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Making News Today: Literacy for Citizenship

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This paper is a report on an evaluation of the Making News Today project. This project is a partnership involving the University of Wollongong, Apple Computers, WIN Television and participating schools, supported with a grant from the Australian Research Council. <http://makingnewstoday.UOW.edu.au/>

Schools participating in the project are involved in the analysis and creation of news items for television. This evaluation focuses specifically on the potential of the Making News Today project as a vehicle for teaching literacy for citizenship.

Introduction

This paper is the result of an evaluation of the *Making News Today Project*. It looks specifically at the potential of the *Making News Today Project* and the teaching of ethical journalism as a means of also teaching citizenship literacy.

In 2005 The University of Wollongong, in partnership with WIN television and Apple Computers, launched a three-year project, *Making News Today*. In the project, participating secondary school students learn to analyze and create media products using the resources provided by the three partners.

The project is founded on the premise that our society continues to become increasingly more complex and people are confronting a range of often competing social, political, economic and environmental issues. The project is designed to equip high school students with the multiple literacy skills necessary to negotiate this increasing social complexity (Blackall et al. 2004).

This paper takes an expansive view of literacy, defining it in a sociocultural context (Gee 1996, Perez 1998). Literacy is more than an act of reading and writing; it is about the creation and sharing of meaning through language. This tradition sees literacy as a social and cultural construct, and it is possible to talk about not a single literacy but multiple literacies. In this tradition, literacy is understood as both a process and product. It is the act of composing a literacy product as well as the product itself. People use the resource of language to create literacy products or artefacts through which meaning is mediated. The theory of multiple literacies is useful in understanding literacy in a society and culture rich in media and information and communication technologies. In 21st century societies, particularly the societies found in Western style advanced capitalist states, literacy is processed and mediated through these technologies, whether it is the more traditional print media or the most advanced and emergent digital technologies.

In a theory of multiple literacies, literacy is not values neutral. Rather it is a contested social practice with competing political interests (Luke et al. 1997). We use literacy to achieve political outcomes. Literacy is the means through which people interact in the world. It is through the human capacity for speech and the ability to create and share meaning that we are able to reach the necessary consensus to achieve the political cohesion

for social, economic, cultural and technological advancement that has come to define modernity (Habermas 1984, 1987). Literacy is fluid. It is in a constant state of flux, where meanings sometimes coalesce and build consensus, while at other times they collide and create division. For Habermas, rational discourse occurs where we communicate as equals to create consensus. Non-rational discourse is where literacy is used not to build consensus, but as an instrument of power. Literacy has a strong association with citizenship (Luke et al. 1997). The growth in literacy is closely intertwined with the rise of the modern democratic state. For complex Western style representational democracy to work, the citizenry needs to have a reasonable level of literacy in order to both understand the process and also to be able to make informed decisions concerning their political representatives.

We move in a media rich society. Our various literacies are increasingly mediated through popular media and information and communication technologies (De Zengotita 2005). These convergent technologies are woven into our social fabric. Everything, from the more traditional daily newspaper, through to the endlessly evolving digital media, spins the complex, intricate and at times unfathomable and invisible web of communication.

Working within the ethical framework of *Making News Today*, students learn how to research, construct and deliver a news media product for television. This is based on the assumption that ethical processes across all professions are served through referring to a code, while having constant dialogue with stakeholders or partners in the process. In such an ongoing conversation, ethical journalism not only equips high school students with the technologies of the journalistic craft, but also teaches the political, social and moral implications of media products, and so has the potential to teach ‘literacy for citizenship’.

The body of this paper is written as a scripted conversation between the co-authors: Phil Reece, who conducted the evaluation and David Blackall, one of the developers of the *Making News Today* project.

A conversation between the co-authors

Phil:

The *Making News Today* project provides a practical example of values education in action. The students have real world literacy products with real issues and real audiences and they do this in the context of an ethical framework, the *Recommended Code of Ethics for the Media and Entertainment Alliance (Appendix A)*. As an onlooker viewing the project for the first time, it seemed to me that it had the potential to be a vehicle for developing a ‘literacy for citizenship’; a literacy within a values or moral framework that students can learn and apply to a range of different literacy products including news media. David, who was one of the project developers, outlines the underlying principles of *Making News Today*.

David:

Despite the practical and technical aspects of *Making News Today* as a manual for constructing television news – from scripting, filming and editing to the finished news on video – the learning process has a critical theoretical component. This provides a detailed and systematic description of the filmic, voice, story shaping and ethical and legal considerations at every stage of the practical construction process. This is achieved through the embedding of each relevant ethical guideline from the *MEAA Recommended Code* alongside the relevant technical steps in the practical on-line ‘how to’ manual.

Further ethical, legal and story writing checks are made at the critical point of scripting, where students must submit their draft script to a ‘virtual’ on-line Chief of Staff (COS) for approval and modification, before they can move onto the next stage of actually going out

and filming subjects and other material for the story. This minimises the potential of harming, defaming or infringing the privacy of the subjects in the story, or the wider community, who provide material for the stories. This idea is based on the fact that a considerable amount of learning within mainstream news is via emulation and improvement of cadet reporters' work on a daily basis, where ideally, senior journalists provide feedback and mentoring on technical aspects of scripting, filming and interviewing as well as any ethical or legal advice relevant to the story.

Junior work is corrected, revised and rewritten by more experienced journalists in terms of journalism conventions and in consideration of many of the often hidden ethical and legal issues. As a consequence, mainstream journalists, and now the students of *Making News Today*, acquire their news reporting skills on a story-by-story basis and this, in best case scenarios, includes the skills learned in making a story work in ethical and legal terms. The simple legal considerations involved with, for instance, defamation should in most cases flow from this. If camera subjects are treated ethically, their stories represented accurately and fairly, it is more unlikely they will feel humiliated and defamed in the finished piece. Thus, *Making News Today* is providing a simple framework for professionalism, in particular the ethical and legal considerations. (Assuming that most journalism stories do not require deception, entrapment or pursuit, despite the fact that these elements are routinely built into the structure of tabloid journalism as we know it today.)

This aspect is critical to the high school context as a school can ill afford to have its student news crews on the rampage digging up dirt that in the final news piece risks defaming and otherwise injuring goodwill throughout the school and wider community.

Phil:

My evaluation of the project focused very specifically on the potential of the *Making News Today* project as a forum for developing literacy for citizenship, or as I refer to it through the remainder of this paper, 'citizenship literacy'. Through teaching ethical journalism, students not only develop an understanding and use of the technical aspects of media literacy, but also deal with the ethical dilemmas that emerge as they manage competing social and individual interests. In fact, they learn to use this technical knowledge to realise the professional and moral responsibilities that go with being a journalist communicating in a public forum.

Firstly, students learn how to apply the *Recommended Code of Ethics for the Media and Entertainment Alliance* in assessing the moral worth of news media products in general. Secondly, they use this ethical code in the construction of their own news products for public audiences.

The *Recommended Code of Ethics for the Media and Entertainment Alliance* is representative of an agreed set of social norms to guide ethical and moral decision-making within the media industry. The code says that journalists have an important role to play in advancing democratic values. They have a responsibility to seek the truth, inform citizens and protect free speech.

Journalists describe society itself. They seek the truth. They convey information, ideas and opinion, a privileged role. They research, disclose, record, question, entertain, suggest and remember. They inform citizens and animate democracy. They give form to freedom of expression.

There are four principles discernable within the code. These are:

1. to report honestly, accurately and fairly
2. to ensure personal opinion and self-interest do not undermine integrity in reporting

3. to avoid racial and social stereotyping and resulting misrepresentation
4. to protect the rights and privacy of the individual through informed consent.

The stories journalists write and the images they project contribute to a much broader public discourse on the state of the democracy. People need to be able to trust that what the media is saying is truthful and the code demands journalists to be transparent in their reporting.

While there are strong similarities across the range of ethical codes for journalists internationally, the project team of *Making News Today* decided to go with the *Recommended Code of Ethics for the Media and Entertainment Alliance*.

David:

The *Recommended Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) Code* and the actual MEAA revised and adopted journalist code, were both presented to the Australian public in the mid 1990s. The first presented, the Recommended MEAA version, was more comprehensive in comparison to the final adopted code in that, among other important standards of twenty, it declares the need for informed consent – a critical responsibility of student journalists doing television news stories within a school community. The recommended code also acknowledges the unfairness in using surveillance cameras, mobile telephone cameras and deliberately hidden cameras.

Coincidentally, these MEAA codes emerged at the time that mini-digital video cameras were becoming available internationally and it is this technology that renders *Making News Today* possible. The relatively inexpensive and easy-to-use cameras radically changed the acquisition methods involved in television news, current affairs and documentary, where a sole journalist could do everything from writing, interviewing to filming. In adopting this video journalist model, it was clear that a camera-specific ethics code with informed consent was needed for *Making News Today*.

Sole camera operators, from journalism to documentary to human rights advocates and visible evidence gatherers could now film broadcast quality video with a home movie camera. This empowered human rights groups in their capacity to record high quality visible evidence and so brought new possibilities for civic journalism with the now easily acquired digital video. It is this filmed visible evidence that gives television journalism its primacy over the other forms.

In formulating the new codes the MEAA ethics revision committee wanted to initiate dialogue with the Australian public and devise a code that would ensure each journalist was aware of the important role he/she plays as a voice within a community. Students in *Making News Today* were to be conducting real journalism with broadcast capable cameras and so it was accepted that they too must keep in mind their obligations and service to the public – the code would work as a guide within the *Making News Today* interactive resources site. The site was designed to also show that this public service citizenship role is today very much in danger of being lost to commercial imperatives for news and current affairs products to be entertaining. This ignores the central importance of journalism to society and the democratic process, where members of the public are actually citizens and not merely consumers in a market place.

In continuing to build a definition for journalistic professionalism into the *Making News Today* learning process, the *Recommended Revised MEAA Code of Ethics* provides twenty useful standards most appropriate to the school situation, providing students the best benchmark for referral and definition throughout the news production process.

Phil:

To look for evidence of citizenship literacy, I reviewed nineteen online conversations, which took place between the news teams in the schools and the online Chief of Staff. The news teams posted their scripts on the website for approval by the Chief of Staff. David, who was the Chief of Staff for the project, explains the context of these online conversations.

David:

This conversation is not intended to deify the MEAA code in *Making News Today*, rather the Chief of Staff refers students to the code as a reference point for reflection, argument, resolution, definition and ongoing dialogue as the real television news products are constructed by the school students. The *Recommended and Revised MEAA Code* is concluded by a Guidance Clause and this is worth noting here:

Basic values often need interpretation and sometimes can come into conflict. Ethics requires conscientious decision-making in context. Only substantial considerations of public interest or substantial harm to people allows any standard to be overridden.

Informed consent is an actual and ongoing conversation between the professional (filmmaker, journalist, medical researcher, sociologist, doctor) and the subject being filmed, being studied or having a medical procedure. The subject, usually through signing a contract, grants consent; then filming may begin, or medical or sociological research may get under way. In *Making News Today* the camera subject and sources, having understood the news story's purpose, simply provide consent verbally to the students before filming may begin.

Informed consent implies that subjects are given all the information relevant to their decision to consent under circumstances of fairness, transparency and honesty. In essence, the final products, the television news stories, are given more authenticity in that they are 'member checked' in this ongoing informed consent conversation. This occurs around the code and so increases story accuracy and fairness by way of the conversation between student journalists, teachers, Chief of Staff and subjects alike – a constant informed consent process referencing the *Recommended Revised MEAA Code of Ethics*.

Phil:

While there was a wide range of ethical issues discussed in the online dialogue between news teams and COS, I was able to organise the conversation points into five broad themes. These are:

1. accuracy
2. truthfulness: honesty, fairness and balance
3. personal bias
4. stereotyping
5. consent.

1. Accuracy

A number of the conversation points focused on accuracy. Technical features, such as spelling, grammar and word choice have ethical implications. Poor technical execution of the media product can result in miscommunication, ambiguity and uncertainty. Students need to learn that technical accuracy has a real purpose in real world communication.

2. Truthfulness: honesty, fairness and balance

There were a number of conversation points that can be grouped loosely under the heading

of truthfulness. It is important to acknowledge that truth in reporting can be problematic. Truth is often paradoxical and can often be constructed from very different and contested sets of facts and opinions. Truth is not necessarily a singularity. Journalists therefore, in their commitment to the truth, need to ensure that they are inclusive of the full range of opinion in their story telling and ensure that these different points of view are represented fairly and are balanced in the reporting. Facts need to be verified. Interviews and first-hand accounts need to be appropriate to the subject, and opinion and commentary authoritative.

3. Personal bias

A follow-on from the theme of truthfulness in reporting is to ensure that personal opinion or bias on the part of the reporter does not unduly influence the reporting. The journalists need to be able to allow the facts to tell the story and hold back on any personal opinions. In cases where personal bias is influencing the story, there is an ethical responsibility for the journalist to fully disclose any such self-interest so that the reader and viewer can take this into account.

4. Stereotyping

There is a danger of stereotyping when dealing with complex social issues such as religion, race and culture. Confronted with the challenge of exploring social issues, news teams would sometimes resort to stereotyping groups and sub-groups within their schools. In so doing, rather than contributing to a resolution of conflict they may exacerbate the problem. The *Recommended Code of Ethics for the Media and Entertainment Alliance* alerts the reporter to the dangers of misrepresenting individuals and groups.

5. Consent

As David explained earlier, the question of consent and the rights of the individual are crucial issues, not only for this project but for news media in general and again for society as a whole. It strikes at the very heart of our democracy when it comes to the question of a right to privacy and a right to personal autonomy. In the context of *Making News Today*, the issue of consent features directly in three of the online conversations. News teams would fail to explain to their interviewees how their contribution would be presented in the final project. While this could be a simple case of naivety, students' learning in citizenship must arrive at an understanding that informed consent is more than agreeing to be interviewed. It is also a case of understanding the full context of the story and how subjects and their views will be represented in the final product.

Beyond journalism and towards citizenship literacy

While *Making News Today* teaches students about the discipline of journalism, it has much broader implications as a means to teach students a form of literacy that promotes and develops the principles of citizenship. In the second phase of the evaluation, I examined the relationship between the ethical principles being taught in *Making News Today* and the values statements for schools articulated both by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) and the News South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSWDET).

The Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training published the *Framework for Values Education in Schools* in 2005. The framework has nine values for Australian schools. Along with values related to personal achievement and excellence, the framework emphasises the importance of a just society, a fair go and the value of freedom. The framework also identifies the need for a compassionate and caring society and the need

to resolve differences constructively, and promotes understanding, tolerance and inclusion. The framework places a high value on honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, truth seeking, mutual respect and accountability for actions.

The New South Wales Department of Education and Training's *Values for Public Schools* (2004) advances the values of personal excellence, integrity, respect, responsibility, fairness, cooperation, participation, and a care for others. Also incorporated into the *Values of Public Schools* is a focus on democracy and active citizenship.

While they may have different origins, there are obvious shared values across the three frameworks, the *Recommended Code of Ethics for the MEAA*, the *Framework for Values Education in Schools* and the *Values of Public Schools*. Values of honesty, fairness, respect for others and active citizenship are embraced by all. The pursuit of truth is also one value that fully resonates with ethical journalism. As Longstaff (1994) discusses, the profession of journalism has a special responsibility and relationship with truth within a democratic society.

The values for schools expressed in both the Commonwealth and State documents promote active engagement with the principles of democracy and promote the values of citizenship. However, as with all such statements, the challenge is how to enact these values in ways that are meaningful, purposeful and real for students in their formative years. While there may well be other means to teach values in our schools, ethical journalism provides a pre-existing framework to teach these values through literacy. Ethical journalism not only teaches students about literacy and media products, but also does so in the context of citizenship. Ethical journalism is literacy that is scrutinised and tested in public forums. The words of the authors are held to account when it comes to questions of honesty, integrity, fairness and balance and of course, truthfulness.

The *Making News Today* project teaches real values, in a real world of television production with real implications for all those involved. The *Making News Today Project*, with a focus on ethical journalism, not only teaches how to construct literacy products in the context of values and citizenship, but also exposes students to analytical processes and equips them with tools to examine and critique literacy products at a technical level and, more importantly for this discussion, within an ethical and moral context. The processes of the deconstruction, analysis and construction of media products teach the students how to evaluate any literacy product, particularly to do with public literacy, for moral content. Students have learnt that literacy is artifice. They understand that it is a construct and they are learning to pull it apart to see how it works both technically and ethically.

In one sense, the literacy promoted in the *Making News Today* project is a transcended form of literacy. It not only provides the user with tools, resources and processes to construct their own ethical and morally grounded literacy products, but also provides a set of skills and a framework through which to interpret the literacy product of others. The ethical code provides a tool for critical reflection by anyone who chooses to apply it to a media product or scrutinise a public form of literacy. The project provides the students with a comprehensive and powerful metalanguage for the deconstruction, analysis and construction of media texts.

Much of what students are exposed to in the popular media falls well short of ethical journalism. Commercial interests all too often replace the pursuit of truth as the underlying principle of journalism. Given the fact that much of our literacy is mediated through traditional forms of media and, even more significantly, the continually emergent digital media, teaching students ethical journalism provides an appropriate analytical framework through which to evaluate what they hear and see on a daily basis.

We also need to keep in mind the very seductive and at times predatory nature of media.

Masterman (1985) creates a compelling case for media education. Contemporary society and popular culture are saturated with media products and media generated literacy. We produce and consume media products in ever increasing volume and media has an ideological importance in what Masterman calls the ‘consciousness industries’ (Masterman 1985, p.2). Media is extremely influential in shaping our perceptions and interpretations of life’s experiences and our worldview.

To be able to question and interrogate media is an essential literacy for the 21st century. Secondary students need to be able to understand and critique media and expose the political, social, economic and cultural nature of the product and its purpose. To accept media at its face value and not to question and look beneath the skin will result in people being exploited, manipulated and disempowered by those who manufacture and control the media. The *Making News Today* project provides students with the skills and tools to objectify and analyze and critique media products. There is a continued danger of being misled about the true nature and function of news media in a democracy.

The tabloid media that dominates popular culture presents a hard-nosed adversarial form of journalism with questionable ethics. Stories are often poorly researched, are opinionated, and biased rather than balanced. The truth is that any investigative reporting is only a very small part of the profession’s work and such reporting should be conducted with a very high regard for ethical standards. The journalist needs to be extremely confident that in overriding an ethical standard, there is a real and substantial public issue at stake.

Perhaps the greatest protection that both journalists and citizens have against unethical forms of media is the power of fully informed consent. One of the significant principles found in the values statements of both the federal and state governments is that of ‘respect’. This is also fundamental in ethical journalism. People, to varying degrees and for varying reasons, have been and always will be vulnerable to misrepresentation and to having their privacy compromised. New technologies have made all of us increasingly vulnerable to predatory behaviour by those seeking to access and exploit personal information without consent. Ethical journalism places a strong emphasis on respect and the rights of people, both the right to privacy and a right to ensure that any representation in public communication is a true and accurate representation.

The teaching of citizenship literacy has an even broader implication when we consider the importance of public discourse and the place that media has in both the evolution and the future of democracy. Habermas(1998) stresses the importance of an independent and public discourse that is free from political manipulation as being important for democracies to grow and thrive. Citizens need to be able to express opinions and debate issues openly and transparently, free from any forms of coercion, both physical and psychological, or any forms of deception, manipulation, or behind the scenes hijacking of public forums for political advantage.

In advanced Western style democracies, which have grown hand in hand with capitalism, there is always the continued threat that the interests of power and money will overtake our public discourse. Media, with its control over the flow of information, is a dominant force within public discourse and is particularly vulnerable to these influences (Herman & Chomsky 2002). The *Recommended Code of Ethics, Australian MEAA* is designed to protect journalists from such influences. Citizens depend on information from the news media for informed decision-making, particularly when it comes to the democratic process. As previously discussed, this is the source of social truths. By adhering to an ethical code the media goes some way to protecting public discourse from distorting and manipulation by those pursuing the interests of power and money

The *Making News Today* project provides students with strategies to both protect and

advance the significance of public discourse. In learning the processes of journalism and how to construct an ethical news product, students also learn how to contribute to public discourse in a way which safeguards public interests.

Conclusion

The *Making News Today* project shows real potential for teaching students about the influence and power of the media within a democratic society. It provides insight into the inner workings of media products and how these products are constructed. Students learn to both critique media products and create their own media product while adhering to high ethical and, by implication, moral standards.

Teaching ethical journalism also teaches a transcended expression of literacy for citizenship and provides a practical means to implement the value systems underpinning schooling in a democracy. It provides a literacy that enables students to act in a moral context and makes a genuine contribution to the broader social discourse.

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Appendix A

Recommended revised MEAA Code of Ethics (most suited to application to high school based camera journalism)

Journalists describe society to itself. They seek truth.

They convey information, ideas and opinions, a privileged role.

They search, disclose, record, question, entertain, suggest and remember.

They inform citizens and animate democracy.

They give a practical form to freedom of expression.

Many journalists work in private enterprise, but all have these public responsibilities.

They scrutinise power, but also exercise it, and should be accountable.

Accountability engenders trust. Without trust, journalists do not fulfil their public responsibilities.

MEAA members engaged in journalism commit themselves to:

- honesty
- fairness
- independence
- respect for the rights of others

In consultation with colleagues, they will apply the following standards:

1. Report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts. Do not suppress relevant available facts, nor give distorting emphasis.
2. Make efforts to give the subject of any damaging report an opportunity to comment, preferably in that same report.
3. Urge the fair correction of errors.
4. Use fair and honest means to obtain material. Avoid misrepresentation and use of concealed equipment or surveillance devices.
5. Pictures and sound should be true and accurate. Any manipulation likely to mislead should be disclosed.
6. Plagiarism is stealing. Always attribute fairly.
7. Only quote directly what is actually said or written. Otherwise paraphrase. Meaning and context should be accurately reflected.
8. Disclose any direct or indirect payment made for interviews, pictures or information.
9. Do not allow personal beliefs or commitments to undermine accuracy, fairness and independence. Where relevant, disclose.
10. Do not allow any payment, gift or other advantage to undermine accuracy, fairness and independence. Where relevant, disclose.
11. Do not improperly use a journalistic position for personal gain.
12. Guard against advertising or commercial considerations improperly influencing journalism. Where it occurs, disclose.
13. Accept the right to privacy of every person. Public figures' privacy may be reduced by their public role. Relatives and friends of those in the public eye retain their own right to privacy.
14. At times of grief or trauma, always act with sensitivity and discretion. Never harass. Never exploit a person's vulnerability or ignorance of media practice. Interview only with informed consent.

15. Do not place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious belief or physical or mental disability.
16. Never knowingly endanger the life or safety of a person without informed consent.
17. Exercise particular care for the welfare of children in reports involving them.
18. Respect every person's right to a fair trial.
19. Aim to attribute as precisely as possible all information to its source. When a source seeks anonymity, do not agree without first considering the source's motive and any alternative attributable sources. Keep confidences given in good faith.
20. Educate yourself about ethics and help to enforce this code.

Guidance clause

Basic values often need interpretation and sometimes can come into conflict. Ethics requires conscientious decision-making in context. Only substantial considerations of public interest or substantial harm to people allows any standard to be overridden.