goal is to add to the academic literature surrounding the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of news literacy education.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to describe what journalists and those working in the news media believe should be part of a news literacy curriculum. The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of what media literacy skills — be they manual skills in the production of news texts, or conceptual skills related to critically analyzing news media texts — that those in the news media rank as of vital importance to the creation of a news literate student and citizen. The answers provide insight into how much agreement there is between journalists and educators over news literacy curricula.

There is some precedence for including journalists in the ongoing discussion about forming an effective media literacy curriculum. The News Literacy Project in the United States is a not-for-profit organization that links volunteer reporters with classroom teachers to help build news literacy programs and contribute to the development of teaching pedagogy. The core of the project is to help students sort fact from fiction in the news (Quinn, 2009), opinion from analysis and understand the foundations of a news story. Volunteer journalists provide curricular advice to educators and focus on bringing a critical teaching approach that focuses on the relevance of news to today’s youth (Quinn, 2009). Material is presented through games, hands-on exercises and having journalists talk to students about their first-hand experiences in the field (Quinn, 2009).

The founder of the project, Alan Miller, a former *Los Angeles Times* reporter and Pulitzer
Prize winner, said that having journalists team with teachers to educate students on news literacy is intended to “give students the tools to become smarter and more frequent consumers and creators of credible information, and to light a spark of interest in news that will make them well-informed citizens and voters” (Quinn, 2009). Such collaborations like the News Literacy Project were explored within the first purpose of this study.

The educational support for the News Literacy Project comes from the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University. Stony Brook University is where post-secondary news literacy curricula and lesson plans first evolved and it is now a leading resource and educational centre in the field of news literacy. I was provided the opportunity to learn from the Center on two occasions during the course of this study and I will discuss its impact on this study in more detail during the discussion section.

**Theoretical Framework**

I use the terms “media literacy,” “news media literacy,” and “news literacy” at different times in this thesis. For the purposes of my thesis, the terms will have the same definition and refer to the news media, which I define as being any source that provides information and/or opinion on current events and social trends. These sources include, but are not limited to, newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, news websites and aggregators, and Web logs or blogs.

Media literacy is defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication and information in a variety of media (Aufderheide, 1993; UNESCO, 2000). News literacy can be defined in the same way, although Fleming (2010) offers a few goals for news literacy in the digital age. Those goals include championing free
speech and freedom of the press (Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, 2003, in Fleming, 2010); recognizing and critically examining hidden meanings in news media; identifying sources of information in the news media, including sources cited within news media texts; and developing an understanding of news media consumption habits. It is here that the theoretical framework begins. It is this extended definition of news literacy that I use in coding and analysis of participants’ described definitions of what it means to be news literate.

Now that I have defined news literacy, the next portion of my theoretical framework requires an understanding of why it should be taught.

Masterman (2001) argued the media are “consciousness industries” (p. 3) that help set the public agenda and therefore require study so they “can be actively read” (p. 20). Masterman argued that there were seven reasons why media should be studied: (a) levels of media saturation in modern society, (b) the influence of the media as consciousness industries, (c) increasing management and manufacturing of information and dissemination by media, (d) increasing penetration of media into our central democratic processes, (e) increasing importance of visual communication and information in all areas of life, (f) the importance of education students to meet the demands of the future, and (g) the pressures to privatize information. This reasoning is used as a secondary method in the coding and evaluation of participant responses.

Using Masterman as a basis for evaluating the content of a curriculum, my theoretical framework also requires a conceptual understanding of the difficulties in delivering a curriculum. This is where Marshall McLuhan’s theories on education and technology in education come into play.
McLuhan (1960, 1967) argued for a more experiential model of learning about the media. This constructivist view of media education places learning in the hands of the students and provides them with ownership of the learning experience, which Masterman also advocated. This approach, then, rejects teaching news media literacy through a protectionist approach or inoculative paradigm.

McLuhan’s rear-view mirror theory of education also frames this study, in that the basis for teaching today is not in the present, but in the past. McLuhan (1960, 1967, 1994) argued that as new technology appears in society, this new extension of self overwhelms human beings. Technology, McLuhan (1962) argued, “possesses the power to hypnotize because it isolates the senses” (p.322). The previously overwhelmed senses become relieved with this new technology and we are thus able to fully comprehend how the previous technology has impacted us and how we have interacted with it. In that case, media literacy education has not matched the pace and sophistication of media changes (Masterman, 2001) as media evolve to adapt to changes in information communication technologies. A way, then, to keep up with the pace of change is to connect those change actors in the media with educators.

To review quickly: I have defined the object under study, the reason for studying and learning about news literacy, and identified some conceptual ideas that may hinder the delivery of such a curriculum. Now, my framework requires a means to evaluate information and news and help avoid some of the concerns McLuhan identified.

The propaganda model of news (Chomsky & Herman, 1988) provides a systematic approach to evaluating patterns of media behaviour. The model’s language is useful in interpreting statements from participants. Evaluations of media behaviour
within the model are based on evidence. Klaehn (2005) argues that the model offers a conceptual framework to identify power relations within the dominant structures of media. Individual journalists may still be able to make autonomous decisions within this model — decisions that do not follow the belief that they will shape their reporting to fit the agenda of society’s elites.

Each of these theories hold together the framework that mapped this study and helped shape the research questions that created the direction I took with my research. Combined, these theories point to what central pillar in the theoretical framework underpinning this study: Masterman’s belief in combining the domain expertise of journalists — namely, their expertise with the creation of media texts — and educators. Masterman (2001) argued that, “the cause of education has generally been better served by working journalists and broadcasters who talk engagingly about particular texts they have produced and who can cast a critically informed eye upon their own practices” (p. 265). It is this concept that ultimately guides how questions and responses are analyzed. The goal was to find where there are gaps and agreements between journalists and the literature in regards to news literacy education. To determine if and where those gaps existed, it was necessary to determine (a) what skills and abilities journalists would consider vital to becoming news literate, and (b) how to educate students to meet those goals. The reviewed literature shows a need for an answer to these questions, as the voice of journalists appears to be left out of this academic debate.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

The field of media education research remains a small, but growing field despite nearly a century of theory (Arke & Primack, 2009). The growing interest coincides with the emergence and implementation of media education curricula in elementary, secondary and post-secondary schools. Media education in Canada has been a mandated part of the curriculum in some form for the last 30 years (Gut & Wan, 2008), either as standalone courses or as a theme woven into various curricula. The reviewed literature that directly relates to news literacy is smaller, but growing. This literature review focuses on the small and unique area of news literacy by summarizing reviewed literature on both news literacy and related media literacy issues.

Theorists generally agree on five aspects of media literacy education: (a) recognizing the construction of media as a social process; (b) semiotic textual analysis; (c) the role of audiences in decoding meaning; (d) understanding issues of ideology and hegemony in media representations; and (e) understanding the structure of media corporations (Baker, Clark & Lewis, 2003; Kellner & Share, 2005). Where things become tricky is when authors begin to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of a media literacy curriculum. The reviewed literature provides little consensus on what courses, units, texts and objectives form the bases of a media education curriculum. The reviewed literature also shows empirical evidence of disconnects between the official curriculum and the delivered curriculum teachers provide in the classroom (Chu, 2009; Hobbs, 2006; Kumar, 2003; Mangram, 2006; Morgan, 1998). Media literacy researchers remain a
fractured community with divergent ideas on how best to teach media literacy skills and what teaching paradigm to employ (Fleming, 2010).

At the outset, media education was based on protecting students and young people from the mass media (Dobrzynsak, Blais, & Nadeau, 2003; Kubey, 1998). Known as the protectionist approach or the inoculative paradigm, the roots of this media education paradigm date back to the Great Depression of the 1930s with the introduction of motion pictures and concerns about their impact on youth (Martinson, 2004). Demand for a media studies curriculum gained attention following Orson Welles broadcast of *War of the Worlds*¹ (Martinson, 2004) when radio listeners who tuned in late actually killed themselves believing aliens had invaded Earth. Not everyone believed what they heard: later studies showed that those with critical thinking skills — those who were more media literate — were less likely to have been taken in by the hoax (Martinson, 2004).

While the protectionist approach has not gone away, it faded through the 1970s and 1980s as researchers focused more on the individual processes of encoding and decoding media texts and how the audience negotiated meaning from media texts (Bowker, 1991; Kubey, 1998). At the same time, researchers and educators began to recognize media literacy education as a critical practice of citizenship (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Hobbs and Jensen (2009) wrote that media education changed focus during the 1990s as concerns emerged about the conflation of media activism and media literacy education. This, the writers argued, led to one of the questions that influences the creation of a media literacy curriculum: should media literacy education have a more explicit political or ideological agenda (Hobbs 1998, in Hobbs and Jensen, 2009)? Phrased

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¹ Orson Welles conducted the Oct. 30, 1938 broadcast, which was an adaptation of the novel written by H.G. Wells.
another way, should media education have a more humanistic or social reconstructionist hue to it?

McNeil (2009) wrote that the social reconstructionist uses a student’s own interest to find solutions to social problems and further student learning. Within this model, teachers become political activists who must choose to serve either those who are in power or those pushing for change (McNeil, 2009). This last point becomes problematic when the teaching of media literacy is put into practice. The National Association of Media Literacy Education (2007) makes it clear in its core principles of media literacy education that teachers are to promote a discussion about media and allow students to come to their own conclusions about media messages and media usage and not simply provide students with what may be considered the definitive or correct answer. The core principles note that media literacy education emphasizes “asking questions about all media messages, not just those with which we may disagree” (emphasis in original), that media literacy education “is not about replacing students’ perspectives with someone else’s,” and is designed to develop critical thinking skills. The same document indirectly addresses whether social reconstructionism should be a basis for media education:

As a literacy, MLE [media literacy education] may have political consequences, but it is not a political movement; it is an educational discipline. […] While MLE may result in students wanting to change or reform media, MLE itself is not focused on changing media, but rather on changing educational practice and increasing students’ knowledge and skills. (Emphasis in original)

Instead of the social reconstructionist model, most researchers emphasize the humanistic approach to media education curricula (Brown, 1998). Having a more humanistic media education curriculum focuses the learning on each student’s interests with the goal of individual growth, rather than the rote memorization of facts. The humanistic path of
student self-discovery allows the student to bring in media texts that interest them and uses those texts to develop media literacy skills. Bringing in a student’s interests and out-of-school reality into the classroom is central to Dewey’s belief that subject matter is only interesting when it serves the purposes of the learner (McNeil, 2009). Dewey argued that subject matter was “not to be selected on the basis of what adults thought would be useful for the learner in some future time,” but instead on what the student was interested in at the present time (McNeil, 2009, p.354).

However, too often, there is a disconnect between what is taught in the classroom and what the student experiences in the real world (Burroughs, Brocato, Hopper & Sanders, 2009) including media use. Schools today tend to restrict Internet usage and block sites such as Facebook, MySpace or YouTube, which fails to build a bridge between the out-of-school world students live in and the classrooms they are expected to learn in (Considine, Horton & Moorman, 2009). This disconnect between the out-of-school and in-school use of technology has affected the development of media literacy education (Considine, 2009; Chu, 2009).

Outside of the humanistic and protectionist approaches, three media literacy teaching movements have also been proposed. The media arts education approach (Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b) teaches students to tap into their creativity and create media. This approach is criticized for only teaching technical production skills and not critical analysis skills. Similar criticisms follow the media literacy approach, which has a small following and focuses on the ability to “access, evaluate, and communicate” (Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b). Critics argue that without critical pedagogy, this media literacy approach will only further cement the social reproductive function of education
Critical media literacy is the latest addition in the reviewed literature to the media studies debate. This paradigm takes into account portions of the three paradigms that have preceded it in the debate (Mercado & Torres, 2006). It aims to debunk myths of the news media, including the myths of diversity, objectivity, political neutrality and balanced information (Mercado & Torres, 2006) and analyze media construction and the tools of media production (Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b). However, its overarching objective is still to protect students from the mass media.

So which teaching paradigm is best suited for media literacy and, by extension, news literacy? Some theorists argue for a protectionist approach, others for a more humanistic approach and, more recently, others argue for a constructivist approach.

Fleming (2010) ran two exploratory case studies of her post-secondary journalism students in 2007 and 2008 in order to determine if a constructivist approach to teaching media literacy — based on students own media interests and putting the students in charge of their learning — was effective in creating media literate students. A secondary purpose of her study was to evaluate how an educator could best merge media literacy teaching into a curriculum. Fleming found that when the material was embedded into the course, students reported that they became more critical of the news they were consuming and critical thinkers about the sources of information.

However, reviewed literature suggests that far from being critical thinkers, this generation of students shows an inability at times to find reliable information in the digital age. The fact they are called “digital natives” who speak the language of technology (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b) does not mean they are media savvy, both in their evaluation of sources of information and the technological tools that aid in their
discovery. A 2008 report from the British Library concluded that while the “Google Generation” could easily access media, they possessed limited ability to critically analyze those media texts (cited in Considine, Horton & Moorman, 2009). Hargiattai, Fullerton, Menchen-Trevino, and Yates Thomas (2010) found that university students relied on search engines to critically evaluate sources of information online — the higher the rank in the search results, the more the student perceived this as a mark of reliability even if the source was unreliable. The researchers noted that even when students talked about critically analyzing a website, they rarely followed through on their vocalized ideals.

These findings support similar studies that have concluded that while these digital natives are fluent in the language media — that is they may be technologically literate — they lack the ability to analyze the news and information they receive through media (Hargiattai, 2010; Prensky, 2001a), which points to a lack of news and information literacy. This is an important distinction to make because these terms can be misused in this discussion about news literacy. While news literacy requires an element of technological literacy — the ability to access and create media — it also focuses on critical thinking functions related to analyzing news and information. Conflating the two terms may lead students to not realize their own news literacy shortcomings. In turn, they may not strive to become news literate because they over-estimate their news literacy skills, a problem identified in social psychology as the Dunning-Kruger principle (Banner, Dunning, Ehrlinger, Johnson, & Kruger, 2008; Kruger, Epley, Parker, & Ng, 2005).

An Associated Press (2008) ethnographic study argued that young news consumers had a hard time critically evaluating news and keeping up with the swirling
storm of information. The Associated Press, an international newswire service, found that young news consumers between the ages of 18 and 24 reported being media literate when analyses of interview statements showed they were not. The study found that participants scanned headlines online and believed the headlines were the whole story. When participants checked the same story through the same source across different media or platforms, they believed they were consuming new information when in fact they were not (p. 42). Participants in the study showed signs of “news fatigue” that arose as “they attempted to navigate an information stream that mostly dishes up recycled headlines and updates” (p. 37). Participants became passive receptors of the news instead of critically engaged consumers. Participants reported that they believed they were media literate even though they could not recognize the same information repeatedly being presented to them. The Associated Press study showed participants lacked some basic news literacy skills — the ability to access, analyze and evaluate — pointing to a need to improve news literacy curricula in the classroom to better prepare students for future learning once they leave school.

McLuhan (1960, 1967, 1994) argued that today, as in the past, most learning takes place outside the classroom. The media are a child’s first form of curriculum (Postman, 1985) and it is through the mass media that a child has access to more information than is conceivable. The University of San Diego’s Global Information Industry Center estimated that in 2008, Americans consumed a total of 3.6 zettabytes of information (Bohn & Short, 2010). A zettabyte is a million, million gigabytes, or as the researchers explained: “If we printed 3.6 zettabytes of text in books, and stacked them as tightly as possible across the United States including Alaska, the pile would be 7 feet high” (Bohn
& Short, 2010, p.13). In Canada, a *Globe and Mail* article (Perreaux, Dec. 28, 2010) noted that the average Canadian spends 42 hours online per month, more than any other country in the world. In the article, Queen’s University media professor Sidneyeve Matrix described Canadians as “‘infovores’ who spend much of their time online perusing news websites” (Perreaux, Dec. 28, 2010). The Internet is quickly supplanting the book as the primary source of societal knowledge. A young generation, having been saturated with technology as their primary means of educating themselves, will inherently turn to that technology in order to further their understanding of the world.

And they have.

Today’s youth spend nearly eight hours a day with media — communication tools that allow people to share information, ideas and thoughts (Booth & Lewis, 1998), including television, the Internet, telephones, mobile devices, print publications, radio and video games — and considering they use more than one medium at a time, youth are exposed to almost 11 hours of media per day (Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010, p. 2). A study from research firm Abacus Data (Monk, 2011) found that 70 per cent of online adults in Canada had a Facebook account and more than half of those with accounts checked in daily to see what was new in their social network. The telephone survey of more than 1,300 respondents found that more than half of respondents said they hear about noteworthy events through their social network on Facebook.

All of the above reviewed literature points to a need for effective news literacy programs that can help students and adults alike better navigate the information ocean. This chapter is only a small part of the reviewed literature for this study. More reviewed literature is sprinkled throughout this thesis to better explain the data collected. However,
the reviewed literature reveals that journalists have not had a more pronounced voice in
the discussion about the development of news literacy curricula. This leaves a few
questions in the academic literature, none larger than this: If asked, what would
journalists say is needed to become news literate? This question is the foundation for the
research questions guiding this study.

Research Questions

The first research question that needed answering was how do journalists define
the term “news literacy.” The answers provided gave an idea of what skills journalists
believed were central to becoming news literate. It also conceptualized the term from the
point of view of participants and related the findings back to the operational use of the
term I took from the literature. A question that was asked in this area prompted the
journalists to do some self-reflection: Did they consider themselves to be news literate?
What were their thoughts on the news literacy rates of those working in the news media?
The answers to these research questions helped better evaluate the definitions provided. I
was also curious to find out how the journalists involved in this study viewed the changes
in their profession and the resulting impact on the skills students needed to become news
literate. Questions in this avenue of thinking probed what changes the journalists had
seen in their time in the industry, what skills they were originally taught and what new
skills they subsequently had to learn, and what future skills journalists believed will be
required to access, create and analyze news media.

Besides skills, I was also interested to see what curriculum design and teaching
paradigms journalists tapped into when they considered the makeup of a news literacy
curriculum. To garner answers to this research question, journalists were asked to
describe how they were taught news literacy skills and what they found did and did not work. The journalists themselves were not fully aware of their theoretical biases related to curriculum development, but the answers allowed me to connect academic theory to journalists’ beliefs to see where there was overlap and where there were gaps. I did not expect journalists involved in the study to use terminology employed in the literature on curriculum theory in their answers. In my analysis of the data, I have linked the words of the journalists to terms and theories in the literature on curriculum theory.

To answer these research questions, I had to determine how best as a researcher to talk with my fellow journalists. I answered this question by tapping into my professional experience and newly acquired academic training to find a method that would answer the research questions while drawing the richest data possible from participants. This leads us to the methodology section of this thesis.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This study relied on in-depth, one-on-one interviews with journalists who were either employed with a news outlet, a journalism association or advocacy group, or a journalism education program. In one instance, a journalist who agreed to participate in this study was the victim of a layoff shortly before the interview. The interview took place as scheduled. The participant subsequently found new employment.

The seemingly small number of participants — in this case, five — is deliberate. I wanted to ensure that there was rich data without adding too many voices and making some data redundant (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2009). I also chose to interview practising journalists rather than retired journalists. In his needs analysis of tasks performed by journalists in the community of Catalonia, Spain, Gilabert (2005) found that the domain experts — those closest to the actual task — provide the most accurate and reliable information. As well, I chose interviewing as my means of collecting data because it is a medium of data collection that journalists are familiar with. Consider what Silverman (2000) wrote about the use of individual’s stories in the mass media as a way of making meaning in the world: “Think, for instance, of how much interviews are a central (and popular) feature of mass-media products, from ‘talk shows’ to ‘celebrity interviews.’ Perhaps we all live in what might be called an ‘interview society,’ in which interviews seem central to making sense of our lives” (p. 822).

The selection of participants followed a purposeful sampling model that required me to use my knowledge of the population being studied — in this case, my fellow
journalists — to select participants who would be able to provide the best information to address the purpose of the proposed study (Berg, 2009; MacMillan & Schumacher, 2009). This type of sampling method is frequently used for in-depth interview studies (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2009). My selection of participants was made easier in some cases by referral. In the case of one participant, the participant’s coworker referred me to the participant. In the case of two other participants, my colleagues in the journalism field recommended them for participation because of their unique experiences and ability to be insightful and articulate about news media issues. In all three cases, the participants were highly informative sources of information. The source of each referral was not told if the participant they recommended was interviewed for this study in order to maintain anonymity to the extent possible.

I contacted participants originally via e-mail to inquire about their interest in participating in the study. The initial message included a brief description of the study’s requirements, a reminder that their anonymity would be protected at all times should they choose to remain anonymous, and that they had the right to refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any time, should they choose to take part (Appendix A). When the journalist signaled they were interested in learning more about the study, or that they wanted to take part, I sent a letter of information and consent form digitally for the journalist to review (Appendix B). We then scheduled a convenient time and location for an interview. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with four of the five participants. A telephone interview was conducted for the fifth participant, who was not able to meet face-to-face.
All information has been kept confidential and participants have remained anonymous in the transcript. Names have been chosen for them using a random online name generation website unless the participant chose their own pseudonym. Only one journalist asked for a particular name and their wishes have been accepted. All digital information has been stored on a secured hard drive while hand-written notes have been kept in a secure location known only to myself. All data will be kept for five years before being destroyed.

Interviews were semi-structured with questions and prompts developed ahead of time so that every participant was asked the same core questions related to the study purpose and research questions. Questioning changed slightly after the initial two participant interviews. Whereas the first two interviewees were asked to describe how they would teach news literacy to a high school class, the remaining interviewees were asked to describe what they would want to teach students if they were standing in front of a class today. The latter format led to more articulate answers. A semi-structured interview also allowed the participant the chance to explore areas of personal interest and myself the opportunity to collect data I may not have anticipated to find. Another reason for the semi-structured, or semi-standardized, interview is that it required questions to be worded in the language of the participants (Berg, 2009, p.107). Being a journalist myself, I am fluent in the journalist’s vocabulary.

Journalists are familiar with interviews and all were at ease when the formal interview began. Questioning proceeded from easy, non-threatening questions and moved into the more important questions related to my research questions (Berg, 2009). Essential questions were placed at the front end of the interview to ensure that subject
matters of utmost importance were dealt with before fatigue set in. When fatigue appeared to be an issue, I altered tactics in order to ensure that key questions were asked before the interview came to a close. At all times, participants were asked to give as much detail in their answers as possible. Probes and closed-ended questions were employed to delve deeper into a participant’s answer or to clarify statements. Interviews were scheduled to last 60 minutes. Only one interview lasted more than one hour. All interviews were recorded. I also took hand-written notes and observations to supplement the audio recordings that aided in my data analysis.

All interviews were transcribed. Participants were contacted and asked to review data obtained through interviews to determine the information was accurate. This form of participant review was used to enhance validity of the data collected from interviews (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2009). However, it should be noted here that not every participant replied to requests for participant review. Those who did reply did not request any changes to the transcript, but indicated where in the participant profiles — which introduce each of the analysis chapters — further context was required to understand their words.

Each participant profile and related interview analysis has received its own chapter in this thesis. Each chapter connects to the next, and I have purposely chosen to order the presentation of participants and their data to make reading easier.

I used a phenomenological and narrative analysis to evaluate each participant’s interview because my method of data collection relied on participants to discuss their thoughts, ideas, experiences and reflections during their time as journalists. Cortazzi (1993) argued that to improve education, we must better understand the culture of
teachers. The same can be said of speaking with journalists in regards to news literacy: In order to understand the how, what, and why of news literacy, we must first understand the culture of news production. Journalists have daily experiences with the media, which lends itself to phenomenological evaluation because phenomenology “aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). The media are part of our everyday experience and the journalist a central protagonist.

The fact that journalists are interviewed in depth and asked for their personal histories lends itself further to phenomenological evaluation. Phenomenological research is interested in making sense of a particular aspect of the human experience (van Manen, 1990) by having human beings talk about their experience with the phenomenon being studied. An individual’s particular context and life history is key to providing a deep description of the phenomenon being studied. Such study also allows the voice of the participant to shine through.

Elbaz (1990, in Cortazzi, 1993) argued there are six reasons why narrative or story analysis is fitting for voice: (a) it relies on tacit knowledge to be understood, (b) it takes place in a meaningful context, (c) it calls on storytelling traditions that give a structure to expression, (d) it often involves a moral lesson to be learned, (e) it can voice criticisms in socially acceptable ways, and (f) it reflects a dialogue between the storyteller and the audience. Each of these reasons for focusing on the voice in the analysis will ring true for journalists. A journalist is a storyteller and uses a variety of storytelling techniques when putting together a news piece, such as character development, analogy, metaphor, anecdote and dialogue (Willis, 2010). The journalistic product is as much
about the news producer’s voice as the voices within the news piece. A news article can meet all or some of the criteria Elbaz listed — another reason why it is appropriate to find a research approach that most closely links to the journalistic method of interpreting information.

The interpretations in this thesis are made through a selective reading approach (van Manen, 1990). In this approach, the text — the transcript of the individual interview and the analysis itself — is read several times to see what statements are particularly revealing about the content and approach to news literacy. These statements are organized into themes. The relationships between each theme are discussed to explain how one theme connects or overlaps with another theme in the participant’s description. At both levels of evaluation, the participant’s voice is used to colour the interpretation: “The task is to hold on to these themes by lifting appropriate phrases or by capturing in singular statements the main thrust of the meaning of the themes” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). Direct quotes and anecdotes are used throughout this thesis as a way to explain and link various themes. Anecdotes are also used to describe news literacy because the use of anecdotes helps turn an abstract or theoretical concept like news literacy into something practical or tangible (van Manen, 1989).

Phenomenology is not an exact science. It is a qualitative interpretation of the stories, language and actions of a participant. The result is the construction of one possible interpretation of a certain experience or aspect of the human condition (Silverman, 2000; van Manen, 1990). Therefore, the interpretations of the data from interviews with journalists are just one possible interpretation of the meaning the journalist tried to impart during their time with me. The multiple layers of meaning are
the starting point for a dialogue on news literacy education because educators, policy
makers and journalists themselves will see something different in the text. This makes the
phenomenological evaluation even more appropriate for this study. It provides such depth
that the dialogue can turn into a critical discourse that leads to more and alternative
research into news literacy.
Chapter 4

Data

The journalists who took part in this study identified several concepts and ideas that I have grouped into overarching themes. Not surprisingly, several concepts and ideas cross thematic boundaries. These themes play out in the interviews that follow. Together, they help answer the first research question guiding this study — namely, how do journalists define and conceptualize news literacy.

First, there is the theme of the news as a narrative. Within this theme there is the concept of news as the “first draft of history” and the storytelling nature of the news. There is also the idea of how the news connects us, even if the stories come from distant places, and how it helps human beings understand their world and the human condition. In short, this theme also includes the concept of engagement, which takes place when one becomes involved in the narrative. This theme also includes the concept of being widely read and frequently accessing news as a news literacy skill. This theme is most evident in the interviews conducted with Pearl, Joel, and David, and more implicitly with Sabrina and Bob.

Building on this, there is the theme of the social process that creates the news. This theme includes the idea that the news tells a story created by human beings for human beings. Participants talked about the idea of bias, both from the perspective of media bias and the perspective of audience bias, or cognitive dissonance. The news, then, is a process of negotiating meaning between the journalist, or news producer, and the audience, or news consumer. Subjectivity and objectivity work into this theme as well.
Journalists, like their audience, are not completely objective. Objectivity is a means not an end — it is a process not a state of mind — and is most clearly voiced by Sabrina.

Building on the theme of news as a social process is the theme of understanding the journalistic process. It is in this theme that journalists defined their interpretation of the academic idea of creation as a news literacy and media literacy skill. Production skills were not just of a technical nature, but an understanding of the entire production process — how an idea or news tip becomes a news story presented to consumers across various platforms. The evolving nature of truth — a topic known in the academic literature as journalistic truth (St. John, 2009) — also came up in this theme, although it can be included in the theme of the role of news media in society and the theme of critical thinking.

The theme of critical thinking wafts between and through each theme that arose from participants in this study. Journalists who participated in this study mentioned this theme and the particular term “critical thinking” during interviews. Journalists talked about the need to be curious about the world, to think about the “why” as much as possible, to reflect on why we think a certain way and to look for alternative information that may force us to question our own beliefs and values. This theme also included the idea of identifying various sources of information, distinguishing between reliable and unreliable information and verifying information before accepting it as fact. In short, this theme focuses on the idea deep and constant questioning as critical thinking vis-à-vis the news, which helps to define the term from the standpoint of journalists and further helps define news literacy from the point of view of participants.
Participants also spoke passionately about the role of social media in the modern news environment. Journalists in this study identified social media as a major factor influencing the profession and the concept of news literacy. Participants referred to social media — Facebook and Twitter specifically were mentioned in interviews — as delivery platforms, or sources of news, rather than news sources, but also held the competing notion that social media was a source for information or tips, or a source for news gathering. On the one hand, participants were skeptical about the use of social media as a news source, but also voiced an understanding that social media use is a method of filtering the news and avoiding news fatigue (Associated Press, 2008). Participants were interested in digital fluency in relation to social media and an understanding of its strengths and weaknesses in relation to the news.

It should go without saying that not every idea cleanly fit into one theme, or that each idea received a uniform description from participants. What emerged from interviews was a rich picture of ideas and concepts that can be used to define news literacy — what it is and what it entails — from the point of view of people in the news media.

Each interview is prefaced with a short scene that explains my initial interaction with the participant that has framed how I view them on a personal level. Next, there is a biographical sketch of each participant to set the context for his or her thoughts and beliefs that emerged through my interview with them. Finally, each participant section ends with an analysis of her or his interview. Following the analysis section, I will review and expand on findings, which I have summarized here to help with reading of the analyses.
Chapter 5
Sabrina

Sabrina smiled when I placed my voice recorder on the table between us. She grabbed a handful of napkins and placed them underneath the device, creating a buffer between the pocket-sized recorder and the wooden surface.

Why? You don’t want the sound from the room reverberating off the table, throwing off your sound, Sabrina explained.

I worried the music in the pub would drown out Sabrina’s voice. The napkins ensured the music caused no trouble.

And so began my interview with Sabrina.

The Simple Philosopher

Sabrina has a very simple philosophy on life and she doesn’t mind telling you about it when you ask for it.

Even better, she explains it to you in a really simple way. She could tell it in a more complicated way, but why bother?

Her philosophy on life is part of the reason she became a journalist.

“When I thought about a career, I wanted to obviously do something useful, but I thought in very simplistic, metaphysical terms about human beings. What do human beings need the most? Therefore, what would be a rewarding career?

“So what humans need the most is knowledge because they have to make decisions. We’re not animals, we don’t survive on instinct — we make decisions about
our lives. To make good decisions you need to have good information. That narrowed it down for me quite rapidly into either teaching, which is giving people a lot of knowledge, or discovering knowledge and conveying it. That made it very easy to make a choice because those are things that people need to have to run their lives. So, it wasn’t even as lofty as to save democracy, although that’s the end point of it, right? You can’t make good decisions if you don’t have good information.

“I want to be in a profession where I provide information, ergo people can make decisions. That goes if you’re into these kinds of flighty ways of talking about it. That obviously ties in with journalism saying it’s the fourth estate — that it is essential to the functioning of democracy because the essence of a good democracy is an informed citizenry that participates. No sense being an informed citizenry that does not [participate]. So the information is important both at a personal level — Jordan doing the right thing with his life, so he needs to be able to find the right info — and at a societal level — society being able to make the right choices. That’s why I went into it, so that’s what I think is important about it, journalism.

“You may know that I’m a bit of a libertarian in my views, but that’s why I’m a libertarian in my views because I feel that at a very basic level that your personal decisions are your personal decisions. I also think you have the freedom to make them, that’s why I’m a fairly minimalist government advocate, but it’s much more important than what I think politically. … I want you to have the information you need to make those choices and that’s why I’m in journalism. It’s as simple as that. It’s also why I felt comfortable from time to time in the role of being an editorial writer when I’ve done it
because the other side is jabbing it, forcing you to rethink your assumptions, provoking you to be angry with something I’ve written, whatever it is.

“At the end of the day, although people think of me as someone with strong opinions, and I guess I am, but at the end of the day what I really want to achieve as a journalist is for you to have opinions and know why you have them. I want you to know why you think what you think. That’s my end game. So first of all, have the knowledge and second know why you’re making the kind of decision you’re making with that knowledge.”

Now that you know that about Sabrina, you can understand a little more about how she came to the place she is in her life.

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Sabrina was a good student in high school. Not a straight-A student at first, but she became one in her latter high school years, she says. Her post-secondary career was split into three stages. First, she did an undergraduate degree in language studies. Second, she did a graduate degree in journalism. Third, she did another graduate degree that combined her journalism experience with her personal interest in politics. At the first stop in her post-secondary excursion, she was a good student. At the second stop, Sabrina was, as she describes it, a “so-so journalism student.” She was “not very good, but I obviously did fine.”

She did well enough to earn a summer internship at an urban daily newspaper. The internship turned into a career at the paper where she served in a number of capacities.
When she first started, Sabrina was, as she describes it, a community reporter, someone who focused on neighbourhood news — “reporting on traffic lights and whether curbs should be built on the street and whether a deer had wandered into someone’s backyard,” she says — and then wrote it up for the next day’s edition. She was an editor’s dream because she produced usually more than one story on a daily basis.

“When I started as a reporter, one of my apparent virtues, which I didn’t really know was a virtue because I was too dumb to know what I was doing well, was that I was very productive,” Sabrina says. “I could handle four stories a day, not with ease because it’s not easy to write four or five stories a day, but I could handle them within my shift and get them done and things would be correct and right and the sides would be covered and the stories were there and they were clean. That was a lot of work, but it was clearly something I was able to do.

“It turns out I’m still able to do it, which I’ve discovered in the last couple of years,” she says, reflecting on her return to reporting after years as an editor.

However, when she walked through that first newsroom Sabrina quickly became aware that she was a minority: She was a female in a newsroom and industry that was male-dominated and chauvinistic.

“The editors were all men and when female reporters walked by the news desk they would hold up numbers — scorecards: She gets a 7.7, she gets a 6.3. That’s what the business was like, but out on the street it was not too dissimilar to what it is today,” Sabrina says. “You would ask questions, you’d come back and file your stories.

“Obviously the technology was very different. When I started, we were still using computers, but it hadn’t been around for all that long, so there were still typewriters in the
newsroom — people typed up their photo orders on typewriters. But stories were all happily linked and it all went to a main desk and it was all edited electronically, but composing rooms were cut and paste — pasted stories onto pages and they went to the offset process and on deadline you’d be out there with the compositor cutting the story, like literally cutting the story on the stone.”

After nearly two decades at one news outlet, she moved to a new job. The move brought with it a return to school for her third go-around in the world of post-secondary education. She completed a master’s thesis related to journalism and international affairs, a subject that at that time had a very small, almost tiny, body of academic literature.

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Now in her third decade as a journalist, you can tell by listening to Sabrina that she knows she made the right career choice all those years ago. She doesn’t mind talking about journalism, or thinking it through on various intellectual levels, and she’s more than happy to tell you what she thinks of the job.

Very simply, she will tell you that it’s the coolest job in the world.

“You have an excuse to talk to anybody. All you have to do is have a notebook in your hand or tape recorder and you can ask anybody questions. And how remarkable is that? You get access to people who are apparently important — often you find out that they’re not — but who are allegedly important and you get to ask them questions and sometimes you get to ask them really tough questions and then you get to write it or present it or video it or whatever you’re going to do and hope that other people will be as interested in it as you were.

“There can’t be a cooler job on the planet.”
Critical thinking for the news consumer and news producer

For much of Sabrina’s interview, she focused on news literacy and critical thinking skills in relation to the media rather than the public. This is the portion of the interview where I will start my analysis because it provides us with an avenue to eventually understand her beliefs about news literacy skills in relation to the general public.

Sabrina’s views on the role the media play in society come from multiple points, but the two that are most important at this juncture are her career as a journalist and her academic studies that included researching, analyzing and studying news media. Her master’s thesis looked at the way news media influenced the outcome of a political situation. Her case study analysis showed that “cases that got a lot of publicity got resolved one way or another, sometimes for the good and sometimes not.” The reason that cases did not get resolved properly, she said, was that “the media can get on crusades and sometimes we’re not right.” To highlight her point, she talked about a case where two Canadians kidnapped a businessman overseas. After the authorities apprehended the two Canadians, the news media, Sabrina said, went on a campaign to free “these two white, squeaky clean kids from good families.” They were eventually freed despite evidence of their guilt.

Sabrina: Because we [the media] like to champion the underdog, we often define people as the underdog without knowing whether they are or not and then we’re off to the races. That underdog is our dog and we’re hunting with it.

In this case, and in other cases that Sabrina described, the critical thinking function of the media is turned off because the values of news producers overwhelm the ability to

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2 I have chosen not to go into detail about Sabrina’s thesis in order to maintain her anonymity to the extent possible.
critically interpret the situation. Gans (1980, in Willis, 2010) identified eight values in the news, a few of which Sabrina touched on. The eight values are: (a) altruistic democracy, identified by stories focusing on government for the people and by the people, (b) responsible capitalism, (c) delegitimizing threats to order in society, i.e. crime, (d) moderatism, (e) good leadership, (f) a longing for simple times, called small town pastoralism, (g) ethnocentrism, identified by focusing on one’s own culture and the threats to it, and (h) rugged individualism, identified by stories about people standing up for their rights or the rights of others. Sabrina’s anecdote and insight touched on the values of ethnocentrism, rugged individualism, responsible capitalism and order. As Gans wrote that these eight values, taken together or individually, “suggest that journalists are ideologues, just like everyone else” (Willis, 2010, p.66). Such an ideology can easily overwhelm the rational mind’s ability to critically analyze a news story.

Sabrina: [J]ournalists are kind of like a monolith. They tend to think a little bit as a pack, not always, and individual journalists are brilliant and I’ve dealt with some wonderful journalists.... But there is that kind of culture, it’s a journalistic culture and it’s what we were talking about at the beginning where we identify our underdog and we go with him even if that underdog eats the rest of the herd, he’s our underdog. That’s where we are and that’s not critical thinking.

Sabrina’s language brings us to another point she is echoing here: Bourdieu’s theory of the journalism field. Bourdieu (1998) defined the journalism field as almost a mini-society with its own set of laws and which cannot be understood by external factors alone. Bourdieu argued the journalism field was a homogenous entity (Marliere, 2000), which may be more of an illusion than a reality. Sabrina alludes to such a homogeneity when she talked about how the media “champion the underdog” and “then we’re off to the races.” Sabrina on one hand supported Bourdieu’s journalistic field theory while also supporting the criticism that the field is heterogeneous like other fields, including the
academic field, which “has a variety of the brilliant and the dull, the hard-working and
the self-serving and the simplistic among its members” (Marliere, 2000, 202). However,
it is the homogeneity that Bourdieu argued shapes the way the field frames and produces
news.

Framing, Entman (1993, 2007) argued, is a process of culling a few elements of a
perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to
promote a particular interpretation. That definition, by extension, includes evaluating
what pieces of information are omitted from a news piece to suit the particular frame.
Frames, Entman wrote, define problems or diagnose causes of conflict in a news item,
make moral judgments on the facts in the case and ultimately suggest a remedy to the
original problem. A frame can be one or all three of those functions. Above all, though,
framing a story is, according to Entman, a function of power, which he defined as an
ability to get others to do what you want (Nagel, 1975, in Entman, 2007), and telling
them what to think about in a way that allows you to exert political influence in a non-
coercive political system. This last portion of Entman’s theory of framing returns us to
Sabrina’s last comment on this particular case: “So we saw a lot of cases…where that
fresh air of publicity, which often is a great thing in a democracy, clearly wasn’t. It was
just an interference in what might have otherwise been due process.” In a society that
cannot force the public to think a certain way about a certain issue, the media can help
guide the consumer to a predetermined destination. Not every news consumer will come
to the same conclusion, Entman wrote, and Sabrina has noted that she did not believe that
was the case in her kidnapping example. This is where the theme of critical thinking
began to make its way into Sabrina’s thoughts about news literacy. There were several
points Sabrina touched on in her ideas of critical thinking, including the concept of metacognition.

The Ontario secondary school media studies curriculum identifies metacognition as one of the critical thinking skills students are expected to develop during the course. Metacognition — or thinking and analyzing our thoughts and thought processes — is also considered a pillar of being a critical thinker. Sabrina did not use the term “metacognition” during our interview — I did not expect her to — but she was able to describe metacognitive abilities in relation to thinking about the news, specifically in her role as an editorial writer that forced herself and readers to “know why you think what you think.”

Sabrina: At the end of the day, although people think of me as someone with strong opinions and I guess I am, but at the end of the day what I really want to achieve as a journalist is for you to have opinions and know why you have them. … That’s my end game. So first of all, have the knowledge and second know why you’re making the kind of decision you’re making with that knowledge.

This aspect of critical thinking, Sabrina believed, starts when we are young and beginning to ask questions about the world around us. It evolves as we become teenagers and we start to question our own value systems, she said. By the time someone enters post-secondary school, they should be able to identify their basic values and know why they think that way. The point of a good education system, Sabrina believed, is to ensure that students are given the skills to help them identify why they believe what they believe.

Although she couldn’t describe specific techniques to teach metacognition, Sabrina thought about how to ensure it was taught. For her, it was an issue of not discouraging such skills. The obvious opposite to discouraging critical thinking is
encouraging it. Sabrina agreed that required changing the dialogue in the classroom from a top-down approach to a more lateral approach where teachers talked with students as opposed to talking to students. This constructivist-style approach to teaching has been shown to increase student achievement in relation to news literacy skills (Fleming, 2010) and is also a more general view on educational pedagogy. Such a teaching approach rejects the idea of the inoculative paradigm approach to media literacy, which may produce skeptical thinkers rather than critical thinkers (Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b). Sabrina is tapping into this general teaching pedagogy when she talks about teaching critical thinking, or as Chomsky (2000) said: “A good teacher knows that the best way to help students learn is to allow them to find the truth by themselves” (p.21). Sabrina’s beliefs are similar. She believed that a journalist or educator needed to “feed them [students] information so they take that critical faculty…and use it really well.” However, there is a limit to this educational role for the media, Sabrina said. She said she believes the student has a responsibility to educate him or herself. Sabrina believes that the news media are not supposed to provide all the answers, nor do the media have a moral responsibility to embed knowledge about the world into the individual’s brain.

Sabrina: It is your role to educate yourself; it is nobody else’s role. It is your role to be literate and informed about the things that are important to you. It’s not my moral obligation as the news media to give you that, it is something I think makes news media relevant.

Sabrina’s comments also help define critical thinking. It is not being “critical like criticism,” but critical in the sense of “why is that the case?” Such a line of questioning, which she believed was important to being a journalist, is important to revealing new information about how society works and how we fit within society. For Sabrina, that means asking “not the obvious question,” but asking “the very unobvious question” that
starts people “down a whole series of other questions and different kinds of research.” Sabrina talked about asking “a wider question than what you’re looking at in front of you. … what does that mean? If that were true, what would that mean? Those are wider questions and if you’re asking those things then you’re reasonably [news] literate.” It is the idea of curiosity and constant questioning that lies at the heart of Sabrina’s definition of critical thinking and helps shade this study theme.

Besides critical thinking, being news literate included “being widely read, being well informed, looking at everything in a very critical way, understanding your sources, which sources we can use on the Internet and which ones we can’t and why.” Here, Sabrina is referencing the themes of engagement with the narrative, social media and the news production process. Although her comment was made in reference to journalists, it can very easily be transposed as abilities and skills students and news consumers require to be news literate. Later in the interview, Sabrina talked about being critical as a news consumer: “I think you have to have an ability to analyze, to look at an article from whatever source and figure out whether they know what they’re talking about. You have to be able to do that or at least make an educated guess and you have to know when you couldn’t answer that question.”

Sabrina believed that understanding our choice and evaluation of sources of information should be included as a part of news literacy. When Sabrina talked about her stepson’s youth, she described him as a “very excitable guy who would cite all sorts of obscure sources for what he thought was absolute truth.” The reason that he trusted these sources of information, Sabrina said, was that he agreed with them. However, Sabrina understood that agreeing with a source of information doesn’t make it trustworthy: “I
could go to a whole bunch of libertarian sources and say I trust them because I agree with them, but in reality they’re probably not very reliable sources. I’ve got to do a little better than that.” The key to finding a good source of information is that it is trustworthy. Trust, Sabrina said, is built over time “from evidence” — by consistently providing reliable information. Once that evidence has been built up, there is a trust that develops between the consumer and the news producer, whether it is a particular news outlet or an individual journalist: “You trust somebody to give you a fact because they’ve gotten it right all the other times you’ve ever asked them…. If it’s someone you’ve never read before in a publication you’re not familiar with, you don’t know what its credibility is.”

Even with trusted sources, the key for Sabrina is the old journalism maxim of “trust, but verify,” a comment she said in relation to a discussion about the veracity of information presented on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. When she described a professional development workshop about Twitter for journalists, Sabrina said she was worried about the reporters in the room — specifically the younger ones — who were of the opinion that they had to “retweet” information the minute it came across their screen to be relevant and stay in the conversation. This mindset, Sabrina said, meant these journalists “had obviously concluded there was no need to be a critical thinker, that the job is to be first, not correct.” This mode of thinking is directly related to the medium being used. Sabrina is identifying the impact the medium is having on consumers’ modes of thinking, or McLuhan’s sense extension theory that believed media change the way consumers behave when dealing with the medium in question, shape their belief and value systems and affect their cognitive abilities (Bryant & Zillman, 2009). Sabrina has touched on these effects and believes a medium such as Twitter, without the faculty of
critical thinking skills, can have a detrimental impact on the quality of information and the evaluation of the information.

Remember that for Sabrina, providing reliable information is at the core of her journalism tenets. When she discussed the use of Twitter as a communication medium for journalists, she made sure to point out that “it is profoundly, disturbingly unethical for me to give [consumers] information that I don’t feel comfortable about its source in some way.” She believes that good information is the way we as human beings make decisions about our lives. We learn about our world and survive in it not by instinct, but by the stories we hear (Morgan, 2009). Sabrina was careful to make a distinction about how she uses social media. Social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter are sources of news for her — they are a means of filtering the news and avoiding news fatigue (Associated Press, 2008). Social media is where the news is shared, not where it is created. And like any news source, Sabrina believed a news literate consumer would think critically about the information presented on these new delivery vehicles.

Sabrina: That is a news source for me as it is for many consumers. Is it a news source that I’m going to run out and change my mortgage rate over? No, but it’s a tip, right? That’s what it is, a tip, a conversation in a public square.

Once Sabrina hears that tip, she goes through a verification process that, as she described it, could be helpful for educators, students and consumers trying to develop news literacy skills and abilities. To verify the veracity of a tidbit of knowledge involves checking it across various sources, specifically trusted sources of information.

Sabrina: I would look at the source if I’d looked at a story — I would want to know who had written it and whether it came from The New Yorker or whether it came from something I’d never heard of. If it came from something I’d never heard of then I might check it because I don’t know whether I can trust that source. So I don’t know, greengardens.ca and it was talking about toxic, organic fertilizers, I would say, hmmm, never heard of you guys and then I might Google it in to see if
anyone who is reputable was reporting on that. I’d want to know where it was coming from. I would do that as a consumer and I think that’s probably what a news literate consumer would do.

When the discussion turned to the role the media plays or should play in educating the public, Sabrina reiterated that it is the individual’s responsibility to become news literate — not the media’s responsibility to make someone news literate. This is where the dividing line begins between the education system and the world of journalism. Berelson (1949, in Rubin, 2009) argued that the reasons to read the newspaper included being informed about and learn to interpret public affairs and as a tool for daily living. These two ideas fit Sabrina’s interpretation of news consumption. Sabrina believed it is her job to provide people information and then “it is your role to be literate and informed about the things that are important to you. It’s not my moral obligation as the news media to give you that.”

Sabrina’s academic and professional backgrounds were helpful in discussions about one of Masterman’s key ideas about the teaching of media literacy — connecting journalists and educators to produce a successful pedagogy for teaching media literacy. Masterman (2001) believed that to teach media literacy, the teacher — the expert in education — needed to bring in the journalist whose expertise was in media. Separated, the two sides cannot teach media literacy because one lacks the expertise that the other has acquired. Why these two sides do not get along was a subject Sabrina talked about in detail based, again, on her experiences in the world of graduate studies and as a practising journalist. Sabrina mentioned that during her time in graduate school, there were professors with no media background conducting media studies classes. Sabrina said when she looked at the course outlines, one thing struck her: The courses had “nothing to
do with what we [the news media] do.” So she didn’t take any of the courses. As she described an encounter with one professor where she offered help in the design and delivery of a media course, Sabrina became animated, laughing at one point and then changing tones to make her voice lower to symbolize the male character she was portraying. Her satirical impersonation gave the impression that she was not wholly impressed with how the professor responded to the situation.

Sabrina: I went to one of the professors and said to him, modestly said to him, “would you like some help putting this together?” (laughing) And of course, he just looked at me like, (changing tones) “you lowly student person, what would you know?” … As a working journalist I didn’t think he knew anything about what we were doing. As a working [professional] he would say I didn’t know anything about what he was doing. And a professor would say to me, you don’t know anything about what we require here, and they might be right.

At several points in our discussion, and as I will explain in more detail in other parts of this analysis, Sabrina was not convinced that journalists were always critical thinkers.

However, she did talk about how journalists discuss academic ideas and use their own language to further intellectual discussion.

Sabrina: The difference between an academic and a journalist is that, broadly of course generalizing and being unfair to both, is that academics are very abstract and journalists are very concrete…. You couldn’t have a more abstract thing to be doing in life than to be an academic. You couldn’t have a more concrete thing to be doing in life than being a journalist. … Even when [journalists] talk about journalism ethics, they’re very concrete about that — don’t lie, don’t plagiarize. These are all very practical, good ideas, but the academic would be the guy who would say, why don’t lie? What is wrong with lying? Where does that come from? And eventually they’d come back to why truth is important: it has to do with having the right facts to make decisions in your life — but they’d look at it very differently. They’re both looking at the same coin, clearly, and they’re not connecting it.

This is one spot where Sabrina finds common ground with the academic or educator. The ways of thinking about a given topic are different for each field, but they come back to the same conclusion. In other words, the means may be different, but the ends are similar.
This is where the two sides can find common ground and curriculum construction can begin. Sabrina is, in a sense, supporting Masterman (2001) in the idea of mixing domain expertise between journalists and educators.

However, she is also aware of why such a mixing has not occurred. The root of the issue for Sabrina is a matter of perception — the press and the academic are “wary” of one another “sometimes for good reason.” Late in our interview when we revisited this issue, Sabrina made a comment that supports Masterman’s claim about a division between journalists and educators. Sabrina commented that academics who write about the media “and who aren’t media background people” use an “academic method” to gather data about “a group or discipline that never uses an academic method or almost never uses it.”

“That’s, I think, why they don’t connect with each other,” Sabrina said.

“One of the reasons why journalists are wary of academics, right, is because we don’t think they always have their feet in the real world. Often, they do, of course. It’s an unfair, blanket generalization.”

Sabrina is saying there are biases on both sides that continue the disconnect Masterman (2001) identified and argued against. However, it should be clear that Sabrina’s thoughts expressed in her interview were based on dealings with higher education academics, not secondary or primary teachers.

Identifying biases for the audience is just as important as identifying biases for the journalist. Sabrina raised this issue near the end of our conversation, but more so in relation to understanding how she saw the idea of objectivity in journalism. Once a journalist is able to identify their biases, as well as their value and belief systems, they
can then begin to tackle a story objectively, she said. Sabrina believed that identifying subconscious biases—or “beliefs and thought” Sabrina said we take in “by osmosis that we don’t identify”—is an explicit process journalists and news consumers must go through in order to effectively evaluate information and news.

Sabrina: If you have a view of something, it’s good to know it because you can then take it and kind of check it at the door and that helps you. If you have to do an interview with, and this is the extreme case, but if you have to do an interview with a murderer, you’ve probably got a pretty strong opinion about that guy going into the interview, but it’s not going to help you to be dwelling on that a whole bunch when you’re doing the interview. So you do take it, you take it explicitly and put it to the side. We hold our nose and we go in and we do the story that we have to do and we’re very professional about it. So it does actually help to know.

It is here that Sabrina broached the topic of objectivity under the theme of news as a social process. Objectivity, Sabrina said, is “the way you approach the story.” That means that there is “an inference of a bit of analysis — you’re going to have to make choices about this story.” An objective methodology also understands that making choices about a story includes understanding what facts can be placed within a news piece based on the physical space and time limitations the journalist faces, she said. Her language presupposes that journalists are subjective human beings whose personal histories, beliefs, values, socioeconomic status, geographical location and demography help frame their interpretations of the world (Fuller, 2001; Price & Feldman, 2009). Despite this, Sabrina still believes human beings can use objective methods to test facts (Fuller, 2001; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Project for Excellence in Journalism, nd). It is this method and theme of news as a social process and understanding of news production that Sabrina and other journalists in this study believed are central to becoming news literate.

One way of understanding objectivity is through language, specifically the three types of languages used in the production of a news story (Haykawa, 1990, in Willis,
First, there is the neutral verbiage found in reports that allow the object observed to describe itself. Such language in reports eliminates any value judgment. But because journalists are storytellers who socially construct reality (Price & Feldman, 2009), they use storytelling techniques to convey their message (Willis, 2010). That leads journalists to use inference in their stories, or making a statement about the unknown on the basis of what is known (Willis, 2010). This sort of language is part of the journalist’s role of interpreting not only what happened, but also how something happened, much like a social scientist. This leads to the final aspect of developing a news piece: judgment. Judgment involves making value statements about events, people or issues being reported on (Willis, 2010). Sabrina saw this evolution as part of the objective process. She was careful to differentiate this process from the idea of fairness. Sabrina said she takes objectivity as her methodology and that the methodology results in a fair news story.

Sabrina: Human beings are fallible. They are not going to do this perfectly. They are also going to have differences of styles and taste in the way they write. You and I don’t have the same writing style, so we’re not going to produce the same piece. Does that mean that one of us wasn’t objective? I don’t think it does if you bear in mind that it’s a method. … So what an objective approach to a story eventually leads you to is probably going to be very close to something that’s also fair, I think, because I don’t know what fairness actually means and I don’t approach stories that way. I do, but it’s a shorthand. Fairness is a good word, it’s a shorthand word, it’s a simple word, but it’s also a very simple word. One man’s freedom fighter is another man’s — never mind (smiles).

The reference at the end of the above quote to “one man’s freedom fighter…” sparks a resemblance to the way Chomsky (2003, 2000) and Chomsky and Herman (1988) have described the way media portray conflicts around the world. The use of language may produce an unfair account of events, Chomsky (2003, 2000) and Chomsky and Herman (1988) argued. However, Sabrina is arguing that an objective methodology does not lead a journalist to a predetermined place, but to a place where they can decide whether
someone is a “freedom fighter” or something else. Objectivity to Sabrina is the means of identifying what is news. Earlier in the interview, Sabrina talked about a story she had done about a wrongly incarcerated man overseas. I asked her if she would have still reported the story if she found out he was correctly incarcerated. Her answer was simple: “Sure. I’m a reporter. If it’s a story, it’s a story. Right?” Objectivity as a methodology to Sabrina is means to lead to new discoveries and leads to news.
Chapter 6

Joel

“I’ll be the guy with grey hair,” Joel said.

“I’ll be the guy with the white shirt,” I said.

Not much to go on, but we found one another quickly as Joel walked out of work.

We headed to a nearby cafeteria to talk.

Joel shook his head.

“It’s too loud here,” he said as he scanned the cafeteria.

He knew a coffee shop nearby where we could chat. Much quieter and more private, he said.

Joel and I walked to the coffee shop. It was quieter than the cafeteria and Joel appeared more comfortable.

We placed our respective backpacks on the floor. I placed napkins under my recorder as Joel sipped his coffee.

And so began my interview with Joel.

Learning through and from the news

Joel takes a soft tone when he talks about his life, but his words are sharp and analytical. He is not loud, nor does his voice waiver as he talks. Looking back on his life, the news was always a part of Joel’s life.
Joel immigrated to Canada with his family at a young age. Joel described himself, as “an immigrant. I’m not even first generation.” English was not his first language. Learning English and learning to speak it properly was one of the biggest hurdles Joel identified from his youth.

“So my problem — and this is an individual thing — was that I had to master not only the vocabulary, but I also had to master the — I had to hide my accent,” Joel says. Hiding that accent and becoming more Canadian was a means for Joel to integrate into his new society.

And this was where the news began to take a central role in Joel’s life.

His parents kept in touch with the news through the local ethnic press that provided a connection between the family and their ethnic community. That ethnic paper was a mainstay in his parents’ discourse, though not Joel’s. Joel, instead, picked up the daily newspapers available to him, though not solely to learn English and learn about his city and country: “An immigrant society looks for sales,” he says with a laugh, “and the ads were there.” Again, Joel laughs thinking back to his youth and the search for discount shopping. “There’s the reality of it: We need a new TV set. Where can we get it for less than Eaton’s or whatever?”

The newspaper was one avenue Joel used to learn about Canadian society.

The other avenue was through the flickering images and sounds of the television.

“A TV in an immigrant household is a babysitter. Both parents are working, you come home after school, you sit there and you know there’s homework, you do homework, but you watch television.
“In my case, I learned English by watching TV, but I also watched TV and lo and behold, Walter Cronkite, David Brinkley,” Joel says. “There were these newscasts that all of a sudden began to make sense.”

They began to make sense, he says, by giving him a view of the world he inhabited — the immediate Canadian context — and the greater world beyond his home. Watching and listening to the likes of Cronkite, Brinkley, and the CBC’s George MacLean and Stanley Burke provided the spark Joel needed to become interested in the craft these newsmen performed daily as well as the language education he desired. Joel wanted to speak English in a way that made him a member of the majority.

“That’s right, or at least, a member of — you become one of everyone as opposed to someone who is still, looking at my parents, someone who is tentative about expressing themselves,” Joel says. “Psychologically, I’ll tell you, once you cross that barrier and you are able to speak English with authority, you became part of the general society. You weren’t an immigrant anymore. You sort of crossed the language barrier.”

The interest in journalism quickly focused itself on broadcast journalism. Joel says he found broadcast journalism more enticing than print journalism, but there again arose his language concerns. Part of broadcasting is the inevitable airtime that requires one to speak. Unlike the medium of print, broadcasting relies on sound in the case of radio, or sight and sound in the case of television.

“I liked telling stories and maybe I liked to talk, but I was very hesitant in the sense that the writing part was — what’s the word I’m looking for — not as daunting as presenting myself because of being a new Canadian, not having the vocabulary, etc., etc. So I had to fight very hard to become articulate.”
Growing up, journalism was not among the list of future professions that was discussed in his home.

“Growing up in my household, journalism was not an issue. You weren’t going to be a reporter, you weren’t going to be — you were going to be someone, or at least expectations of my parents were something of what they’ve seen their children and the peers of their children: Is the guy an accountant, or he’s going into business, you know, that kind of stuff. And I just felt I wasn’t called for that.”

The decision to pursue journalism as a life-long profession, Joel said, was also imbued with a certain level of rebellion stemming from those conversations and engrained beliefs from his parents.

When he entered university, the spark of interest in journalism from years of watching television news grew brighter and stronger when he found the student newspaper.

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To hear Joel describe himself as a student, one only needs to hear one word.

“As a student, I was reckless,” Joel says, a smile formed on his face.

“In other words, I didn’t study much. I did the least possible simply because there were other interests and other interests as an undergraduate primarily were university newspapers.”

It was at the student newspaper that Joel began to have fun. The fun arose from finding a forum and space with individuals who shared many of his beliefs, values and interests, including learning and harnessing the craft of journalism. For other students, the newspaper was not the place to find like-minded individuals and fun, he says. They may
have found fun at the drama society, the chess club, the band or musical societies, he says. Joel found his fun at the newspaper.

“And I felt the newspaper had the best parties,” he says.

The student newspaper quickly became more fun than any of his classes, but it was “not just fun for fun’s sake.”

“I soon discovered that you couldn’t just hang around,” Joel says. “You had to produce and the production was in writing and I felt that I had a certain kind of, I don’t know, facility with it, which was good.

“So you start contributing small things and then all of a sudden you discover that there’s a whole life to this, particularly newspapers where there’s a camaraderie that’s built up,” he says. “You put out a weekly newspaper, you get together with people, you go to the plant at night — there’s a mystique about it and it’s all part of that. But to stay there — not only the newspaper but at the university — you had to pass your courses and so I took history and I was fascinated by politics and history and along the way you just sort of get into that and people tell you that’s the right thing to do. Politics, history, journalism — they sort of mesh into one worldview and you pursue that.”

Following completion of his undergraduate degree, Joel travelled abroad. During his travels, he also earned a master’s degree. His undergraduate education, student newspaper experience, master’s degree and associated life experience helped him gain entry to a post-secondary journalism program in Canada. There were courses that dealt with the intellectual side of being a journalist, Joel says, but the program focused on the practical aspects of being a reporter such as writing for television, radio, magazines or
newspapers; understanding and working on deadline; writing headlines for stories; and how to produce a news story for radio or for television.

“It appealed to me simply because of the practicality of daily journalism,” Joel says.

The key in that statement is “daily,” as Joel points out.

At one of his internships for the journalism program, Joel had to produce a long feature piece for a local newspaper. The feature required Joel to get his head around a large idea, conduct a series of interviews with subjects and then sort it into a readable package. It also meant bringing home a story that lasted for days on end. Daily news, Joel found, required a reporter to handle the first two tasks, but didn’t require one to bring the story home.

“On daily news, you walk in, the book is open and 24 hours later, the book is closed and you open the book again and it’s a new page, and it’s a clean start and essentially you don’t take anything home with you, but you have the satisfaction of almost instant gratification,” he says. “It appeals to some people — daily news appeals to me and I felt that that was the way to go.”

Even doing long-form news documentaries, which Joel has worked on during his years in broadcast journalism, still required him to take the story home each night and contemplate revisions to the piece.

“[Daily] news doesn’t give you that luxury, but it also gives you the challenge of being right the first time — well the process itself is much more intricate than that, but nevertheless — when I worked for the six o’clock news… six o’clock was the deadline, the story was over, the post-mortem told you either you screwed up or it wasn’t as good
as it could have been and do it better next time. That’s where my sort of sensibility of journalism comes, or at least I feel more comfortable on a daily basis and putting stuff out every day.”

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Today, Joel works in daily news. His job entails overseeing the stories coming in from reporters and wire services to see what can be packaged for airtime. The job, though, has changed in Joel’s three decades in the business and even more so in the last 10 years as digital technology speeds up the flow of information.

“I started in film. It took time to develop — I’m talking about real time to develop, okay, I’m not talking about the development. Right now, it’s instantaneous. The changes are incredible, they’re swift, they’re fast, sometimes they’re beyond comprehension and you have to deal with them. Also, information comes at you at a speed of milliseconds and you have to somehow digest it and in some ways make it your own before you can tell the stories.”

Despite the rapid ascension of digital technology in his daily routine, Joel still has a few pieces of his past journalism life — some may even think them to be relics of a bygone era — at home: “You know something, in my basement I still have the three carbon paper we used in — the first page was for the script for the anchor, the second was for the producer and the third was for the teleprompter. I still have a few sheets of that.”

Joel used carbon paper for years for daily news. It was how the words made it from the reporter to the anchor to the consumer and transmitted ideas around the country.
But Joel was quick to say that not everyone understands how difficult it is to actually do daily news because of “the expectations and how different it is in terms of ‘journalism.’”

“Journalism is a very, very long word that tends to give gravitas to something that should be seen in a very serious fashion, but daily news is something that’s practical. It’s like you get up in the morning and somebody out there is waiting to consume information,” he says.

“I liken it to McDonald’s: When civilians, if you will, want their Egg McMuffin at six in the morning, somebody is there at three in the morning preparing the bloody thing. This is the same thing with newscasts, news, information — somebody is there preparing in a digestible fashion, the plate of news that people want to consume. And I do the morning stuff and it’s basically, wham, bam, thank you ma’am. It’s there, you know what’s happening around your house, you know what’s happening in your province, you know what’s happening in your country, you know what’s happening outside. Once you know that, in theory, you’re armed to start the day and you choose from that what is most important: traffic, weather, international affairs, business, whatever. You cherry pick, but somebody has to give you the plate and I love that part of the process.

“That’s daily news. That’s the thing I thrive on.”

Why “why?” is so important

Joel was not convinced that news consumers thought critically about the news they consumed. At some level he believed they did think critically, but at other levels he believed they did not. In both cases, his judgment related back to his own experiences growing up as a news consumer and his experiences over the past few decades as a news producer and gatekeeper.
Before delving into Joel’s thoughts about the levels of critical thinking and news literacy amongst the general public and his own profession, it is helpful to first understand how Joel defined critical thinking and how the concept was an underlying feature of many of the skills Joel identified as necessary to becoming news literate.

For Joel, critical thinking revolved around having an insatiable curiosity that stems from constantly asking the question “why” — such as why is this news story relevant to me? Or, why did this event take place? Once the question “why” is asked, Joel believed that any news consumer can start to really dig into a news piece.

Joel: And the thing about it is, you know you sort of always ask why, why is this happening. And you kind of have to get to the why and then say, but is that really it? Is there more? ... You know, yes, but what is it that you really mean?

Joel’s definition of critical thinking is similar to the definition Sabrina provided and further solidifies the idea of constant questioning of the news as a defining aspect in the theme of critical thinking.

Joel’s entry point provides a springboard into what constitutes curiosity. For Joel, it implies wanting to know and understand how events can impact one’s life or one’s immediate environment. His definition mirrors academic interpretations of curiosity. Curiosity has been defined as a desire to acquire new information, knowledge and experiences that further motivates exploratory behaviour (Litman & Spielberger, 2003, in Guo, Zhang, & Zhai, 2010). On multiple occasions, Dewey (1910 in Guo, Zhang, & Zhai, 2010; 1896) emphasized the role that curiosity plays in the education of students to further their psychological and social development. Joel has made the same connection.

News literacy levels, for Joel, were directly related to what a news consumer was interested in learning about, echoing Pearl’s comments in the theme of curiosity and
engaging with the narratives of news. At various levels of consumption — be it local, national, or international news, for instance — the news consumer brought their own level of understanding to the news pieces being consumed, Joel said. Research supports Joel’s belief: Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) noted that news consumers acquire, make choices about and interpret media texts based on their sociodemographic background — their social class, gender, age, and ethnicity — and individual life history. Relevant schemas become activated as news is consumed, which helps in the meaning-making and decision-making process about news (Entman, 1993; Dilevko, 1998; Goidel, Shields, & Peffley, 1997; Hwang, Gotlieb, Nah, & McLeod, 2007; Price & Feldman, 2009; Valentino, 1999; Williams, 2003; Zaromb, Roediger, & Karpicke, 2010).

Joel: I suspect if you are a consumer, then you are literate depending on what it is that you consume. … Let’s put it this way: you worked on the Whig-Standard. The Whig-Standard is a very, very good, local, small level — moderate level — but their stories tend to be for people who live in Kingston and people who live in Kingston consume it avidly. If they want to have more, they will go to other sources. They either watch the CBC, get the Globe and Mail, etc., etc. Those people are literate in terms of their approach to the world... The answer is, some people are literate consumers, they know what they want — they want news, they want background, they want opinion. So, yes, the public is literate depending on the level of maybe education, expectations, that sort of thing.

The particular aspect of critical thinking and news literacy that Joel touched on in the preceding quote deals mainly with the types of information one consumes and the context consumers bring to the news they consume. It also relates to the way Joel tries to teach journalism students about the relevance of the news in their lives. He described his teaching method as a concentric circle theory. Each circle, further away from the source, is further away from a direct impact into the lives of the news consumer. However, for Joel, critically thinking about the circle furthest from the source can provide an avenue to making news from a faraway place relevant to the consumer’s immediate life. In a sense,
the concentric circles for Joel when it comes to news literacy start with curiosity and critical thinking, and expand from there to answer successive layers of questions that a piece of news can create.

Joel: When I teach young, sort of, undergraduate journalists, we do exercises and I sort of go think of concentric circles. These are basic things: your family, your home, your neighborhood, your province, your country — so what’s the most important in terms of information? Am I safe, is my family safe? This is very, very small. Was there a fire next door? Well, the fire next door may have affected your house, the roof may have been singed, whatever. That’s one level. Then extend it. There are certain municipal politics that might affect you — the construction on your street will create a traffic jam and it’s going to make it difficult to get to work. That also is a bit of interest, so you widen your circle. The next circle: The provincial government has introduced a law, whatever. It will have some effect on you; what is it all about? What kind of effect? Finally, you look at the national politics, national scope, national figures and see what they do and what effect they may have on you — so extend the consumption and literacy to a wider circle. And then international stuff. … Everything has its consequences. It’s sort of a domino thing. If I teach people or teach young journalists, I say, cause-effect, domino, that kind of thing. Always look for why — why, why, why?

Joel’s concept of concentric circles begins with the student’s immediate environment and then brings other, more distant concepts or news into contact with their immediate environment. This idea closely resembles the Deweyian concept of education that looks to connect a student’s out-of-school life to their in-school experience: “the school life should grow gradually out of the home life; that it should take up and continue the activities with which the child is already familiar in the home” (Dewey, 1927). Such a pedagogical approach is not something that Joel explicitly mentioned, although he is connecting learning through the lens of a student’s lived experience. He is tapping into his favoured teaching paradigm as a way to promote learning and curiosity.

For Joel, curiosity implied making connections based on the information that one finds — connections that make a piece of news from a faraway place relevant to the consumer’s immediate environment. This task requires knowing more than what the news
story presents. But as the circles widen, the idea of what constitutes knowing, may change. Postman (1986) argued that as technologies like the telegraph removed the physical barrier of space that acted as an obstacle of news production — a local newspaper was unlikely to cover something overseas immediately after an event because it had no way to immediately connect with the source of any reports — it also changed the way news consumers defined “knowing.” For Postman, “Intelligence meant knowing of lots of things, not knowing about them” (p.70). Joel’s definition is different: He believes in using curiosity and critically thinking to connect news items to the consumers’ current knowledge.

In order to know lots about a subject, Joel subscribed to the idea that to be news literate, a consumer needed to consume — maybe not voraciously, but actively search out — a wide variety of news sources, or “a rainbow of information to choose from and there’s nothing wrong with taking every shade of the rainbow,” as Joel put it. This comment mirrors Sabrina’s comments about news consumption habits, but not Pearl who disagreed with this notion, giving a different view of the theme of engagement and the search for a definition of news literacy. For Joel, isolating oneself from certain media platforms is wrong; what is more correct is understanding that each medium of communication has its own languages, its own norms and its own strengths. By consuming various media and various media content — be it local or national news, sporting news, news opinion, or entertainment news — one can develop news literacy skills and abilities and better navigate the “information rainbow.”

Joel: In other words, watch as much TV as possible in terms of news and current affairs; read as many newspapers as possible; there are magazines; understand what it is that you’re watching and listening and reading. If you’re watching daily news on TV, you will understand that you are getting just a sliver of information, okay,
of that day. If you are reading a newspaper, you’re getting something a little more — the menu becomes more substantial. If you think that you’re missing something, search out other things — magazines. And if you really want to be literate about information, then there are thousands of books written on thousands of subjects. … I would say journalism per se is a door, or at least consumption of journalism is a door to wider information.

Again, Joel links curiosity and critical thinking to news literacy. This time, however, he is seeing it as a doorway for further learning. As mentioned earlier, curiosity is defined as a desire to acquire new information, knowledge and experiences that further motivates exploratory behaviour (Littman & Spielberger, 2003, in Guo, Zhang, & Zhai, 2010). If this is the case, Joel can be seen as turning the audience from passive receptors to active participants in news texts. Reviewed literature suggests that the audience is now seen as an active member in the meaning-making process around media texts rather than passive receptors. The idea of audience as meaning makers is part of the pluralist tradition that believes audiences employ strategies to construct individual interpretations of events (Dilevko, 1998). Joel’s view of the audience in the meaning making process make him part of this pluralist tradition. However, Joel’s own experience shows there is a continuum of audience participation in the meaning-making process, a continuum that runs from fully passive to wholly active.

In his role as an audience member, or a consumer of news, Joel described himself not as an active decoder of media messages, but as a passive consumer of whatever pieces of information that were put before him. When he first raised the issue of audience theory, he admitted he was “not very critical” of the stories he consumed. In a sense, he did not look for inferences in stories, or dissect media texts to understand the various elements that make up a news story. As he progressed with his description, it became clear that original fascination with the news carried over into his professional life when
he started creating news and making editorial decisions about news for others to consume.

Jordan: What kind of questions — before you got to journalism school — what kinds of questions do you remember thinking to yourself and wondering about what they were presenting to you?

Joel: Not necessarily very critical, but just sort of the wonder of it all, the idea that, wow, stories from Russia, stories from China, standing there, being part of it, clichés, the first draft of history. Somebody said it much better than I did, but the idea that you sort of look at this and you say, that’s interesting, you know? Not only that, but you become part of this — you watch, you listen and you start hearing voices of people and you start hearing stories of people and you say to yourself, wow that’s interesting. And in many ways, the measure, certainly for me, of a particular story, again it’s a cliché, it’s, wow, that’s interesting. Or the old, another cliché that we use — we use it in the business — and that is, “Hey, Martha! Did you know…” In other words, you’re calling your wife into the living room to share with your wife what you’ve just seen. The sharing and the calling in is indicative, it’s almost like, wow, did you see that? Did you hear that? Absolutely new, absolutely different, absolutely fascinating and this is the part that really, you know, got me.

I look back and I wasn’t going to say, “Mom, look at this,” but I kind of looked at TV or listened to the radio and I kind of went, wow. And I remember, as a matter of fact, one of the things that I was doing when I had the little kind of plug-in radio bedside, I would listen at night, sort of putting myself to sleep… And at night you had different kinds of shows, but you also had your hourly newscasts and things and that kind of listening there and you hear of my goodness, this is what happened. That’s interesting. Again, uncritical.

It is also interesting to note here that Joel was an immigrant and that the news media was an agent of socialization and helped Joel integrate into a new culture. As he mentioned when we first started talking, he learned English by watching and listening to broadcast newscasts while also getting a sense of the subtleties of Canadian values, customs and norms.

Media have always been considered and studied as an agent of social change and reinforcement of social norms. Masterman (2001) argued media help set the public
agenda by not necessarily telling the public what to think, but telling the public what to think about. In this way, the media are “consciousness industries” (p. 3) that require study so they “can be actively read” (p. 20). In this case, Joel was led to think about the issue the news media focused on in Canadian culture at that particular point in history.

However, today Joel seemed to describe himself as a more critical news consumer. Given his position, he is aware of the vast array of information sources online and alluded that evaluating online sources of information is part of news literacy. As we talked about news sources and sources of information, Joel referenced the website WikiLeaks, which released documents secretly delivered to it from government and business whistleblowers. On one hand he supported the release of information and the right to make information available to the public — which connects with one aspect of the academic description of news literacy, that of championing free speech and freedom of the press (Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, 2003, in Fleming, 2010) — but he was also wary of how the information made its way to the public.

Joel: I think, yes, information has to be shared, the government should not be allowed to harbour information because information is power, but there’s got to be a responsible way of using that information. Throwing it out just like that and sort of saying, well, you guys decide, I’m not quite sure that that’s the right way. … What was more interesting? To me, the New York Times piece because the other stuff was so intricate. Was it easier to read rather than going through 76,000 bits of information? Perhaps. Do I feel that my interpretation of it is based on the facility that somebody else did the work? Yeah. Trained, practising journalists did it.

Joel is identifying a key difference between the concepts of information literacy and news literacy that flowed through participant responses. Grafstein (2002) wrote that “given the seductively easy accessibility of masses of unregulated information, it is imperative that students … develop the ability to evaluate the information they encounter for
authenticity, accuracy, credibility, authority, relevance, concealed bias, logical inconsistency,’’ in relation to information literacy. All of these ideas work their way into news literacy, but Joel has made a distinction. The difference between information and news, in Joel’s opinion, is that information is raw data while news takes that data and provides an interpretation. He is also quick to use the term “practising journalists” in reference to the news. Joel believed that journalists required training to do their profession and he expressed concern that anyone can call himself or herself a journalist, thereby answering the information literacy issue of authority and credibility.

Following this line of thought, Joel appeared to believe that information consumers were not as critical about online sources of information as they should be. This can also be a generational divide under the theme of social media as Pearl discussed explicitly and Sabrina identified with her talk about how young journalists at a conference discussed their use of Twitter. Joel fondly talked about his past and his early days in journalism and was astounded at the rate of change in his industry that included information coming out faster than ever before. And as the raw information seeps out to the press, it also seeps out to the audience. Yet the idea of checking the library or searching for information online, to Joel, appeared to require the same basic set of skills: one has to know what they are looking for and then evaluate the trustworthiness of the sources of information. The difference is in trusting whatever one finds online or whatever Google or another search provider — Google just happens to be the one Joel referenced — provides in its search results. Joel’s analysis of online searching is not far off. Research in the field of online search and content evaluation has found that people do not strongly possess these skills. Studies have shown the Millennial Generation, or digital
natives (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b), does not possess the expertise required to search the World Wide Web efficiently or critically assess the credibility of what they find (Hargiattai, Fullerton, Menchen-Trevino, & Yates Thomas, 2010). Joel seemed to believe that people “in the old days” were more adept at this process than youth today. However, this is where digital literacy begins to overlap with news literacy and lends itself to the idea that these various literacies participants identified — information literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, and news literacy — at some point cross curriculum boundaries just as themes in this study cross thematic boundaries.

Joel did identify one aspect he believed was required to be news literate: An ability to challenge one’s own beliefs and consume news that may force her or him to rethink his or her value systems.

Joel: I think also that the public tends to consume the things they want to hear, in other words something that’s comforting for them — opinions that they share are much more readily acceptable by them. Maybe people like to be confirmed and not challenged. I don’t know.

Without saying the words, Joel touches on the issue of confirmation bias, which is when news consumers submit to their own biases and select sources of information that fit their belief and value system. In the context of the news, when a consumer comes across information that contradicts what they know or believe, the two thoughts cannot fit in the same space. Instead of dealing with this cognitive discomfort, the consumer may submit to the proverbial path of least resistance and seeks out sources of information that reinforce what they already know even if the information is factually wrong. This cognitive issue is known as cognitive dissonance and is an unconscious process (Claussen, 2004).
When Stroud (2008) looked at partisan selective exposure — that is news consumers selecting news sources that fit their political ideologies — following the 2004 U.S. presidential election, the results from surveys of news consumption seemed to validate selective exposure as a factor in news consumption. However, Stroud was not ready to say the results definitively proved the existence of selective exposure: “Partisan selective exposure is not so pervasive that people have completely surrounded themselves with likeminded media outlets,” but “people’s political predispositions are important determinants of their media use” (p. 359-360). The personal history Joel brought to our interview appears to give weight to the presence of selective exposure among news consumers. This is partly what Joel was trying to get at when he talked of the “information rainbow” and “cherry picking” from every colour — not only could he be seen as referring to various media platforms, but also referring to the consumption of various sources of news within each platform, again echoing Sabrina’s views on using a variety information sources, not just those that support one’s core values and beliefs. This is one way to counter news fatigue (Associated Press, 2008) and to further understand the theme of social media. On the World Wide Web, consumers use social media as a way to sort through news to avoid information overload. The key for Joel is ensuring the filter does not isolate the consumer from different perspectives on the “information rainbow” and that “cherry picking” the news also means selecting a few items that challenge one’s beliefs.

Joel: If you like to have your ideas confirmed, then that’s fine. If you like to have your ideas challenged and you rise to the challenge, that’s a good thing. But if you don’t like to have your ideas challenged and you get angry and start fighting those ideas, then essentially your critical thinking is more or less left behind and you become an aggressive participant.
This particular aspect of Joel’s evaluation of what it means to be news literate relates to a particular definition of what it means to be a critical thinker: the ability to identify and challenge assumptions and search for alternative ways of thinking (Ore 2005 in Bergman & Radeloff, 2009).

When I pointed out to Joel that what he was talking about could be described as cognitive dissonance, Joel began linking the idea of selective exposure to “uncritical thinking.” By denying this aspect of critical thinking, Joel believed that instead of being an active or passive participant in the news process, the consumer that chooses the path of selective exposure becomes “an aggressive participant.” “Aggressive participants” emotionally react to the news rather than critically evaluate the news text before them. Rather than build an argument about the facts contained in a news text, Joel believed “aggressive participants” impose a perception of bias or immediately dismiss the story as false before fully evaluating the facts contained in the news text simply because they do not agree with the news. Emotion controls “aggressive participants” as opposed to active participants that critically evaluate news.

Joel said it is the media’s critical role to be fair to the facts of a story and be careful with them. Further evaluation of the sources of information and the information contained in the news piece is left to the consumer. This is where Joel drew his line between the role of the audience and the role in the media in developing news literacy. After being fair with the facts and critically thinking and presenting a news story, it is then up to the consumer to bring in their own critical thinking function.

And being fair with the facts is different from being balanced in reporting. Joel did not say the role of the journalist was to be balanced with the facts — their role was to
be fair. Being fair implies making a value judgment and critically thinking about the facts presented in a news piece, as Sabrina talked about. Balance implies providing equal time and space for opposing viewpoints in the news piece (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). By using the term “fair job,” Joel is alluding to the media literacy notion and the theme of the creation of media texts as a social process where journalists, as human beings, make subjective judgments. This mode of thinking mirrors the results from one study (Hanitzsch, 2007) where participants who identified themselves as subjective journalists said their beliefs and values could not be separated from their evaluation of every fact for a story. They believed each claim must go through an objective and subjective evaluation process to determine its level of veracity before being presented to the public. It is a critical thinking process that Joel is alluding to through the term “fair job,” rather than a balanced job where the critical thinking function could be turned off (Holcomb, 2009).

Crossing thematic boundaries, Joel described the news as “the first draft of history,” bringing us back to the theme of news as a narrative. As the first draft of history, there is always the possibility that something might be wrong or that not all the facts are visible for the journalist and the world to see. In that sense, using the term “first draft of history” is quite appropriate — news is only a draft document that is updated and never fully finalized. It is a daily slice of the truth that is put together to make a whole (St. John, 2009). This particular issue is known as journalistic truth (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; St. John, 2009), which is very much like scientific truth in its nature to evolve and change as new information and insights become available. While Joel did not use the same words, he was able to identify journalistic truth as an area where news consumers require
understanding. Joel regarded this knowledge of journalistic truth as a news literacy skill under the theme of engagement and understanding news as a social process.

Joel: You know, people say the truth will rule out. Today this person told me this particular story; tomorrow, I’ll get another version and I can have the two versions compete and in that competition another truth will come out. Again, it doesn’t sound very academic or very deep, but in fact that’s part of, to me, the daily kind of struggle of getting stuff on the air.
Chapter 7

Bob

Bob sat down in the chair across from me.

He had a rough day and had to return to work that night. He had had to deal with a pushy public relations professional trying to “push some piece of crap” on him.

We each ordered a beer and relaxed for a moment. We laughed at the originality in his choice of pseudonyms.

Bob was tired, but he wasn’t going to use that as an excuse to not talk with me.

Bob didn’t have any questions for me.

He was ready to chat.

And so began my interview with Bob.

The Wordsmith

Bob was not and still does not see himself as a numbers guy. He’s a words guy, through and through.

In high school, he hated math.

Social sciences? That he liked. That he was okay at.

“I think with social sciences you saw how things immediately had an impact on you, or how they did in the past. The link was very strong between political events and how they’d turn out and affect the citizens. Whereas the science stuff was a little more detached from the immediate impact on society as I saw it,” says Bob, a 20-something.
Looking back on some of his courses, Bob remembers a high school calculus course he took late in his secondary school career. He barely passed. Bob says he didn’t see a practical use for the math being taught in the course.

“I think if I really liked what I was learning about, I did really well. But if it was something I didn’t like, I probably wasn’t going to study very hard and as a result I probably didn’t do well in some courses,” he says, thinking back on what he was like as a learner.

The courses he did do well in were politics and history. In those courses he scored in the high 80s.

“I like knowing the events that shape the path, that shaped history that shaped our world today and seeing how what happened in the past has had an impact on the way we do things today, whether it’s in our everyday lives from a cultural point of view, or from a political point of view,” he says.

That’s where Bob’s interest in the news comes in. Bob sees journalism as the fourth estate — the counterbalance to government and private institutions — and that’s what got him interested in making journalism a life-long occupation.

“I like knowing what’s going on and being the first to know and also holding governments accountable for the decisions that they make,” Bob says.

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It was in high school, Bob says, that he started noticing the news.

At home, his parents had two local newspapers. How they arrived at the suburban home, Bob isn’t too sure.
“They were free,” he says, pausing to reflect on that statement. “Or for some reason we got them for free. My parents wouldn’t subscribe to them.”

Laughing, he says, “They just showed up.”

Outside of the printed word that showed up at his door, Bob also watched the evening news. He didn’t watch the 6 p.m. newscast every night with his parents, but Bob says he watched the nightly news “three times a week,” which he feels is a high viewing rate for high school students considering “you have better things to do” as a teenager.

Bob did most of his news reading at school. The school library had papers from across the country that provided Bob with different views and insights.

“In the library they’d have all the papers, all the Canadian [newspapers] … they’d have them around so I’d pick them up and read,” Bob says. “I read a lot, and I don’t mean books. I mean, I did read books, but I wasn’t a bookworm. I just read a lot newspaper-wise when newspapers were still the main way to get information.”

Slowly, his reading habits changed. He continued to read the news, but picking up the printed paper and coming home with ink on his fingers faded away as he, along with other news consumers his age, migrated to the realm of online news.

“As online news sort of became an up-and-coming thing, I would spend more time on various websites just reading about stuff and also knowing about which media companies owned which outlets and I think that’s something that people still don’t understand,” he says.

Those two newspapers he read at home growing up? They were once owned by different owners, which, Bob says, resulted in different perspectives and interpretations
of an event or issue in the community. He says he used to compare the two papers and the coverage they provided to see what information one provided that the other did not.

“The two different papers we had, they’d have their reporters covering different issues in town, but they would have different styles, different perspectives on it,” Bob says.

“Now when I go visit my parents, both of these papers are owned by the same company and one has the condensed version of what the other one had. But I would always want to see both papers to see what did [one] say and what did the other one say and what information did they get.”

In the few class talks that he has done, Bob says he has tried to be honest with high school students about the news production process and tried to imbue in them some understanding of the structure of media ownership.

“The importance of knowing media [ownership] is to know that one company can own two different newspapers, but they can share a whole lot of content and there’s a very good chance they’ll have the same stuff in each outlet. I think when you have more owners you have more perspectives because they would have more outlets, independent outlets of each other.”

The more views, the more the media can perform the roles Bob believes they should perform: that as the first draft of history and as the fourth estate.

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A normal day for Bob starts early, long before the sun rises. He starts his shift at 6 a.m. and updates his outlet’s website with stories that have come in overnight locally,
provincially, nationally and internationally. He also checks what the competition is reporting that day and may summarize the top stories circulating in the community.

At the same time, he also has a beat that he covers and he may pitch stories to his producers.

His time is spent between his outlet’s website and broadcast channel, creating content for both platforms.

Bob still reads a lot of online news, although not as much outside his job. Much like in high school, he reads the news outside his home.

“Outside of my job I try to ration it because it’s sort of like I’m working when you tune in after work. I’ll check in on the web before I go — actually, no, I’ll check in when I get home from work to see what’s happened since I left and then maybe I’ll check in after dinner and before bed. By ‘check in’ I mean just opening up their websites and checking what they’ve posted on their front pages, seeing what’s new,” Bob says.

He says he scans headlines on news sites and glosses over most of the stories posted, “but if there’s something that’s developing or something that really catches my eye, I’ll read it in depth.”

After speaking for nearly an hour, Bob orders himself some food and relaxes a little. He seems to enjoy talking about a subject he was passionate about, even if his fatigue shortens his answers. It is nice way to break up his long day.

Teaching news literacy inside and outside the classroom

Bob’s thoughts about news literacy began in the classroom and stayed in the classroom for the duration of our interview. That classroom was either one he had been in as a student, or been in as a journalist talking to students about the news media.
A few months before Bob and I met, he spoke to a group of students at a suburban school. It was his first time speaking before a class and it shaded much of his thoughts about what students know about the news media. His talk, which came on the school’s career day, was not the traditional classroom talk. Bob described it as “a power circuit” where he spoke to a group of students for 20 minutes before a new group rotated in. Bob gave his prepared presentation, “saying what I do, what I don’t do, how I do it, when I do it” and then opened the floor to questions.

Bob: I was nervous going into it, but then afterwards I found out these guys don’t know anything about what I do. They think I go out to the scene of everything and I interview everyone and I know everything and I make lots of money, which isn’t entirely true.

Bob’s expertise is in broadcast journalism and that was what he spoke about to the students. Bob was, as the above quote shows, surprised at how little the students knew about how television news is produced. Bob said the students didn’t know much about the production process or the various roles played within a broadcast newsroom. For instance, the students didn’t realize “reporters do very little work from a TV perspective” and that researchers and producers support reporters behind the scenes. Bob said the students believed “it’s all about the reporter and that’s the only one that does anything. Or the anchor — they’ll report on what’s going on in Afghanistan and they [the students] don’t understand how they [the anchor] get the information.” Bob said he believed understanding the journalistic process is something important for students to know. This is where the theme of news production entered Bob’s interview.

Jordan: How did those students react to your explanation of how much work reporters and anchors do and how much is done behind the scenes?
Bob: I think it was almost like telling them that Santa Claus doesn’t exist. (Laughs) They were really disappointed. We’re talking Grade 7 and 8 kids and they were just
devastated. I just told them like it is and I said, no that’s not the way it actually works.

Bob’s reference to news production is not strictly on the technological aspects of creating a news text, but the complete production process and social process that goes into the creation of every news text. Understanding the production and social processes that create a news text is a means of better understanding and evaluating news. Masterman (2001) argued that students needed to understand how news is created in order to understand the media and media educators agree the ability to create media is part of becoming media literate (Aufderheide, 1993; UNESCO, 2000). Bob’s perception that students lack an understanding of the news production process led him to the observation that the students he spoke with were “disenchanted with the reporting” they encountered on television newscasts “and how little we do, how much of the news TV stations and outlets get from newspapers.” While this disenchantment could be seen as a medium issue — where the images are more important than content and thinking deeply about a topic doesn’t fit with the entertainment value of television (Postman, 1985) — this disenchantment is not isolated to television news. The Associated Press (2008) found young news consumers craved depth in the news they consumed, yet could not find such depth. The study found that while there were vast amounts of news line, “the abundance of news and ubiquity of choice do not necessarily translate into a better news environment for consumers” (p.37). This is where “news fatigue” arose as participants “attempted to navigate an information stream that mostly dishes up recycled headlines and updates” (p.37). The study suggested that flooding the market with repetitive content wore down the audience and turned them into passive recipients of information. It seems that from Bob’s experience, it has also disengaged young news consumers and builds the
theme of engagement that Pearl and Joel discussed. Reversing this disengagement for Bob meant tapping into another theme in this study: the use of social media.

Being a multimedia journalist, Bob was very much a fan of social media. He identified Twitter as a way his outlet connected with consumers to get information and also engaged with them in conversation: “It’s a really easy two-way method of information.” Even in his media life, Bob sees talking about the media as a lateral conversation rather than a top-down dissemination of information — the point for Bob is to engage in a dialogue rather than deposit information into his consumers’ minds (Freire, 1970). Bob has given a glimpse into how he would teach students about the media — while he would still provide information in a top-down manner by giving students facts about the media, he would also engage in conversation making media education less hierarchical (Masterman, 2001), similar to Sabrina’s beliefs.

By referring to students as “jaded…with the whole field” of journalism, Bob is identifying a potential spin-off from one teaching approach to news literacy or media literacy: the protectionist approach. This approach arises from the magic bullet theory (Willis, 2010) of media that believes that media have a negative affect on consumers. In order to remain unharmed from the magic bullet, this approach views the teacher as protector and the student their protected. It is also linked to the third person effects theory (Willis, 2010) that argues the perceived impact of media on others is greater than the perceived impact on oneself. These two theories, when put in the context of educational pedagogy, may not create news literate students and instead promote skepticism and cynicism about news consumption (Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b). By becoming jaded, the students Bob described have become skeptics of the news media and may therefore
not be thinking critically about the news they consume. Without saying it, Bob has identified the protectionist approach as the wrong approach to teaching news literacy the same way Sabrina did.

Bob’s reluctance to follow the protectionist approach is also based on his experiences as a high school student. When Bob described the absence of explicit media literacy instruction in high school (he did not identify any implicit media literacy skills woven into the delivered curriculum), he pointed out that an economics teacher did call the *National Post* the “Nazi Post.” While Bob laughed at the memory, he did mention that was the “unofficial media literacy training that you get.”

Bob’s lack of an explicit educational past with the media and the news likely helped him connect with the students and recognize their lack of a curricular experience with the news media. I asked Bob about what the students’ teacher had told him in regards to her media literacy instruction.

Bob: She said some of them would be interested in being a sportscaster or being a weather reporter… but never said they had any prior training. She did say afterwards that they responded very favorably to my presentation and thought it was one of the most interesting ones there.

This lack of in-class experience with the media is a likely contributor to the students’ inability to formulate a realistic picture of what the news media do and how they operate. For Bob, this unrealistic picture of the news media is troubling. Remember that Bob said the students’ lack of news media knowledge left him “a little shocked.” When Bob talks about understanding news production, he is connecting this idea to the theme of news as a social process, as Pearl did through her experiential learning example. This gives us a different point of view on what production and the ability to create means in the context of this study: The ability to create news media is not about technical skills or digital
literacy per se, but the entire production process that starts with an idea or tidbit of information and ends with a competed news text delivered to the consumer.

Bob was also very conscious about the need to think critically about information presented online via social media, specifically the micro-blogging service Twitter. Blogs, especially, have become an area of social media growth in the last decade (Murley, 2009) and blog readers consider blogs more credible than traditional news organizations (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, in Murley, 2009). Bob viewed engagement through social media as a way to increase the size of an outlet’s audience and also to reverse the disengagement and disenchantment he saw in students. Bob believed Twitter requires people to think critically about the information being presented to them, echoing comments from every participant in this study. In Bob’s own words, he finds consumers and students often do not and he used a particular example to illustrate his point, referring to the June 2010 earthquake that rattled Ontario and Quebec. Twitter was a source of information for his news outlet to gather details about the earthquake’s impact.

Bob: We took steps to verify the information, like someone said, my chimney just fell over because of the earthquake, and we’d say, well, send us a picture and they’d twitpic a picture and you’d see rubble on the ground. We’d say, well, where did it come from? And they’d send another picture and it’s like a chimney missing bricks. Then we’d ask for a big picture, like literally and figuratively, a big picture to show that these bricks fell from this chimney onto the grass below. We never got that picture. It was really important for us to verify that that’s what happened and we weren’t able to verify that’s what happened. As a result, we didn’t say, bricks were strewn across neighbourhoods or backyards because we couldn’t verify it, whereas people were retweeting this picture of the bricks on the ground saying, “oh my god: bricks on the ground.” And that’s something that we were able to do. At the same time, a lot of people that were on Twitter were saying, “well, you know what, there’s a picture of it — it must be true.”

Bob is very clear: If he couldn’t independently verify the information on Twitter, he was not willing to believe it was fact. Others were not as critical of the information streaming
on Twitter, letting the pictures of bricks on the ground becoming the verification required before believing a statement was true. Through his words, Bob is differentiating between a news source, an information source, and a conversation chamber. He sees social media as information sources, conversation chambers and sources for news, but not a news sources. Joel has already made this distinction, but the idea of social connections is something that Pearl and now Bob have distinctly identified within this theme.

When I gave Bob a chance to add any further thoughts before we wrapped up our interview, he was quick to talk about how unimpressed he was with how students found information online. His ideas about how students find information online was based on classroom talks that he recently did. He summarized his findings thusly: “I think what we’re seeing, in many of my talks, many of them are just getting their information from Google.” Bob, like other participants in this study, is blending concepts of news literacy, information literacy and digital literacy while thinking in the theme of critical thinking.

Bob: A lot of them say they just go to Google and type in whatever it is they want to know about and that’s how they get their information.
Jordan: So they’re missing that quality that you mentioned journalists have to have, which is the critical thinking.
Bob: Yeah. … They’re just going to go to whatever is the most recent or the top rated [search] result. That kind of alarmed me a little as a journalist.

Bob’s perception that students put faith in the new information gatekeepers — search engines — is, according to recent research, what appears to be taking place when students search for information online. Hargiattai, Fullerton, Menchen-Trevino, and Yates Thomas (2010) had university students navigate the Internet to find websites that would help them complete a task. What the researchers found was that “in some cases, the respondents regarded the search engine as the relevant entity for which to evaluate trustworthiness, rather than the Web site that contained the information” (p.479). The
university students who took part in the study relied heavily on search engines and news brands they trusted “to guide them to what they then perceive as credible material simply due to the fact that the destination page rose to the top of the results listing of their preferred search engine” (p. 486). Rather than trusting the source of information, student participants placed their trust in the search engine to find the best information. Bob believed such reliance was an example of a lack of critical thinking when it comes to evaluating information and the sources of information. For Bob, critical thinking, or at least part of his definition, included what he called the “bullshit detector,” a reference to a quote by author and former journalist Ernest Hemingway. A journalist, much like a news literate student, needs to be able to think critically about facts they consume even from trusted sources of information, Bob said. What is the reason for trusting, but still verifying information from trusted sources? For Bob, the reason partly lies with the methods journalists use to gather facts in the modern era.

Jordan: When you watch a news piece either on TV or reading it, what kinds of questions are you asking?
Bob: More and more I wonder how did they interview said person. I think when an interview is done over e-mail, it sort of lacks the rawness of a phone or in-person interview. I didn’t notice so much before at other organizations as it is so much at the outlet I’m at now. A lot of interviews are done over e-mail now, at least from my perspective, and it sort of lacks the natural back and forth that happens. Sometimes I wonder did they find this out with a quick e-mail or even a [text message] or was it a phone and do they have the bounce back or follow-up and dig a little deeper because I think that’s something that’s really easy to do over the phone or in person whereas for e-mail or something electronic, someone can sit there, massage, ponder, script this reply and I like to see when someone’s actually do a [live] back and forth with the person rather than just saying, ‘we messaged so-and-so and this is what they had to say.’ You see what I mean? It’s good to know how they got their information, how the journalist got their information.

3 The actual quote to which Bob referred is: “The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shockproof, shit detector. This is the writer’s radar and all great writers have had it.” Hemingway made the comment to interviewer George Plimpton. The quote was then published as part of a piece for spring 1958 edition of The Paris Review (available online http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4825/the-art-of-fiction-no-21-ernest-hemingway)
Now that Bob has identified questions news literate consumers should be asking, the question becomes how to teach the skills? What should curriculum designers include in a news literacy program to develop the skills and abilities Bob believes are lacking in students?

When Bob talked about his interest as a student in the social sciences, he talked specifically about how “political events… affect the citizens.” There was immediacy to it, much like the news. It was in the social sciences that Bob also said he understood “how decisions were made [and] how they affected members of the public.” That practicality and connection to his life is very much in the Dewey (1927) model of education that aims to link the student’s out-of-school life with their in-school experience and exceed not only in school but also in real life (Eisner, 1967). Making a course “hands on” or “very practical” is what Masterman (2001) argued was needed in order to learn the media inside and out. The language Bob uses is very much in the constructivist vernacular, a method of teaching that has been shown to be effective in fostering news literacy skills among university students (Fleming, 2010) and helping to develop skills and values of news media (Parry, 1993). Consider again what Bob said in analyzing the response from students at the career day: “I think I brought it down to earth for them and I think I helped them understand how much, how many layers behind the scenes there were to it, but I don’t think they were blown away by it.” By “bringing it down to earth” he has made the news media something tangible, something concrete that the students can touch and relate to their everyday lives, in much the same way Pearl and Joel described.

But for Bob, there is more for the students to learn.
Bob was very focused on the corporate structure of news media. He had read about corporate ownership as a student in high school and believed it was an essential aspect to becoming news literate. Bob said that understanding media ownership was important because “one company can own two different newspapers, but they can share a whole lot of content and there’s a very good chance they’ll have the same stuff in each outlet.” This arises partly out of his experience with the papers in his hometown that were separately owned at one time, but now are owned by the same company and produce news in very similar manners: “I think when you have more owners you have more perspectives because they would have more outlets, independent outlets of each other.” This view meshes with the propaganda model of news (Chomsky & Herman, 1988) that includes the belief that as media ownership continues to be concentrated, the diversity of perspectives decreases and, ultimately, so too does democracy (Mercado & Torres, 2006). Just as understanding the propaganda model can enable people to better understand how the media operates and the messages being disseminated, Bob sees understanding corporate ownership as essential to knowing the media inside and out, something media literacy educators generally agree should be part of a curriculum (Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b).

Chomsky and Herman (1988) argued that advertising is part of the reason why there is a growing concentration in ownership — outlets that were more attractive to advertisers earned more money, while those that weren’t as attractive died off. Advertising, or delivering corporate messages to a wide audience (Postman, 1985), is the main source of revenue for most news outlets. Bob believed the line dividing advertising from editorial content was quickly blurring. He was not convinced consumers could see
the difference nor that they understand the agenda-setting power advertising has over
news media decisions (see Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

Bob: I think they also need to understand that you have public relations
professionals trying to set the agenda and control the message and I don’t think
people understand that. At the same time, I think sometimes the audience may think
that the only reason media outlet XYZ is reviewing the new iPhone is because
they’ve been given one for free to review and they’re going to keep it. I think
they’re disillusioned over what’s advertisement, what’s a proper review and what’s
an advertorial, which I think is happening more often these days. I think that’s
something they don’t quite understand — where the boundaries lie.

Again, we see Bob touching on the theme of news production. He also introduces the
notion of the role of public relations in the social process that creates news, be it as
source of stories or a source of influence over news decisions as Chomsky and Herman

It should also be noted here that Bob was the first participant in this study to talk
at length about media ownership as an aspect of news literacy. This can be linked to the
theme of the social process of news production and to the theme of critical thinking. As
Bob’s story about the two papers in his hometown reveals, he believes that understanding
the structure of news ownership can aid in the development of news literacy skills and
abilities. Recent research backs up this belief. Ashley, Poepsel, and Willis (2010) asked
80 undergraduate journalism students to read either a piece of poetry or an article about
media ownership, then read and analyze four news stories and critically judge the
credibility of each piece. When students in the study read about media ownership in
relation to the stories they were asked to critique, the researchers found that students
thought more critically about the accuracy of the story and whether the story went deep
enough. This accuracy and superficiality factor were the two with statistically notable
results. The remaining two factor scales — truth and comprehensiveness or completeness
— did not yield statistically notable results, meaning that students in a control group scored almost the same as those in the test group. Simply reading about the structure of news ownership had a positive impact on the development of critical thinking in regards to news consumption.

Moving back to advertising, Bob believed that students needed to understand the difference between news and advertising. News can be defined as stories that deal with significant topics and events that people need to know to better understand the world, human interest stories designed to elicit sympathy, interest or fear to keep attention of audience (Trafford, 2007). Advertising is more concerned with the public promotion of a product or service. Sometimes it is tough for consumers to see the difference, Bob said.

Bob was quick to point out that some of these advertising features, also known as advertorials, are clearly labeled, but not always. In Bob’s view, Chomsky and Herman’s link between advertising and journalism manifests itself within news stories. This is where an uncritical thinker can become confused or blinded to the type of information they are consuming. This is where news literacy can step in.

Chapter 8

David

“I’m the worst thesis source,” David joked in an e-mail to me.

This missive followed our first scheduled interview. I say first because David forgot about the meet.

David was not going to let it go and still wanted to be part of this study. So we arranged a second meeting over the phone.

I called a little early. David was late getting home from work.

I called again and David picked up.

I could hear an infant laughing in the background.

And so began my interview with David.

From father to son

David’s infant son sounds like he has his father’s laugh. That laugh comes out when David begins to think about why he got into journalism. David can’t explain what exactly drew him to journalism, but he just knew that was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life.

David says he doesn’t see journalism as a profession, but as “a pursuit” — and he has pursued it passionately.

“All I ever wanted to do was to write things,” he says over the phone. “I didn’t have a very sophisticated student newspaper in my hometown, but I did write for it and
mostly I’d try to write humour and stuff like that. And I just felt I would be okay with it if this is all I did.

“I wrote short fiction contests and stuff like that. I did half decent. I always had very good marks in languages more so than in other subjects. It just came naturally to me.”

The problem was trying to marry his love of language and writing with an occupation that could earn him a living after university.

Money became a motivation, but not in the sense of how much he could make in a job. David says many of his high school friends went to university with the full financial backing of their parents.

“I wasn’t interested in doing an undergrad and then maybe a master’s or that stuff. At the time … I didn’t have the financial resources for that. I basically assumed that I would be barely able to get through a bachelor’s degree and then I’d need to be able to work and as it turned out I was barely able to get through half a bachelor’s degree before I needed to do a fair amount of work during the year and summer. That was a big motivating factor,” he says.

“So if you’re going to go to a university, which is your goal, then you’re also going to be practical. Journalism was one of the better options.”

When he graduated from journalism school, David became the first person in his family to earn a university degree. On the phone, David pauses for a few seconds to run through his family tree and ensure he didn’t miss another university graduate.

“I’m the first person in my family to graduate university and — I’m trying to think if there’s anyone — pretty much in my whole extended family,” he says with a
laugh. “It was motivating for me to get a degree but also to marry up some of the things I wanted to do, i.e. write and see things, see the world, see places.”

David’s father has a college degree and works in the field of electrical engineering. His mother works in IT management.

“They’re both very technically savvy and very smart and good at stuff, but neither of them had formal education to take them to the place where they are,” David says.

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David says he was in high school when he first noticed language and the way it could be used to give insights on society. The classic reading list in high school might include *The Chrysalids*, for example, but it was not that particular brand of literature that caught David’s attention. Instead, it was the words crafted in iambic pentameter that mesmerized David.

“The introduction to Shakespeare I think for a lot of people is mind-blowing. Here’s this guy trafficking in ideas that still trouble our society now and he wrote this stuff in the 16th century. It’s crazy. It’s unbelievable how complex and how sort of deep and dramatic and layered his stories are and his plays. I think that was the first awakening of language,” David says.

Reading and analyzing Shakespeare’s plays and poems became fun for the teenaged David. He says he didn’t see it as something he had to do, but something he wanted to do. In his words, it became “more than just homework.” He felt the same connection with ancient tales from Greek mythology.

“It was such a deep spread of our culture that comes from those stories. It’s everywhere. The landscape is littered with phraseology and ideas that are encapsulated in
those works. It’s amazing when you discover the secret language of the stuff that people have been teaching you,” he says. “And, like, when you start seeing that stuff on television as you’re awakened to it, you’re like, ‘oh, this is everywhere, not just in these terrible books they make me read.’”

It was only later in life, David says, that he started to notice these themes running through the television programs he watched with his parents. He remembers how *M*A*S*H* was more than just a sitcom based in the Korean War — “it’s about war, it’s about choices and authority, and all that stuff,” David says. On the other hand, *The Brady Bunch* provided little insight. Even today, David sees literary characters used as the basis for cartoon characters and plots.

“Cartoons are loaded with references to other cultures…. You watch any Dreamworks or Pixar films and, you’re like, my god. More so than *Family Guy*, these guys just rip off other culture. That was a lot of cartoons. Scooby-Doo is loaded with villains from literature and history. It’s hilarious.”

Then David started seeing those connections and themes in the news. David says you can find the same connection in history and fiction, but the news is the “authentic version, which is what I think I want to do as a journalist: feed their — and my own — unending curiosity.”

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When he arrived in journalism school, David had no clear sense of who he would be as a journalist. He started getting a sense of his journalism persona shortly after arriving on campus, or, more precisely, what he would not be as a journalist. The first weeks of journalism school can be a jarring experience for young people. Jarring
because, as David found, professors and instructors explain that you will learn how to be
a working journalist, not necessarily a famous author.

“The teachers in the first year often try to disabuse you of any notions of yourself,
like ‘if you’re here to put some padding down before you write the great Canadian novel,
you know, you should leave now. You’re going to be a working journalist and here’s
what working journalists do.’”

His first assignments, like many journalism students, included going out and
talking to people on the street — called “streeters” in the language of journalists, or, as
David says, “one of the lowest forms of journalism” — to ask their opinions on a news
item. From there, students are introduced to a variety of journalistic fields of coverage,
including the courts.

“I spent some time at a murder trial and another time at a property dispute trial in
my first month of school and I’m just like, ‘what a crazy disparity between these two
experiences.’ One’s a very serious journalism type experience, the other is very, wow our
society is kind of weird that this is the stuff people spend thousands of dollars to fight
over,” David says.

Then he got into the business and realized his education missed out on some
critical bits of information about how the profession operates. For instance, David says he
was not prepared for the idea that news would be what the editor decides or that personal
subjectivity would give more weight to pursuing a story than did the merits of the subject.
That disparity, at times, between what he was taught in school and what he has seen in
the field shaped the way he views journalism and how it should be done.

And how should it be done?
At this question, David laughs.

“Save the easy one for the end,” he says, laughing again.

“I think it’s just probably going to be the same way as the right way to be a police officer or a mom: You muddle through, you carry on, you try to do your best. I think that’s all really anyone can ever ask from anyone in our society. The idea that journalists are different because we run printing presses and that we’re going to do more than our best and be able to deliver on more than our best — we can’t do the best of everyone who consumes us. If we attempted to, or could, be the perfect version of what everyone wanted from us, I mean that would be pretty magical. I don’t think that magic exists in society. Nobody can meet every expectation of everyone all the time. That’s kind of the world you live in in media.”

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David’s best in the world of news media begins early in the morning. As an online editor, he arrives at 6:30 a.m. and flips through that day’s newspaper to see what he has missed. He says he likely worked on many of the stories, although maybe those pieces are more detailed than they were the previous day.

“A lot of times on the web we’ve sort of moved on from what the paper has that morning. I think of the paper as yesterday’s news,” he says, “particularly for me because I probably worked on that story that’s on the [front page] now.”

In between scanning his own outlet’s stories, he scans Twitter and the newswires to see what stories people are talking about, what is of public interest that day and what should be followed throughout the day for new developments.
“That’s basically the beginning of my day. I make sure we look sensible, we look like we’re not ignoring the news, and then we start trying to find more,” David says.

David’s infant son becomes louder in the background as the conversation winds down and David prepares to spend an evening with his son.

“You hear him over there?” David says with a laugh.

“He’s learned to blow bubbles.”

The laugh does sounds like his father’s.

**Seeing the social process of news creation**

News, David said, is all about the people who create it.

“It’s sort of like that notion that we’re the first draft of history,” he said. David said he does not always agree with the idea that the news is the first draft of history, “but there can be times when that can be true.”

“You can explain something for the first time in print and that becomes a narrative of a country or an era, if you wrote it right. I’m intrigued by that. I think that does happen. It can be real.”

The use of the term “narrative” echoes Pearl and Joel’s use of the word and reinforces the theme of the news narrative. The stories contained in the narratives of news are constructed realities that are not neutral, isolated or transparent conveyors of information (Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b). Interpreters tell narratives. Hemingway helped capture the Lost Generation. Jack Kerouac captured the flavour of the Beat Generation. Tom Wolfe chronicled the Hippie movement, and also profiled McLuhan to capture his impact on a generation (Wolfe, 1965). Each of these authors used the printed word and language to write the “narrative of a country or an era.” Each writer took their
experiences and went through a process of interpretation and evaluation before presenting it to the public. The scenes they presented may have been as detailed as the images captured in a television newscast, but they were also constructed realities about the human condition. The media, then, “provide us with selective versions of the world, rather than direct access to it” (Frau-Meigs, 2006, p.19). Or as Hobbs (2007) wrote, the human beings create news by making decisions about what to include and exclude from coverage. In that sense, the news is never a perfect reflection of reality, nor is the media a perfect method of narrative telling (McLuhan, 1994).

David, like other participants in this study, believed we connect and learn through narratives. We seek out stories about our world as part of an eudemonic drive (Oliver, 2008, in Nabi, 2009) because we inherently want to gain a deeper understanding of the human experience (Nabi, 2009, p.208). It is through hearing, reading or seeing stories about someone else that we learn about ourselves. McLuhan (1994) argued this point in regards to why people prefer novels and movies that have familiar characters and settings. McLuhan argued that reading about an event in the press “bestows a delightful playback of earlier awareness” (p. 211). The mind processes the information, tapping into the memories of earlier experience, and “we can translate the outer world into the fabric of our own beings (p.211). The narrative of news does all this, as David pointed out, when it’s done right. So narratives in news are not only about the product that the author creates, but also about the reflection, background and context the news consumer brings to the narrative that underpins how it is interpreted (Williams, 2003).

This is where the social process of news creation comes into play. David said that as a young journalist first entering the field, he was surprised by the influence this social
process has on the news cycle. “It took a long time to realize the news media [were] subjective,” he said.

David: People don’t report on stuff unless they are personally interested by it. It’s very hard to get a reporter of any seniority to do a story that they don’t find personally interesting. They may define that as, ‘that’s not a story,’ but a lot of cases it’s because that’s not a story to them.

David said he has found that news is what is news to a journalist or media manager, not necessarily to the wider community. Bourdieu (1998) made a similar argument: “Journalists, on the whole, are interested in the exception, which means whatever is exceptional for them” (p.20, emphasis in original). This can lead to what Hackett and Gruneau (2000) called news blind spots. As one journalist told Hackett and Gruneau, the newsroom they worked in was made up of 35 to 50-year-olds: “These people cover Baby Boomer stories, often to the exclusion of other perspectives (p.89).” David gave the example of a news outlet whose editor-in-chief was interested in education stories. The outlet ran stories on the issue to the exclusion of others some days. The news blind spot is limited to a particular view of the world or personal interests and confirms Bourdieu’s argument. Or as David said, “There’s … not fact-based or ledger-based kind of thinking that goes into what is the story, what is going to lead today. It’s a lot of emotions.” Here, David is crossing thematic boundaries. Objectivity and subjectivity work into the evolution of a news narrative and the social process of news creation.

David: What is news? (laughing) I think a big part of it is, does it surprise you? Does the story tell you something about a part of society or a part of the world that you didn’t already know. That’s the most basic test for news. If it’s not something that’s widely known by you or by science, by experts or by other people, that’s probably news. The number of people affected divided by the sexiness of the object in question is sort of the formula that creates how big is the news, how much of it is news.
David builds the theme of news as a social process by adding to Joel’s earlier definition of what gives a story news value. Here, David is identifying sexiness as a factor as well as impact, which touches on one academic definition of news value. Hackett and Gruneau (2000) defined news value as being timely, having political importance, involvement of individuals instead of abstract institutions, presence of powerful people or celebrities, a sense of drama and/or conflict, possibly be a “negative” event, large in scope or potential impact, proximity to audience, relevance to deep-rooted cultural themes, novelty, violation of social order, or be a human interest piece (p. 85). Many of these definitions fit into David’s newsworthiness equation. Most of these measures are qualitative. Each news producer, or news gatekeeper, makes a value judgment about what is news. No two people are likely to come to the same answer to the newsworthiness equation even if the inputs are the same.

News can also be a reactionary view of the world, as David pointed out. Stories in the news media may not be “news-news,” David said, but may be a response to something taking place in society. “That conversation happens a lot in newsrooms: ‘We need something on X.’ And what that is doesn’t matter, they just need something on X, preferably something new.” That language is similar to what McLuhan (1960, 1967) used in his rear-view mirror theory. Far from being proactive, the news media become reactive. It is only after an event takes place that the news can begin to understand what has transpired. By looking back, the news media cannot look forward, McLuhan (1994) argued: “Mental breakdown of varying degrees is the very common result of uprooting and inundation with new information and endless new patterns of information” (p. 16). This is the same argument McLuhan made about the education system.
David’s words also require us to consider the place of bias in the theme of subjectivity and its influence in the social process of news creation, on the news narrative and in the creation of news. Based on the context in which it is used, bias could mean one of three things, Entman (2007) argued. Bias applies to news that distorts or falsifies reality, which Entman called distortion bias. Bias is news that favours one side instead of equal treatment to all parties involved in a political conflict, which Entman called content bias. Bias is a motivation or mindset in the journalist that affects the way an issue is covered, including what is and is not said in a report, which Entman called decision-making bias. David does not identify which definition of bias he is referring to, but it is worth noting here that he understands what it means without being clear about its definition.

While Joel gave his ideas about what constitutes a journalist, which he saw as a means of evaluating news and differentiating news from information, David was more detailed in his definition of a journalist. David’s idea about who is a journalist has evolved from watching the ever changing media landscape and the rise of the blogosphere as the fifth estate (Connell, 2006). When I asked David who was a journalist, he said this: “I think [journalism] is a pursuit, that’s my basic view of it. I think some people refer to it as a profession, but it’s really a pursuit.” David’s words put journalism into a different light than what Joel described — a profession with specialized training — and what Pearl described.

The idea that journalism is a pursuit rather than a skill or ability shades David’s ideas about news literacy. He sees news literacy as something one does, not something that is learned in a classroom, which helps further define news literacy as a continuum or
scale of ability. David said that he believed that news literacy “at one time required special knowledge or education, but I don’t think that’s the case anymore.” Now, David said, all one needs is “time and interest and access and you can become pretty news literate and that means you can produce as well.” This definition of what news literacy entails touches on the main points of what the academic literature generally agrees it means to be media literate: the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media texts in various forms (Aufderheide, 1993; UNESCO, n.d.).

Returning to the idea of subjectivity and objectivity in news literacy, David also spoke about understanding this theme. However, David talked about the actual content of news reports as a secondary layer of subjectivity and bias analysis. David said journalists “are not these arbiters of objectivity who never let our personal feelings sway us.” His words, and the words that Sabrina and Joel have already spoken about this theme, is a diversion from the generally accepted notion in the academic literature that journalists use the term objectivity to defend themselves against attacks of bias (Segal & Schmidt, 2006; Williams, 2003). By talking openly about subjectivity and objectivity, David and his fellow journalists are providing a way to engage with the news and deal with some of the long-standing myths of news that media literacy education has chosen to debunk.

The issue of political neutrality, objectivity and ideology are three of the four myths about the news media that Mercado and Torres (2006) identified based on the propaganda model of news (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). Mercado and Torres argued that critical media literacy education should explain that the mainstream media are not ideologically diverse, but have slight variations on the same underlying ideology. Objectivity in journalism, the researchers argued, is also a myth. The choice of facts,
sources and language require subjective judgments and can say something about the journalist’s personal beliefs (Klaehn, 2005; McLuhan, 1994; Phillips, 2010). The third myth relevant to David’s comments is that of political neutrality. The decision to cover a certain story, or cover a story in a certain way, can be seen as a political act rather than an apolitical act.

Based on David’s language, a few of these myths are quickly becoming acknowledged aspects of the journalistic process. He acknowledged that journalists make subjective decisions about what to cover — “people don’t report on stuff unless they are personally interested by it,” — how they cover it — “we’re not these arbiters of objectivity who never let our personal feelings sway us,” — and that news organizations create a view of the world that is coloured by their political and ideological identities. This last point David brought up when he talked about the political divides within the media landscape, specifically in regards to the red and blue media in the United States where outlets support either a Democrat or Republican viewpoint. These acknowledgements are what Masterman (2001) believed were essential to connecting media professionals with the education system. He also argued that such a confession would alleviate problems associated with the media: “If broadcasters could only bring themselves to be more open about the problematic nature of ‘objectivity,’ then much of the power and the majority of the problems associated with the media would begin to whither away” (p.5). Although Masterman didn’t list these problems, they likely underlie the protectionist approach to media literacy. Removing these aspects of the silver bullet theory about media (Williams, 2003; Willis, 2010) could create a deeper, more critical —
and less skeptical — dialogue about news media texts. David has already started to do so as have the other four participants in this study.

Like other participants in this study, David’s thoughts about news literacy drifted to the theme of social media. David talked about social media users such as bloggers who drive the news conversation and are the new writer-gatherers who practice writing or newsgathering outside of the mainstream media\(^5\) (Couldry, 2010). However, there is little evidence that they produce news as opposed to repackaging or reanalyzing news already in the public sphere (Couldry, 2010; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009).

These super-connected individuals are changing the way the media operate. Much like Bob, David saw social media as a vehicle to connect. David also saw Facebook as a “news gathering sort of organization,” echoing Sabrina’s comments. David, like other participants in this study, held these conflicting viewpoints in regards to social media — that it was at once is and is not a news source. Social media influence the news, but social media do not report the news, according to David. They are the eyes and ears of the journalist when deciding what is news, David said, and some active social media users are not critical evaluators of news coverage. This group David talked about is emblematic of what Kellner & Share (2007a, 2007b) described as the outcome of the protectionist approach to media literacy — rather than creating critical thinkers, a generation has grown up becoming cynical of the news. David described these non-critical critics of the media as being “in many ways more cynical than journalists.”

David: A lot of times they seem even more willing to believe in grand conspiracies of every story seems to — they’ll lock in on something and say, ‘that confirms my belief that you don’t believe in X,’ and they’ll write nine posts about it, or write an

\(^5\) In this context, mainstream media refers to those areas of the media that tend to be highly commercialized and whose products reach large audiences and tend to make big profits for their institutions (Baker, Clark & Lewis 2003).
e-mail. That happens everywhere. The blogosphere will take stories that they think are emblematic of a newspaper or a website or a TV shows’ faults, biases, problems, blind spots and they’ll run wild with it. …There are a million pet theories out there about everything and those are the people that usually give you feedback.

Some people may interpret the concept of the “grand conspiracies” as stemming from Chomsky and Herman’s propaganda model of news. Indeed, many critics of the model believe that it espouses a conspiratorial view of the media (Klaehn, 2005). However, Klaehn (2005) argued that using the word “conspiracy” implied a form of secret control over the media that is divorced from regular institutional channels: “This is precisely the opposite of that which the propaganda model actually argues” (p. 223). The model only explains patterns of media behaviour, Klaehn argued, and offers a conceptual framework about how to identify power relations within the dominant structures of media. The model does not deny that individual journalists make decisions that stray from the model — the model “does not theorize social-psychological processes” (Klaehn, 2005, p.226) — so the model is not a way to evaluate gatekeeper decisions. Trying to identify “faults, biases, problems and blind spots” requires a process that may differ from the one in the model. David is making note of this with his words.

David identified time and access as two issues affecting the development of news literacy. From a journalist’s perspective, he believed making the news easier to understand involved decreasing the amount of time one needed to spend with the news in order to understand it. Research supports his belief. Research has shown that news consumers have a hard time remembering exactly what they have consumed, even if they have just watched a television newscast minutes earlier (Blanc, Kendeou, van der Broek, & Brouillet, 2008; Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007; Watt, Mazza, & Snyder, 1993). Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (2007) argued that barriers to understanding
the news include use of technical terms, lack of context, rapidly shifting news agendas, and mismatches between visual and verbal information. David’s belief in making the news easy to digest in a short period of time fits with this concept. It also fits with the argument the researchers make when they write, “people’s interest in the news is shaped by whether or not they understand it, and understanding depends on the form of the news, and the ways in which it addresses people” (p. 33).

David identified a few skills and abilities that could be included in a news literacy curriculum. The skills and abilities he identified are qualitative and quantitative thinking skills. He also discussed understanding the codes, conventions and language of media, specifically the design and layout of newspapers. First, to the theme of critical thinking skills.

David: When you get to the end of a sentence, to a conclusion, you have to ask, how did they arrive at that? Is that in the text, the answer to the assertion? Where is that coming from? There’s a lot of assertion in news and it’s based on reporting in a lot of cases, but, you know, who? I think counting sources is a very valuable thing. How many people allowed themselves to be quoted in this story? That’s an important factor when you’re weighing how much work has gone into it. It’s not necessarily true that the more work, the more sources, the more quoted people, the better the story, but it can be an important indicator as to how seriously to take what you’re reading.

Why are sources important to evaluate as David has identified? The reliance on sources in the news arose following the Second World War as a new method of journalism took hold in newsrooms, a methodology that relied on scientific-like analysis (St. John, 2009). Dewey argued that the press overemphasized the use of experts, or elites, in the newsgathering process. St. John (2009) wrote that Dewey argued that experts were “not the key to the press providing accurate renditions of the world” (p.364). Dewey argued that reality — or the best picture of the truth — was only available by being in the
community. In the construction of reality in the news media, sources, then, are the characters that help build the narrative David described and why assessing sources within stories is a news literacy skill.

The use of sources and types of sources — be they anonymous or on-the-record — is a method of news analysis Chomsky and Herman (1988) put forth in their propaganda model of news. It can also be a way to analyze the level of framing or slant in a news item (Entman, 1993). Chomsky and Herman argued that the media very rarely do any critical reporting because it could hurt relations with sources and therefore damage the ability to gather news from these sources. How sources are used says as much about a news piece as the story it presents, according to this interpretation of Chomsky and Herman. David made a similar connection, but he provided critical thinking questions that allow news consumers to become more news literate.

David: Ask those questions as you go along and make note of how many people they talk to and what they talk to them about and who is allowing themselves to be quoted — that all goes into determining why something is news.

Moving from the theme of news as a social process to the theme of news creation or production, David discussed understanding how a newspaper is designed and what the placement of a story says about its news value. This semiotic textual analysis (Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b) can help tier four members the language, codes and conventions of the newspaper.

David: I would say that the first and most important thing is you have to know that not every story is worth as much as the story next to it. Some of them have great headlines or a great hook and that’s why it’s where it is. Others have a good paragraph, you know, that really tells a story that the editor wanted to tell. Some of them just had great art so they’re going to anchor the page.
David’s description of the newspaper layout also provides a variation on the agenda-setting theory of media (Willis, 2010) that views the media as a vehicle for focusing public attention to a specific issue that requires a solution. However, David’s description of the newspaper layouts lends itself more to Stuart Hall’s argument about the media: that it focuses on issues that distract the public from more pressing concerns (Davis, 2004). The use of headlines, pictures — “great art” — interesting or well-written narratives in the newspaper are more in line with Hall’s interpretation of the agenda-setting function of news. David believes decoding the use of stories and their placement within the newspaper can help people better identify the news value of a story, namely by moving to the narrative itself and searching for the information therein.
Chapter 9

Pearl

The corner café Pearl suggested we meet at was busy when I arrived on a soggy spring morning.

Importantly, I arrived late, a casualty of rush hour traffic.

Pearl was still there.

“Jordan?” she asked, coming up to me just as she was about to leave.

I thanked her for waiting and profusely apologized for my tardiness. She agreed to the interview and to stay longer.

She was very understanding as I stumbled through questions after my long trip to see her.

“You poor thing,” she said with a smile every time fatigue forced me to consume more coffee.

And so began my interview with Pearl.

The Good Student

Her glasses sat evenly across her face as Pearl began to talk. Her coffee cup was filled as she contemplated the question before her. The glasses give a hint of her life as a high school student and the laughter accompanying her answers was hers alone. It was not a laugh built on nerves, but on a memory that amuses her.

“I was a keener. Total brownnoser, front row, loved school, loved learning,” — laughter — “wore glasses, had braces.”
“You could have made a movie, or I could have been cast in a movie. I was perfect. … For Grade 8 and 9 I went to a private music school. I did ballet and harp,” Pearl says with a laugh. “Obviously.”

When she speaks of her days as a student, she doesn’t see them in a negative light. Far from it, she smiles at the thought of her days sitting in classes and taking part in after school activities.

“I don’t know what to say about it except that I was just one of those kids who took to school, loved school, loved my teachers, related to all my teachers, loved the material, loved every subject actually — as much as I was science focused, I think part of it is that, especially as a girl, you’re a minority so I think I liked being in science. I was also really sporty, so I wasn’t totally nerderrific. Well, I was a nerd: One of my sports was cross-country skiing.” Again, laughter.

However, it was her interest in science that became a staple of her education. Long before she wanted to become a journalist, she had science on her mind. Pearl says she just remembers being good at science and, because it came easy to her, she contemplated going into the sciences as a lifelong profession. Now in her late 20s, Pearl admits there were two other motivators that pushed her towards science: One was family — one parent is a doctor — and the other was the perception of an arts education.

“I definitely felt a perception in high school that the arts were inferior to the sciences. This is going to sound so ridiculous. That was my feeling. I was good at sciences so I stuck with it,” Pearl says.
That’s not to say that literature and writing didn’t have a role in her life as a student. She enjoyed English courses and writing. “But really science was to me superior to the arts,” she says.

Her undergraduate degree was in science. She pursued a graduate degree in science, but quickly found it wasn’t what she wanted. There was just something about the thought of spending the rest of her life over a Petri dish, dissecting and viewing various organisms up close that didn’t interest her.

“The research is in a lab and it’s very kind of, you have your small universe with small details and it’s not people, it’s molecules and worms or whatever your model organism is and I just felt like I had skills that I wasn’t using.”

Suddenly, science was gone.

Pearl moved back home with her parents and took a service industry job and applied for “random master’s programs across North America.” One of those applications came through and she found herself in a journalism program.

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The news had been a part of her life for years. She didn’t read every page of every newspaper, but her magazine consumption habits were routine as a teenager.

“I was very good at picking up my monthly issue of National Geographic and Discovery and I was very plugged into what were the breakthroughs in developmental biology. … Even up to that point, I was probably just reading the paper most days and I would read the news section. I was sort of — I suppose I was news literate, but just barely, just barely.”
Her news consumption habits changed during her undergraduate education. Moving away from home, she entered university and received a free daily newspaper on campus. Every day she flipped through the news section of and caught up on provincial, national and international events. However, when she left her graduate studies in science — leaving her strictly science education behind her — she also left the newspaper and the news behind her.

“I remember when I moved home and was working [as a server], I don’t think I picked up a paper for six months. I definitely would have still — I throw on the CBC when I’m in the car and I would have caught, certainly the weekend I would have been watching the newscasts, the nightly news at six o’clock, but that would have been it.”

The news became something for her to follow regularly, again, when she started her journalism degree. The university’s location in a large urban centre meant newspapers of all kinds — daily, weekly, alternative, ethnic — surrounded Pearl. She says that reading the newspaper during her journalism program, which was something she had to do as a journalism student, was easy.

She landed an internship at a large daily newspaper and began her journalism career. It was not long before she started working at another daily newspaper, eventually landing the position of education beat reporter.

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Besides her articles about the education system, Pearl regularly speaks to students, classes and groups about her job as a journalist. She takes them through the different parts of her day, the different aspects of her job, such as how a story is put together, and, for more advanced students, the ethical dilemmas that accompany news
stories and investigations, including the use and distinction between “off the record” and “background” conversations. Whenever she has a teaching moment, she says she finds students are engaged with the topic. Sometimes, when she is on the job and observing a classroom for a story, teachers will ask her to step out of her role as a reporter to speak to her class about journalism.

“I’ve met a lot of teachers and I think the number that have asked me about journalism or seem to have incorporated journalism into their curriculum is small, I think. I think there are probably a lot of students who like me will manage to get through their schooling without getting any real exposure to it. There’s maybe a little too little of it. And then anyone I know who is gelling it is doing really cool stuff. It’s a great teaching tool. I’m biased, I guess.”

Again, laughter.

That laughter extends to the thought of teaching a subject she received no education on as a high school student. Pearl says she couldn’t remember being taught about the news media while in high school, but picked up an interest in journalism along her path through life.

“I’m very naturally curious and engaged person. I love reading — as much as I wasn’t picking up the newspaper, I was probably digesting two or three books a week. I read, but no one plugged me into it” — and by “it” she means journalism — “and I bet you if I had even had one teacher — one teacher — who pushed me in that direction, I would have been news literate years earlier and also probably taken a less circuitous route to my career in journalism.”

And again, there is that laugh.
Engaging with the narrative

For Pearl, it is all about the narrative.

The narrative, Pearl said, is where news literacy begins. Caring about and following the narrative is where news literacy skills and abilities emerge.

When I asked her what skills or abilities make someone news literate, she stopped and looked at me, turning the question over in her mind. She changed the terminology and answered my query in a way that rearranged the pieces of the news literacy puzzle.

Pearl: Is it skills or is it just — because once you can read, it’s not a skill it’s a practice. It’s a practice where you’re actually making sure each day to check in on what’s going on. Sorry, and I should say actually you don’t even need to be able to read, you just need to be able to understand English because you could literally just watch the morning news or the radio and I think it’s fair to say that you’d be news literate. … I’m not going to make some argument that how to be news literate you need to be going to multiple sources. Maybe as a journalist it’s important, but I don’t think for the general population it is. If you’re just regularly making sure to have a practice of digesting news, I think you’re news literate.

This view of news literacy as a practice lends itself to Dewey’s concept of curriculum. Dewey (1929) argued that a curriculum should not try to prepare students, for one particular set of conditions. Students needed to learn how to continue learning and adapt to changing circumstances. To Dewey, education was a process of living and not a preparation for future living.

A practice is also a process and requires regular activity to maintain its strength, or as Pearl said, “making sure each day to check in on what’s going on.” Improving the practice of news literacy for Pearl means the practice itself is not finite — instead, it lies on a continuum that never ends (De Abreu, 2007) making it a means with unlimited development potential. Martens (2010) argued that media literacy requires “both knowledge and skills” (p.14) and “is not something you either are or are not. Rather,
individuals permanently move on a continuum” (p.14). Martens’ argument further lends itself to Pearl’s interpretation of news literacy as a practice.

Pearl’s choice of word “practice” is also revealing: The academic literature on what constitutes being media literate refers to it as an ability or skill (see Aufderheide, Christ & Potter, 1998; Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009; Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b; UNESCO, nd). A skill or ability is learned or can be taught. This is one definition of curriculum: a series of training experiences schools use for unfolding and embedding skills in an individual (Bobbitt, 1918; Kliebard, 1975). Once a skill or ability is learned, it may or may not be used. A practice, Pearl said, is one that requires you to constantly use it, constantly work on it. Media literacy is the same way: it is a set of conceptual understandings and shouldn’t be seen as a skill (Frau-Meigs, 2006).

Pearl: I think it’s just like riding a bicycle. You’ve just got to do it and when you’re doing it, you’re doing it, and when you’re not, you fall over — when you stop pedaling you fall over. … News literacy, it’s a practice and I think part of it is when you’re really news literate, you want to do it, right, you care.

Jordan: What do you mean by caring?

Pearl: It’s getting into the narrative. I think that’s the thing. It’s sort of chicken or the egg because once you start you actually care about our global narrative, our news narrative as a country as a world, politically, you get it and you become engaged in that. So, picking up the newspaper or listening to the radio or whatever your routine is becomes an important part of your day the same way brushing your teeth in the morning does and I think that’s when you’re news literate. (Pause) And that’s important because then you have engaged citizens. (Pause) You don’t want people to have some notion that they have some obligation to fulfill some news quota every morning. That’s not news literacy. News literacy is caring about the narrative.

Pearl’s connection between brushing one’s teeth and news literacy is a worthwhile analogy. Human beings may be taught hygienic skills and abilities, such as brushing teeth on a regular basis, but only through practising proper hygiene is one considered to be hygienic. Put another way, knowing how to brush your teeth does not guarantee your
teeth will stay in immaculate condition. Pearl is essentially saying what Masterman (2001) argued about the success or failure of a media literacy curriculum: “The acid test of any media education programme is the extent to which pupils are critical in their own use and understanding of the media when the teacher is not there” (p.252, emphasis in original).

Calling news a narrative as Pearl has done points to the theme of news as a narrative, including the idea of news as the first draft of history and an evolving story. It also links to the theme of news as a social process because the news is a symbolic system that requires active consumption, “and not unproblematic, self-explanatory reflections of external reality” (Masterman, 2001, p.20). Pearl’s use of the term narrative is also appropriate considering the academic literature on media and news uses the same terminology.

Blanc, Kendeou, van der Broek and Brouillet (2008) wrote that news is a mediated experience between the news producer and news consumer and is therefore not a simple narrative. The news creates a representation of reality that includes real people and explains real-world situations. Montgomery (2007) argued that the language of television newscasts creates a product that bears resemblance to the narrative forms of fiction cinema (p.90), but is not a complete narrative like film because it presents incomplete actions and, at times, no identifiable protagonists (p. 91). Journalists use story-telling language to create a narrative (Willis, 2010) and current thoughts on journalism education recommend using narrative approaches to telling the news (UNESCO, 2007). Journalists using such techniques may see themselves as storytellers (Phillips, 2010). Such a situation can lead to more parasocial interactions with the
audience, who may feel a sense of camaraderie with certain journalists (Rubin, 2009) and believe they have a friendship with a certain media personality. When a consumer sits down to read the paper, or watch the news on television, they sometimes believe they are listening to a story from a friend.

The use of narrative techniques in disseminating the news — from a traditional print story following a main character through a particular incident, to a multimedia presentation with sights, sounds, texts and interactive elements, including games that help build the story — are part of what researchers refer to as “new literary spaces” (Luce-Kapler, Sumara, & Iftody, 2010, p. 538). These new literary spaces require readers to respond to narratives with “literary practices without necessarily considering that these are not fictional characters” (Luce-Kapler, Sumara, & Iftody, 2010, p. 538). When people partake in the narrative, they partake in it in a specific way: They become attached emotionally to the narrative and the characters in it and are interested in knowing how things turn out. As Pearl said, they become engaged with their world.

Pearl did not believe that news literacy led to someone being “an excellent member of a roundtable,” or doing well “at a job interview,” or “how you plug into” the world. “I think that’s all bogus,” she said. “I just think the important thing is caring and following the narrative.” In Pearl’s mind, once people feel that following the narrative is a daily practice they want to take part in — as opposed to a practice they are forced to participate in — they become engaged. That engagement, Pearl said, leads to “engaged citizens,” which media educators have come to realize is a result of media education (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b).
However, not all news consumers follow the narrative on a regular basis. The Project for Excellence in Journalism (2010) noted in a report on the social aspects of news consumption that 56 per cent of survey respondents said they followed the news on a regular basis. So how can news literacy educators get people interested in the news narrative so they follow it on a regular basis?

Pearl: How do you become engaged in any story? You start following it. So the way to get people into it, you have to find stories that engage them, stories that speak to them, stories that affect them. I’m sure there are certain segments of the population, certain students who will never give a shit about federal politics in a major way. You’d expect with good news literacy that they would at least care broadly about what’s going on. So everyone will have their segments of things they care about more than the others, but you get them into news in general by finding what engages them.

Pearl’s answer brings up a simple point that media educators have made for years: Bring the students’ interest into the classroom and allow their media interests and consumption habits to dictate the content for the curriculum (Buckingham, 1998; Considine, Horton & Moorman, 2009; McLuhan, 1967). Or as Pearl said, “you get them into the news in general by finding what engages them.” This language doesn’t impose a top-down effect in the classroom — instead, Pearl sees media literacy and news literacy as a bottom-up educational endeavor. Once the students out-of-school interests are brought into the classroom, the learning experience can begin. Pearl said she is constantly asked about crime stories because “it grabs people. … Everyone knows death, right?” They may not know it intimately, but connecting with a crime story, or consuming a piece of news about “the sad story of the family who was killed” brings about an eudemonic response in news consumers who are trying to connect closer and better understand the human experience (Oliver, 2008, in Nabi, 2009). It is this basic need to connect emotionally with ourselves and our world that underlies Pearl’s thoughts when she said, “you’d expect
with good news literacy that they would at least care broadly about what’s going on.”

This thinking matches well with what literacy means in its broadest sense: Literacy is “myriad of discursive forms and cultural competencies that construct and make available the various relationships and experiences that exist between learners and the world” (Giroux, 1987, p.16). Being news literate necessitates becoming engaged in the narrative because the storytelling techniques used in the narrative are the most powerful way we as human beings connect with the human condition, learn about ourselves and mediate understanding about the world around us.

It is through the narrative that we learn.

Pearl occupies an interesting position in the journalistic field. She covers educational issues, which means she not only covers educational stories, but also helps shape the evolution of the education system. To write her stories, Pearl takes on the role of an educational researcher. Pearl said she spends time observing classrooms. Her observations aid her stories. This connection gives her the air of a qualitative researcher who will observe a setting, make notes and then use those observations as part of their overall study. As she mentioned during our interview, sometimes a teacher will ask her to give a class talk about what it means to be a journalist and what the job entails. This form of interaction with schoolchildren — a group she said she serves through her work — has allowed Pearl to reflect on her own journalism and her modes of thinking.

When Pearl began describing her interactions with schoolchildren, she touched on issues related to cognitive development and to Dewey’s (1929) concepts of education, namely connecting the out-of-classroom experience to the in-classroom education. “Journalism is a career that they can understand even if they haven’t read [a major
newspaper],” Pearl said. “It’s something that they can understand what you do. It’s not like I’m a management consultant.” Considering that the media are the first curriculum a child encounters (Postman, 1985), that child will grow up interacting and touching media. It will take a central place in their lives. News and journalism are part of that relationship students have with media, so, as Pearl describes, they “understand what you [the journalist] do.” The news is part of their out-of-school experience. Pearl went on to say that journalists are “just people with notepads.” A student can see himself or herself in this role. As well, the quote continues on her previous line of thinking that sees journalism and the news as a tactile subject, one that isn’t overtly abstract in its thinking and practice: “There’s no voodoo magic to journalism.”

Yet understanding the news does not come without questions. To understand journalism, students regularly ask Pearl questions.

Pearl: Grade school, they’re very nuts and bolts. It’s very, how do you do your job, who do you meet — what is your job kind of questions. Then as they get older, it’s more the ethics of journalism, stuff like bias, stuff like on-the-record, off-the-record — it’s the legal aspects of your job. And then you can also, too, talk more about investigations or things like FOI requests, which are great things for them to learn about. A little bit more of the technical aspect of how you do your job. It almost follows the career of a reporter. We all generally start out in general assignment crime sort of reporting, which is the stuff the younger kids can really grab onto. Then with the older kids you can talk about what you might do as a more seasoned journalist and covering a beat and investigations and things like that. That’s a nice parallel.

What Pearl is describing here is the cognitive development a student goes through, starting from building a base knowledge to complete relatively simple, but new, thinking tasks to using that base to deal with more complicated tasks. Pearl’s description also matches recent research into the cognitive development displayed by children in regards to media literacy, specifically television.
Anderson and Hanson (2010) argued the development of cognitive processes to understand television begins at infancy when children up to six months in age are exposed to television, usually through baby videos. The child’s eye must learn what to focus on, what aspects to take in and then use those visual cues to educate herself or himself about future television watching. By age two, a child learns the basics of media language at the same time the child begins to use their spoken language to convey ideas. At age five, a child has mastered the basic visual grammar of television and is now “capable of learning an enormous amount of social and academic content” (Anderson & Hanson, 2010, p.252). The researchers argued that when a child turns 13, they have adult-level cognitive processes in place to comprehend and understand the linguistics of broadcast media.

Pearl’s description appears to match this suggested development scheme.

When they are first learning the language of the news, the students want to know the “nuts and bolts,” the “how do you do your job kind of questions,” Pearl said. Pearl described a setting with underprivileged children from immigrant families who asked her as a newspaper reporter “‘where’s my camera guy?’ and ‘do I carry a microphone?’” At this point in their media literacy development, “there can be really big gaps — they don’t get it,” Pearl said. To “get it,” these students look for the language rules of the medium so they can interact with it. They then move on to a stage where they understand the linguistic rules of news. At this point, they begin to think about more abstract issues relating to the news — the legal constraints, the ethical decisions, bias and issues such as off-the-record and background conversations.
“‘So is that a moral or legal obligation for you to follow those?’” Pearl said with a laugh recalling the question she had not anticipated to hear from a group of high school students more advanced in the language of media. From the look on her face during this recollection, it appeared she was surprised at the time by the depth of the question. “The questions they were asking were very intelligent. The stuff was of a journalism ethics class,” she said.

Pearl: I don’t think I’ve ever talked to high school kids where they’ve totally missed that point [about the basics of journalism] and usually I find when they get to about 13, 14, I’m usually getting interesting questions regardless of their exposure to media.

The questions Pearl described occurred at about the exact age when Anderson and Hanson argued that adult-level media comprehension is in place — age 13.

Pearl described some of her teaching experiences with students, specifically how she talks with them about her job. Her interactions are the foundation for her view of how students interact with and understand the news. With elementary school aged students, Pearl does a role-playing activity to get them to be journalists and investigate a fictional accident scene to determine what exactly happened. Some students play the role of the investigator while others play the role of the actors in the scene. The students then piece together the puzzle by asking questions and evaluating the evidence they gather. When talking with high school students, Pearl described her discussion with students, using constructivist-sounding language that places the emphasis on dialogue and having the teacher learn as much from the students as the students learn from the teachers. It is this

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6 The language I have chosen to use at this juncture is intentionally vague: Any more specifics on why the students are more media savvy than their peers could lead to Pearl being identified and losing the anonymity granted her for this study.
theme of experiential learning (McLuhan, 1960, 1967) that shades Pearl’s ideas about news literacy education.

Pearl’s educational pedagogy likely stems from her journalism education. As a journalism student, experiencing the news production process within the confines of a classroom has been shown to be more effective than a traditional chalk-and-talk teaching method in teaching student basic journalism skills (Parry, 1993). The same is true of news literacy. Pearl is having the students experience what it is like to be a news reporter, to experience the news production process to understand the media from inside out. Part of this experience is learning to question properly, a practice that allows students to learn how to learn (Postman & Weingartner, 1971). This experiential and also inquiry method of learning helps activate different senses, attitudes and perceptions and creates different, bolder and more potent kinds of intelligence (Postman & Weingartner, 1971). Pearl’s teaching techniques for younger students tap into these educational pedagogies and help prepare students to think about how to develop learning strategies that they can use once they leave school, a theme that appears in other interviews conducted for this study.

The practice of news literacy extends to the sources of information that one consumes. Pearl was very clear that the major change in the journalism world over her years in the industry was the rise of social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter as sources of information about people, issues and events. These new spaces of socialization and news sharing can be a major source of information for the modern journalist as much as it is for the modern news consumer: The Pew Research Center in the United States found that 75 per cent of American adults received their news via their online social circles (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010). Much like
Sabrina, the theme of social media vis-à-vis the news is cloudy for Pearl. Social media are a realm of sharing, but not a news outlet. For Pearl, social media are a vehicle to connect with ideas, people and potential sources of information. In short, social media are a tool of social interactions rather than information gathering. Pearl said she didn’t think you could fully trust the information presented on social networking sites, “but it’s not the information on the networks that I trust, it’s their ability to get me a person.” Once in touch with a person or source, Pearl said she then talks to the person in order to extract more information for her story. Twitter and Facebook “will give you a sense of ‘they’re saying this happens’ and then you look into it.” It’s the old journalism maxim of trust, but verify, which Sabrina also pointed out and which also brings us back to the theme of critical thinking and constant questioning.

Pearl: I’m sure I’ll be the old fogy at the back of the newsroom in another 15 years and there will be a new generation of kids coming who will be very prone to trust that. Right now, in the newsroom there was a lot of frustration I think with my generation being too prone to look at online sources and just trust them. Wikipedia being the worst example, but even other sources. We’re very prone to rely on the Internet for research and then whatever is on the Internet we’re good with. They sort of are trying to change our parameters and make us more discerning and I can imagine that in 10 years there will be a generation of reporters who will have that discussion more with things like Twitter and Facebook. But right now, just for me, they’re a means of getting to people.

The age issue is one that is worth exploring in the above quote. First, Pearl notes that her generation may be too easily accepting of online sources of information and not critical enough about what they are consuming. Hargiattai, Fullerton, Menchen-Trevino, and Yates Thomas (2010) found that university students did not critically analyze sources of information online or the search engine results that led them to a particular site. A 2008 report from the British Library concluded that while the “Google Generation” could easily access media, they possessed limited ability to critically analyze those media texts.
(cited in Considine, Horton & Moorman, 2009). The older generation that grew up in a
different research milieu may be well concerned about this particular shortfall in news
literacy practices. This is where the “they” comes into play. Pearl said “they” — a
reference to the more senior newsroom members, both in age and in hierarchy — are
trying to make “us more discerning.” This brings up the generational divide that
McLuhan argued existed in the educational system and in society. McLuhan (1962)
argued that when new technology affects one sense — say, radio and its affect on hearing
— it throws off a person’s sensory balance. To compensate, all the other senses heighten
to bring everything back into balance. At the same time, every new technology
“possesses the power to hypnotize because it isolates the senses” (p. 322) and therefore
hypnotizes society to the changes that are coming. Technology numbs us as we enter a
new environment and then, and only then, McLuhan argued, can our senses fully
comprehend and understand the previous state we once inhabited. This leads to
McLuhan’s rear-view mirror theory of education that says that teaching is not based on
what is going on today, but on the previous state of technology and society because it has
finally come into view. Or as McLuhan once said in an interview: “Our entire educational
system is reactionary, oriented to past values and past technologies, and will likely
continue so until the old generation relinquishes power. The generation gap is actually a
chasm, separating not two age groups, but two vastly divergent cultures” (Norden, 1969).

Pearl sees the same issue in her newsroom. Eventually, though, she will inherit
this position of seniority in the newsroom — “the old fogy at the back of the newsroom
in another 15 years” — and the discussion, she said, will not end. “It’s a slippery kind of
world and it’s going to be a constant struggle,” she said. That constant struggle explains
the undercurrent in McLuhan’s theory rear-view mirror theory. It also helps to explain how this generational gap shades the theme of social media running through this study. While Pearl and Bob are very explicit about their beliefs in this generational divide about digital and information literacy skills — and by extension, news literacy abilities — the language is subtler in the responses from Joel, David and Sabrina. The generational divide is on display amongst participants in this study. As McLuhan argued, and Pearl is pointing out, eventually, the younger generation — Pearl, Bob and David — will take the place of the older one — Sabrina and Joel — and its culture will again diverge from the culture of the generation below. It is a constant cycle, or “constant struggle.”
Chapter 10

Discussion

To review, the analyses revealed some overlap in ideas and themes as to what it means to be news literate.

Journalists who took part in this study talked about engagement with the narratives of news and how the news aids in building an engaged citizenship as well as helping individuals make decisions about their lives. They also discussed the social process that creates news, which included the need to understand media bias and audience bias, and the use of objectivity as a methodology in coming to a conclusion. Understanding the news production process was another theme that connected to the theme of news as a social process and provided participant’s views on what it meant to be able to create media. Evaluating sources of information was also mentioned as a means of becoming more news literate, which included the theme of social media and their role in the news production and consumption process. Underpinning all these suggestions was the belief and theme that being news literate meant being a critical thinker. This answered the first research question about what it meant to be news literate and connected well with the operational definition of news literacy that I have used in this study, which is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993), recognizing and critically examining hidden meanings in news media, identifying sources of information in the news media, including sources cited within news media texts, and developing an understanding of news media consumption habits (Fleming, 2010). There was not as much explicit discussion among participants in this study about
Fleming’s (2010) belief that championing free speech or freedom of the press was a news literacy skill, but it can be implicitly seen when Bob talked about the role of the media as the fourth estate and Sabrina and Pearl’s view that the media were essential for a functioning democracy. As well, creating media was not explicitly discussed in detail amongst all participants.

In short, the academic view of news literacy is almost entirely in line with how journalists in this study viewed the concept of news literacy. The differences lie in how participants defined news production and also focused on the role of social media in developing news literacy abilities. Social media can be seen as the “access,” “analyze” and “evaluate” portion of the academic definition of media literacy guiding this study. Social media are used to filter the news and avoid news fatigue (Associated Press, 2008), as well as being used to connect with people who might be able to evaluate and analyze pieces of news. News production can easily fit into the “create” portion of the academic definition of media literacy. This interpretation of academically accepted definition of media literacy has not come up in the reviewed literature, but is not surprising considering critics of the Aufderheide (1993) definition argue it “lacks specificity, that is it cannot provide much detail to people who want to design educational strategies” (Martens, 2010, p.2). I would argue that participants in this study provide such specificity through their domain expertise. The themes of social media and news production provide two avenues to engage students in the classroom. Taking part in news production can lead to an inside understanding of media (Masterman, 2001) while also focusing on the experiential learning model participants favoured. As well, by bringing social media into the classroom, teachers will be able to discuss multimedia news creation skills and news
consumption habits while also bringing the students’ out-of-school experience into the classroom. Educators looking for specificity can find answers to some of their questions through the words of participants in this study.

The second research question that this study wished to answer was seeing how journalists believed news literacy should be taught. While they did not tap into any specific teaching paradigm, journalists in this study identified a hands-on approach to teaching news literacy, one that requires students to do more than to talk. It also requires the teacher to listen. Sabrina likely put it best when she said,

The thing about a teenager who’s starting to ask critical questions is that it’s a good thing to do, but he also doesn’t know a lot yet, or she doesn’t know a great deal in terms of objective information about the world. So your role is to feed them information so they [can] take that critical faculty they’re rapidly developing, I would say almost scarily developing, and use it really well.

Sabrina and other journalists in this study were looking for ways to make the media more interesting for today’s students and as such tapped into a constructivist paradigm even if they weren’t aware of it. Studies have shown that if the content of the lesson is something a student can easily relate to and find interesting, the student will want to learn and be engaged in the lesson (Considine, Horton & Moorman, 2009). These journalists, and Joel in particular when he described how news can always be related back to the individual in some respect — his concentric circles lesson — can be seen as making the news more concrete and less abstract, a notion that came up several times in interviews. As Cheung (2005) argued, the traditional “chalk and talk” teaching style doesn’t fit in a media education classroom: “In media education, the main focus is on child-centered learning. This requires a media pedagogy [that] encourages investigation and critical and reflective thinking on the part of the pupils.” Journalists in this study discussed developing practical
news literacy abilities in elementary students, then expanding to more complicated practical tasks and lower-level theoretical thinking tasks with secondary school students and finally theoretical problems associated with the news at the post-secondary level.

Pearl’s idea of engaging with the narrative and role-playing as journalists, Sabrina’s concept of asking the question “why?” and debating ideological positions, Joel’s ideas of the information rainbow and the concentric circles lessons are all means through which to develop a news literacy curriculum. These ideas did not come from each journalist’s experiences with the news alone: These ideas worked in tandem with their media literacy education experiences.

This study asked participants to do some reflective thinking of their own and identify where they received their media literacy and news literacy education. None could identify explicit in-class media literacy instruction and all were critical of the news literacy levels among their fellow journalists. Pearl was very blunt about her estimation of news literacy practice rates among her fellow journalists: “There are some that aren’t.” After pausing for a moment, she affirmed with a nod: “Oh yeah.” She recalled a current events quiz a university student-produced magazine gave out to reporters. The results? “There were a couple of reporters who just bombed,” Pearl said. Journalists, she said, may not be news literate practitioners in all aspects of news, but in the aspects they are intimately interested and familiar with. Pearl is an education reporter. She knows her area well. Give her a quiz on current events in business and she “wouldn’t ace it,” she said. Pearl said the same could be true of reporters from other sections of the newsroom. Each specialty area may not be completely aware of what other sections had covered that day: “We all have our specialties and I think there are, a lot of us have holes. Not all of us
voraciously read the whole paper every day.” Even within a newsroom, there are domains of expertise that work together to deliver the news.

It may be this understanding of domain expertise that led to an unexpected finding in the data.

Participants in this study were asked to think about education. Sabrina was critical of journalism education programs at post-secondary institutions and Bob joked about one secondary school teacher who referred to the National Post as the “Nazi Post.” Outside of these critiques, participants did not criticize the education system or teachers despite the opportunity they had to do so. This can be interpreted as the participant’s belief that while they held expertise in the domain of the media, education was the domain expertise of teachers. Participants did not go into detail about how to teach the news literacy themes, skills and abilities they identified. They merely provided foundational ideas that “media literacy educators take … and translate into educational practices that are accessible for children and adolescents” (Martens, 2010, p.3). Masterman’s (2001) argument for mixing educators and journalists in the classroom appears to have some foundation through this interpretation of the data.

Reviewed literature has not revealed any formal mixing of teachers and journalists in Ontario classrooms, but it is likely informal relationships exist through organizations such as the Toronto Star’s speakers’ bureau, which connects groups with Toronto Star journalists, and the Media Awareness Network, which provides media and news literacy lesson plans for educators. As previously mentioned, this mixing of journalists and educators in the classroom has already been formalized in the United States through the News Literacy Project. It is also on display at the Center for News
Literacy at Stony Brook University, which acts as an educational advisor to the News Literacy Project.

I had the opportunity to review the Stony Brook news literacy model during the course of this study. During the spring of 2010, I posted my thesis proposal on my blog. Within a day of the posting, there was a comment from an American reader. The reader happened to be Dean Miller, director for the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University in New York State. His publicly posted comment included his perceptions about the coolness academia held towards the area of media and news literacy:

I have heard stories of Media Literacy stalwarts standing up at conferences to announce that journalists have no place on university faculties. An isolated instance, perhaps, but a good anecdote to illustrate the perception that in some quarters of media studies, academics have real concerns about the integrity of media study undertaken by the world’s ink-stained wretches. The Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University would welcome a visit from you if that will help with your research. We are a small faculty comprised entirely of practitioners, which makes us a pretty good laboratory in which to test your hypotheses.

After a brief correspondence, I travelled in late April 2010 to Stony Brook, about 30 minutes outside New York City on Long Island, to review the Stony Brook Model for news literacy. I made a return trip for the Center’s News Literacy Summer Institute for educators in July 2010. The information gleaned from those visits, coupled with the themes and issues participants identified in this study, can be used to develop a Canadian news literacy curriculum.

First, it should be noted here that in my talks with the Center’s faculty, who spoke with me openly while I took notes, there was a sense that this was an evolving course. The faculty was constantly tweaking course components to ensure that students remained engaged and that key lessons were taught. From an educational standpoint, this is
important: The decision about what to teach in a curriculum is vital to the curriculum’s success because that decision defines the educational purposes and objectives (McNeil, 2009, p.105).

In my talk with Howard Schneider, the dean of Stony Brook’s journalism school and the founder of the news literacy program, he talked about how the course evolved out of a class he taught about the media. He discussed how what he perceived were deficits in student understanding of the news — specifically the difference between news and opinion, lack of understanding about the journalistic process and the rules under which the American media must operate. His language in our talk sounded much like the Tyler Rationale model for curriculum design. The Rationale is an ends-means model that stresses identifying goals or objectives and then creating a curriculum to meet those goals (McNeil, 2009, p.118). The Tyler Rationale design process involves gathering data about student knowledge and behaviours about a subject, including any gaps in knowledge, the social context within which students find themselves, and expert analysis and advice. Once all the data are collected, goals and objectives are identified, a curriculum is designed to meet the end goals and bridge the gaps in knowledge identified at the outset. Effectively, that is what happened in Stony Brook and what has emerged in data from study participants: Participants saw news literacy deficiencies in students and news consumers, but were not sure how to support the development of those skills and abilities through a curriculum.

The Tyler Rationale is not without it’s problem. Although designing a curriculum through the rationale requires cultivating data about students, society and experts, the rationale does not provide a means to balance these information sources or a means to
give more weight to one area (McNeil, 2009, p.120). In effect, the rationale does not provide a way to balance biases that appear at various points in the curriculum design process nor does it resolve political conflicts in curriculum policy design even if the actors involved can agree on common values (McNeil, 2009, p.120). McNeil (2009, p.120) wrote that the Rationale has been criticized for locking curriculum design into a top-down model where politicians, educators, parents and academics create the curriculum based on their inferences of students’ needs, which may not result in an attractive and engaging curriculum.

Students in classes I observed during my April visit were engaged and willing to talk about the news and their assignments. They used language similar to the course goals outlined in the curriculum documents I was allowed to review, such as the ability to evaluate sources and sources of information. Smaller lab classes in the days following the lecture emphasized group work and discussion. The lectures did not have a group-work aspect to them, but were organized in a manner to promote discussion between the professor and the students. At all times, in the recitation, the lecture and in my conversations with Miller about the course, there was a heavy emphasis on applying what the students had learned rather than regurgitating concepts discussed at lecture. However, there were some disconnects: While students were asked to submit news items of interest to them to be used as a basis for discussion during lectures, they were not used as the basis for the lesson itself.

There is one other critique of the Tyler Rationale that I wish to mention at this point. The Tyler model, McNeil (2009) wrote, tends to result in “many more standards and objectives related to learners and the community” (p.121). This leads to a conflict
McNeil identified with curriculum design: That the goals or objectives should be attainable. This issue materialized when I sat in on a planning session for the term’s final lecture. The faculty at the Center for News Literacy discussed how to review the 12 lessons delivered during the course of the semester. There were those who argued that listing 12 lessons would be too much for students to digest, while others believed that the review should not omit any of the term’s lessons. The 12 lessons are built off of four key concepts underlying the course. Schneider said that the core of the news literacy curriculum is four lessons: identifying various types of information, what the faculty call knowing your information neighbourhood; evaluating sources of information and sources within news stories; identifying news and opinion; and understanding and identifying media bias and audience bias.

The course begins with an introduction to news literacy and a discussion about why news literacy can be considered an important ability in the digital information age. Students are then exposed to the reasons why people would follow the news, what makes the news different from other sources of information such as advertising, publicity or entertainment and the philosophical and practical pillars that hold up the American press, such as the First Amendment. Next comes a lesson on the journalistic process that includes understanding how some information becomes news, what is the difference between news and opinion, what is the difference between fairness and balance in media coverage, understanding journalistic truth, evaluating sources of information and sources within news stories, understanding the power of images, the difference between print and broadcast news, unique issues related to online news and, finally, a discussion about the
future of news, which includes an overview on the structures of media ownership. In short, there is a lot to learn.

If we look at what journalists in this study said about what is needed to be news literate, many of the lessons in Stony Brook can be applied to a Canadian setting. In some shape or form, every journalist involved in this study pointed to some aspect of the news literacy curriculum at work in Stony Brook. For example, Joel’s concentric circle theory could be used as a way to teach students about why it is important to follow the news, connecting to theme of the news as narrative.

David talked about understanding the social process that creates news. In short, he talked about understanding why something became news and the subjective judgments that make some stories more newsworthy than others. Sabrina, Joel and David talked about understanding and evaluating media bias, fairness and journalistic truth, as well as understanding audience bias and evaluating sources during the consumption of news. Bob also talked about understanding media ownership structures — the final lesson at Stony Brook and also a lesson that Masterman (2001) recommended be included in a media literacy course.

Participants in this study did not explicitly state that students should be required to learn about the mission of the press and freedom of speech, which happens at Stony Brook. While this may be a clash of Canadian and American values — the First Amendment is considered central to American democracy — it also shows how the rationale when put into practice may bias domain experts in curriculum design. This is where combining teachers, journalists and academics would aid in curriculum design and balance out problems inherent in the Tyler model.
While Stony Brook does have a lesson on evaluating news online, the lesson like the responses from participants on the theme of social media, blends the ideas of information literacy, digital literacy, media literacy and news literacy. However, the lesson does not go into the same detail as that discussed by participants in this study. If Canadian educators are keen on teaching news literacy, the responses from participants in this study would point to a need to focus more on the various roles of social media in the new news environment and expand on this one lesson at Stony Brook.

Reviewed literature and course curricula have not shown a news literacy course being taught in Ontario at the post-secondary or secondary school level. Media literacy is woven into the Ontario primary secondary school language curricula and an understanding of news sources is included. Media literacy is also a standalone Grade 11 elective course open to any student. The Grade 11 elective is a course in media studies and has a broad media literacy focus, rather than just the news. The Ontario School Library Association also provides an overview of information fluencies required to be taught within the Ontario curriculum.

A review of the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum documents related to media literacy show a detailed description of what students should learn and how teachers should approach teaching the media. The mostly clear wording in the policy and curriculum documents meet two of the key ingredients to creating a successful media studies curriculum, according to UNESCO (Frau-Meigs, 2006). The curriculum documents also appear to be based on current research into media education and students’ use of media, meeting another of the UNESCO key ingredients. The other ingredients include pre-service and ongoing professional training for teachers; involvement of media
professionals, parents and youth groups; teaching materials and resources; an open
dialogue between all participants; and an international dialogue among educators (Frau-
Meigs, 2006, p.17-18). Looking at this list, the curriculum documents do not discuss
involving media professionals in the curriculum as Masterman (2001) recommended, or
as Stony Brook University has already done. Considering the reported success and
continued expansion of the News Literacy Project in American high schools, the Ontario
high school language curriculum may be best served with a made-in-Canada cousin of
the News Literacy Project. Such an organization could not only help teachers develop
lesson plans using news literacy standards and guidelines, but also connect journalists
and teachers within the communities they both serve. It is what Masterman (2001)
envisioned.

A news literacy curriculum based on the Stony Brook model could also be helpful
for universities and colleges aiming to develop critical thinking skills in students. In
2001, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities released a policy on
general education that outlined how colleges should evaluate any general education
course. The Ministry wrote that general education courses should “identify and deal with
issues of societal concern in a manner relevant to the lives of students.” The course, the
Ministry said, should guide the student through the issue’s historical context, theoretical
bases and its application to modern life. All courses, the Ministry wrote, should help
students with their personal growth; help them become informed citizens; and/or help
them in their future working life. Most of all, the Ministry said, courses should prepare
students for future learning — in a sense, prepare them to learn once they have left school
and living their lives. These goals can also be found in the Stony Brook Model. The goals
and broad objectives the Ministry identified, and which are relevant to news literacy, included developing the skills and knowledge necessary to help students become more involved in civic life; better understand and build understanding of cultural history and diversity; gain greater self-awareness as well as build an understanding of others; understand social relationships and an awareness of how society functions; and build an appreciation for the role and place technology has in modern society. Again, each of these broad goals and objectives can be seen as underpinning the Stony Brook Model as well as reflected in the comments, ideas and perceptions from journalists involved in this study.

All this is to say that there is potential for a news literacy curriculum in Ontario and the possibility that journalists will be welcomed to join teachers in the classroom to help build news literacy abilities and skills in students. However, further study is needed. The conclusions drawn from the data in this study cannot be generalized because of the small number of participants. This study relied solely on the voice of journalists — further studies in the area of news literacy in Canada should explore the teaming of teacher views with media views to better determine what those on the front line of the media industry and the educational sector believe should be part of a news literacy curriculum. As well, team teaching should be studied to determine how well journalists can be integrated into a classroom setting to work with educators as Masterman believed. These two avenues of exploration can only lead to deeper data, deeper recommendations and, ultimately, a more critically aware student.

The news media are an entry point into a realm of learning. The media are, as discussed, the first curriculum a child encounters in life (Postman, 1985). The media are a
key source of learning before a child enters school, a core source of knowledge during their educational life and the main source of learning when they leave school and enter “the real world.” The discussion about preparing students to live their lives in the modern news environment has already started. This thesis is a small contribution to that discussion, which like news literacy is evolving and ongoing.
References


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Appendix A

E-mail Script

I’m a Master's of Education student at Queen's University. For my thesis, I’m researching what journalists believe should be part of a news literacy curriculum. I’m hoping that you would be interested in taking part in my study. If you accept, I would conduct a one-on-one interview with you to get your thoughts on how educators can teach students about reading, analyzing and creating news. Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent possible and your name won’t appear in my printed thesis unless you choose otherwise, as per university guidelines. You also have the right to withdraw from the study without consequences. Should you withdraw, you may request removal of part or all of your data.

If you’re interested in participating, I can send you a Letter of Information that outlines the study in more detail, as well as a Consent Form for you to read and sign. If you’re not interested, I thank you for your time and, if you’d like, I can let you know when my thesis becomes publicly available. I’m also available to answer any questions you have.

Thank you very much for your time.
Sincerely,

Jordan Press
Appendix B
Letter of Information/Consent Form

LETTER OF INFORMATION

“Meeting the Press: Thoughts from the Fourth Estate on how to teach news literacy”
A Study about Journalists’ views on how to teach news media literacy

To Whom It May Concern:
My name is Jordan Press and I am a Master’s of Education student at Queen’s University writing my thesis on news literacy, an area of personal interest since I am a journalist. The purpose of my master’s thesis is to bring the voice of journalists into the discussion concerning creation and delivery of news media education in Ontario. This study was granted clearance by the General Research Ethics Board for compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans, and Queen's policies.

The main questions guiding my research include finding out what journalists believe are the most important skills necessary to become media literate, how journalists define the term media literacy, and to discuss media literacy rates among journalists. Answers to all these questions will then be used in providing ideas to educators on how they can best teach media literacy to students. I am inviting you to take part in this study. Further details on how you can participate are listed below.

Procedures involved in the Research
Anyone who volunteers to take part in this study will be asked to take part in a one-on-one interview with me. The interview can be done in person, over the phone, or, if you wish, over e-mail.
If you would like to be interviewed either over the phone or in person, we will set up a time, date and location that is easy for you. The interviews will take 45-60 minutes and will cover the topics central to the study. With your permission, I would like to record the interview with a digital audio recorder and take hand-written notes to ensure accuracy.
While it is likely that you will only have to take part in one interview, I may have follow-up questions. It will be up to you about how you would like this follow-up to take place – either face-to-face, over the phone or via e-mail — or whether you would like to take part in any follow-up questioning.

Are there any risks if participating in this study?
It is not likely that there will be any risks to you should you choose to take part in this study. However, you don’t have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable and you can choose to stop taking part in the study at any time and have all the information you provided removed from my thesis. Your identity will be kept confidential at all times to the extent possible and nowhere in my thesis will your name appear unless you choose otherwise. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

Are there any benefits to taking part in this study?
The research won’t benefit you directly, but your answers and thoughts will benefit the education system by providing more ideas on how to teach media education. Your thoughts could help change the way media education is taught in Ontario and connect the profession with the classroom — a connection that has largely been missed.

Confidentiality
At all times, your identity will be kept confidential to the extent possible. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified unless you choose otherwise. No one but me and my supervisor will know whether you participated unless you choose to tell anyone. However, since your group (community) is small, others may be able to identify you on the basis of references you make. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me.
All digital data will be kept on a secured hard drive and all handwritten notes will be kept in a secure location. Only I and my supervisor will have access to the notes and secured hard drive. In accordance with publication standards, all recordings, handwritten notes and personal information will be kept for five years before being removed from my database. Transcripts of interviews and my analysis notes may be kept indefinitely, but your personal information will not be attached to either of these documents. After I have completed my thesis, I may review the information you provided for a secondary study. If this should happen, you will be informed of the secondary analysis. Your personal information will not be used in the secondary analysis and your identity will be kept confidential to the extent possible, unless you choose otherwise.

What if I change my mind about being in the study?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to be part of the study, you can decide to withdraw at any time, even after signing the Consent Form. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any information you have provided will be removed from my database unless you indicate otherwise.

Information about the Study Results
I expect to complete my thesis by January 2011. If you would like a summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you. I will also let you know if my thesis is published in any journals and will provide you with a copy of the article if you wish.

Questions about the Study

Any questions about study participation may be directed to me, Jordan Press, at j.press@queensu.ca, or my supervisor, Rebecca Luce-Kapler, at 613-533-6000 x77267, or rebecca.luce-kaper@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

Sincerely,

Jordan Press

“Meeting the Press: Thoughts from the Fourth Estate on how to teach news literacy”

CONSENT FORM

• I have read the information presented in the Letter of Information about a study being conducted by Jordan Press of Queen’s University.
• I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
• I understand that this study will require me to be interviewed either in-person, over the phone, or via e-mail and answer questions related to the teaching of news media literacy in Ontario.
• These interviews will be audio recorded and will last between 45-60 minutes.
• I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time and if I withdraw, I may request that all or part of my data be destroyed.
• By signing below, I agree to participate in the study.

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Jordan Press. Retain the second copy for your records.

I. I want my identity kept confidential to the extent possible.
   ___ Yes. I want a pseudonym used. Please refer to me as ______________
___ No. I want to be identified or have a pseudonym used. Please refer to me as __________________

2. I agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview, and understand that I can always decline the request.
   ___ Yes. How to contact me___________________________________
   ___ No

Name of Participant (Printed) ___________________________________

Signature: ____________________________________________

Date: ___________________

___ Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study’s results. Please send them to this email address ____________________________________ or to this mailing address ____________________________________.

___ No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study’s results.

Any questions about study participation may be directed to me, Jordan Press, at j.press@queensu.ca, or my supervisor, Rebecca Luce-Kapler at 613-533-6000 x77267, or rebecca.luce-kaper@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca.
Appendix C

Sample Questions/Interview Schedule

Tell me about your experiences learning about the news media when you were in school. What sources were used (i.e. newspapers, magazines, advertisements, broadcasts)?
Looking back at your education, how well did the program prepare you to become more media literate?
What skills are currently of importance for those in the news media?
How will the life of a journalists change in the future?
How would you rate the levels of media literacy among Ontario journalists?
How would you rate your own level of media literacy?
How important do you believe media literacy is to being a journalist?
How important do you believe media literacy skills are to today’s society?
What are some of your general impressions from your years as a student?
What are some of your general thoughts about the education system today?
What role should the news media play in educating students?
What skills would you want to see emphasized in a media literacy course?
How would you define the term, “media literacy”?
How would you define the term “news media literacy”?
How has your definition of “news media literacy” changed over the years?
What, in your opinion, would be the best way of teaching media literacy?
May 19, 2010

Jordan B. Press  
Master's Candidate  
Faculty of Education  
Duncan McArthur Hall  
Queen's University

GREB Ref #: GFEDUC-514-10  
Title: "Meeting the Press: Thoughts From the Fourth Estate on How to Teach News Media Literacy"

Dear Jordan:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled “Meeting the Press: Thoughts From the Fourth Estate on How to Teach News Media Literacy" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB; of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (details available on webpage http://www.queensu.ca/ors/researchethic/Grebeb/Forms.html – Adverse Event Report Form). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects into the study procedures on the Ethics Change Form that can be found at http://www.queensu.ca/ors/researchethics/Grebeb/forms.html - Research Ethics Change Form. These changes must be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or Irving@queensu.ca prior to implementation. Mrs. Irving will forward your request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewers and / or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, PhD  
Professor and Chair  
General Research Ethics Board

c.c.: Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kaper, Faculty Supervisor  
Dr. Malcolm Welch, Chair, Unit REB  
E-REB: c/o Graduate Studies & Bureau of Research, Attn: Celina Freitas

JS/ll