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**What's Black and White and
Retweeted All Over?**
Teaching news literacy in the digital age

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PRESS • POLITICS



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*Faith is an island in the setting sun
But proof is the bottom line for everyone
– Paul Simon*

On September 6, 2005, as the city of New Orleans wallowed in the ghastly aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Times-Picayune published a dramatic story. “Katrina’s Body Count could reach 10,000 / Bodies found piled in freezer at Convention Center,” the headline read. Staff writer Brian Thevenot, one of a handful of intrepid reporters who kept filing stories to a website after the newspaper’s offices were abandoned in the flood, reported that “between 30 and 40 bodies” were being stored in the freezer in the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, including a 7-year old girl with her throat cut.

Thevenot attributed the gruesome finding to two named National Guardsmen, whom he quoted on the record. One described the decomposing bodies in the freezer, adding, “I ain’t got the stomach for it, even after what I saw in Iraq.”¹ Thevenot himself witnessed four corpses lying just inside the food service entrance of the convention center.

But he didn’t open the freezer.

The upshot of this cautionary tale will surprise no one: There weren’t any bodies in the freezer. A subsequent inquiry found that the guardsmen were repeating stories they had heard in the food line at Harrah’s Casino, a police staging area nearby. The newspaper ran a lengthy corrective story – but not until 20 days later. In January, Thevenot wrote a mea culpa in the American Journalism Review.

“Open the Freezer!” is now the rallying cry and defining metaphor of a program in news literacy at Stony Brook University on Long Island. The slogan is printed on

* Special thanks to Alex Remington, Masters in Public Policy candidate (class of 2103), Kennedy School of Government

buttons and course materials, and hammered home to the roughly 7,300 students who have taken the course over the last five years. It's not so much a knock on Thevenot or the Times-Picayune, scrambling to get at the facts in a near-total collapse of the communication infrastructure, but an admonition to every student not to passively accept news from secondary sources, even if they have the gloss of authority.

"Misunderstandings, believing in half-truths and rumors, this is why [students] need this course," says Howard Schneider, dean of the journalism school at Stony Brook and creator of its news literacy program. "If nothing else, we make them pause and ask themselves a few questions: 'How do I know this? Who's telling me?'"²

* * *

The problem of an ill-informed American citizenry is not new; Marshall McLuhan and Newton Minow were lamenting the mass media's tendency to distort and distract 50 years ago, back when the Internet's creative disruption was but a dream. But today, the media landscape is so mercurial it can hardly be charted on a map. It's not so much Minow's vast wasteland as a vast wilderness, with no guideposts, no gatekeepers, no filters, no boundaries.

The collapse of traditional news organizations has left consumers with spotty or unreliable coverage. According to Paper Cuts, a blog that tracks newspaper layoffs, 3,685 people lost their jobs at American newspapers in 2011, and 19 newspapers closed down altogether or converted to a web-only presence. This is mild compared to 2009, when the bottom fell out of the industry's business model, 14,825 newspaper workers were laid off, and 112 newspapers closed.³

In their place have sprouted a bewildering array of alternative news sources, some of them enriching in their depth and perspective, but many of them specious, trivial, or derivative. According to Blogpulse, a project of the Nielsen company, there were more than 179 million identified blogs as of December 10, 2011, increasing at a rate of about 100,000 a day.⁴ A mere fraction of them do any original reporting. In November, CNN laid off 50 editors and photojournalists, citing the increased use of its

unpaid “iReporters,” or citizen journalists, who chime in on everything from the debt crisis to what they’re grateful for on Thanksgiving.⁵

The Times-Picayune, at least, is a traditional news operation with standards and disciplines that slipped under pressure. But many of the new information generators – operating in a culture of radically blurred boundaries between news, entertainment, propaganda and advertising – don’t practice those disciplines at all. Instead, they depend on the so-called wisdom of crowds to correct any errors (Wikipedia) or are driven by an ideology that all information must be unmediated and free (Wikileaks). If these popular sources of news won’t verify their assertions, be transparent about where their interests lie, or stand behind the accuracy of their reports, ordinary citizens can get lost in the thicket.

The great promise of the Internet is its democratizing effect, enabling countless diverse voices to be heard. But the Internet also promotes a culture that is dismissive of expertise, because anyone can be his own lawyer or car mechanic – or journalist – with a few clicks of the mouse. The distrust of experts (or the sneering synonym, “elites”) afflicts many industries, but it extends to the news media in spades.

The biannual Pew Research Center survey on attitudes toward the press found public trust at record-breaking lows in 2011. From 1985 to 2011, the survey found that respondents who believe “in general, news organizations get the facts straight” fell from 55 to 25 percent, and those who agree “stories are often inaccurate” rose from 34 to 66 percent.⁶ Younger news consumers are even more likely to read traditional news sources with a jaundiced eye.

Whom do they trust instead? Each other. According to the same Pew survey, 38 percent of people under 30 now get their news regularly or sometimes through Facebook, Twitter or other social networking sites. It’s even greater for high school students: A Knight Foundation survey this year found 76 percent use social media like Twitter, Facebook or Tumblr at least several times a week to get their news.⁷

Traditional news organizations and entrepreneurial start-ups alike are scrambling to take advantage of this trend by offering consumers specialized apps and

news feeds based on what the people they follow on Twitter are reading or following. This hall-of-mirrors effect can narrow consumers into silos of like-minded Mini Me's, a trend known to sociologists as homophily. But it also underscores an important development in news habits: as people increasingly share stories, videos, and tips through their networks, they are not just news consumers but news *producers*. There's even a neologism coined to describe the shift from passive consumer to active producer: "prosumer." This development confers an added obligation to "responsibly retweet," and makes even more crucial the news literacy skills to evaluate what information is worth sending on.

The propaganda, hoaxes, guerrilla tactics, and sheer falsehoods that infect the new media are at pandemic levels. Presidential candidates air deceptive campaign ads and repeat wild rumors with impunity. In January 2010, the conservative provocateur James O'Keefe and three others crashed Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu's office disguised as phone repairmen, cameras rolling, intending to use the footage for a web video. They were arrested by U.S. Marshals; as his defense, O'Keefe called himself an "investigative journalist."⁸ In April 2011, the Federal Trade Commission roused itself to file charges against fake news sites touting the "Acai Berry Diet," complaining that "millions of consumers are being lured to websites that imitate those of reputable news organizations."⁹ But such policing of the web is rare, and anything but systematic.

Now take all that and apply a variant of Moore's law: twice the information twice as fast. Far from providing more depth or detail, young people surveyed in an "ethnographic" study by the Associated Press in 2007 said the 24/7 news cycle mostly leaves them tired and hungry, "as they attempt to navigate an information stream that mostly dishes up recycled headlines and updates."¹⁰ No wonder an exhausted populace retreats to its comfortable silos.

What is to be done? Educators, civic leaders and others who care about an informed citizenry are pinning their hopes on the emerging academic field of news literacy. Simply put, news literacy is an effort to educate citizens, especially young people who have been reared in this new media wild West, to be more critical, more

discerning consumers of the news. Jennifer Fleming, an assistant professor of journalism at California State University, puts it well. The goal of news literacy, she writes, is to help students understand and challenge their own habits in consuming media. But it is also “to build a bedrock of independent thinking so students have the critical capacity and clarity of mind to continuously question the clutter of the Internet.”¹¹

News literacy is agnostic, or should be, about “platform” – it’s immaterial whether people are getting their news from dead-tree media, from the Cloud, or anything in between. The skills developed in these courses apply across all media, and they undergird every political or policy issue the citizenry may wish to discuss. Because without a set of stipulated facts – or at least a shared way to evaluate purported facts – there is no possibility of rational debate.

* * *

In 2005, Stony Brook president Shirley Strum Kenny hired Howard Schneider to start a journalism school on campus. But Schneider, the former editor of the Long Island daily newspaper *Newsday*, quickly developed a different idea. His first journalism class, called “The Ethics and Values of the American Press,” was a revelation. A third of the students, he said, believed everything they read or saw in the media, while a third believed nothing. The rest were utterly confused.

Schneider realized that “focusing on the supply side” – training the next generation of journalists – was no longer sufficient. “News is the currency of citizenship,” he said. “If we are going to produce citizens in the future, they’re going to have to be able to really understand how to evaluate, and critically, themselves, decide what kind of news reports they can act on and trust.”

Schneider’s big idea is that the skills traditional journalists learn at the knee of some grizzled veteran editor are skills that everyone needs in today’s media mash-up. Getting both sides of the story; keeping an open mind; digging deep to verify facts and assertions; going to multiple sources; placing a high value on accuracy, balance, and fairness – in short, the disciplines of the often-mocked “mainstream media.” They form

the foundation of the nation's first Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook, and they animate the mission of its journalism school.

In 2006 the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation placed a very large bet on Stony Brook, with a \$1.7 million grant to enroll 10,000 students in the news literacy course over five years. Alberto Ibargüen, CEO of the Knight Foundation, said that he expected the course would foster "a group of students who would simply graduate better able to cope with the bombardment of information that's part of modern digital life."¹² But with President Kenny's enthusiastic buy-in – she herself had a journalism degree from the University of Texas – Ibargüen also hoped for two other results: a university-wide adoption of the curriculum as a graduation requirement, and the creation of an exportable module so that news literacy could be easily replicated in other schools.

Founded in 1957 and located 25 miles away from Levittown, which was built just ten years earlier, Stony Brook is a fitting place for the news literacy pilot because it is so determinedly middle class. About a third of the students receive Pell grants to help with their tuition. Twenty-nine percent are the first in their families to attend college (as opposed to, say, 14 percent at Columbia); 17 percent are "underrepresented" minorities.¹³

Although the course is required for journalism majors, it isn't really designed for them. The three most popular majors at Stony Brook are psychology, biology and business management, accounting for nearly 5,000 of the 16,342 undergraduates; there were only 260 journalism majors in 2010. So while the majority of the students taking the course are freshmen, most of them will wind up in disciplines that aren't steeped in media studies or current events.¹⁴

To the course instructors, this relative lack of sophistication among the students is a big plus. "They are forced to make a lot of leaps, to think and not just regurgitate information," said Dustin Herlich, an adjunct professor in the program who himself majored in environmental science. "This is not an area where you can get a concrete answer for a lot of things. The students struggle with this concept."¹⁵ Getting students to

make those leaps is precisely the reason for the Center. If news literacy is to help build better-educated citizens, then it needs to get out of its comfort zone of political science and journalism majors.

But when Schneider tried to make the news literacy course a university-wide graduation requirement, like freshman English, many on the faculty objected. “I was very naïve,” says Schneider of his encounter with the university’s curriculum committee. “They threw me out of the room. They said: ‘You can’t tell us what to teach.’”¹⁶ Knight’s Ibargüen, who partially based Knight’s grant to Stony Brook on his hope that the course would be mandatory, says not having the faculty vote to adopt news literacy in the standard curriculum is “a mistake and a shame.” Eventually Schneider and the faculty compromised by having the course satisfy two core graduation requirements – in humanities and history – and that’s the main reason most students enroll. Schneider now expects to reach the goal of 10,000 students by 2013.

The Stony Brook news literacy class consists of 14 lectures and recitation sections.* It uses *The Elements of Journalism* (Rosenstiel and Kovach) as a reference textbook, but the course mostly depends on real-time multimedia, in-class discussion, case studies, and exercises. It covers a broad range of material, including the history and principles of mass communication from Gutenberg to Zuckerberg, landmark Supreme Court cases on libel and prior restraint, censorship in China and Iran, the study of rhetoric and logic, and concepts like the power of images, media convergence, cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias, and inference. At least some of the professors and teaching assistants (not to mention the students) think the course tries to do too much.

It may be useful to consider what news literacy – at least as taught at Stony Brook – is not. It is not to be confused with media literacy, a well-established field that considers a much broader array of cultural artifacts, including television, films, music, and video games. Media literacy tries to teach students to recognize cultural manipulations, such as gender stereotyping or the use of violence.

* For the complete syllabus, see Appendix A.

The Stony Brook curriculum is challenging enough without broadening the lens to include the usual media literacy concerns. A focused concentration on the news subset helps avoid the course becoming too diffuse or abstract.

News literacy also is not a substitute for civics education, which explains the structures and functions of government. News may be “the currency of citizenship,” as Schneider puts it. But being a savvy news consumer is only one pillar of civic engagement.

The most successful lessons are the ones that engage the students in experiential learning. The semester begins with a 48-hour media blackout: students are instructed not to watch, read or listen to any news, including sports or the weather report. If they see a news crawl on a building or a barroom TV they must avert their eyes. If a friend starts talking about something in the news, they must leave the room.

Students report it’s the hardest thing they’ve ever done. Even those who don’t believe they pay much attention to the news learn first-hand how ubiquitous it is, and also how passively they have been receiving news messages without giving them much thought.

Ellen, a science major who is studying biomechatronics (building “smart” prosthetic devices), joined a group of her fellow students six weeks into the fall semester to answer questions from this researcher. Asked what she hoped to get out of the course, she said, “Being able to read something and decide for myself whether I can trust it ... and also to continue reading the news and not just go back to being OK with people telling me something.”¹⁷

Matthew, an English major, said, “For me the key phrase that sums it up is ‘knowledge is power.’ If you don’t have the right source of information or if you’ve got misinformation, then you’re powerless.”¹⁸

* * *

For all the talk about “cognitive dissonance” and “deconstruction,” the Stony Brook course boils down to one indispensable acronym: VIA, for Verification, Independence, and Accountability. Students are instructed to ask: Does this news report

verify its statements? (Does the reporter, in other words, open the freezer?) Has this person or organization created a report free of entanglements or agendas? Does the editor or producer stand by the accuracy of the report and hold accountable whatever sources are quoted?

Applying those questions to every single piece of news information – not just “being OK,” as Ellen says – is hard work, and the students complain about the workload, especially for an introductory-level course. Roberta, a sophomore who took news literacy last year, is blunt about her fellow students’ impatience with the diligence required to be a good news consumer. “It’s really about convenience,” she said. “If it’s not convenient, they won’t do it.”

Roberta is a major in broadcast journalism, but even she admits she looks for shortcuts. “I definitely go to more sources now to clarify an idea, mainly on the web,” she said. “But it does take time, and time is hard to find.”¹⁹

Some have criticized news literacy, at Stony Brook and elsewhere, as little more than newspaper hagiography, taught by legions of laid-off journalists reminiscing about their glory days. Certainly, some of the course material traffics in flattery. One lecture slide paraphrases the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics in its description of the profession: “Journalists seek the truth and should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.”

And some in the field openly hope these courses can rebuild the trust between Americans and the media that is found so lacking in the Pew survey. Consider this analysis from the Columbia Journalism Review:

“The news-literacy movement has the potential to begin to rewrite the unflattering narratives about the press that have become so pervasive that we’ve nearly stopped questioning them—to remove the derogatory undertone from the phrase “mainstream media.” It has the potential to push back against the hijacking of the journalistic reputation...”²⁰

The Stony Brook team is sensitive to this notion. “We are not a cheerleading course for the press,” said Schneider. But with students acting as editors every time they retweet a piece of news or post an article on Facebook, it makes sense to teach journalistic discipline, even if it is divorced from a traditional newspaper or broadcast context. Over time, news literacy could become a media reform movement that works from the inside out, building a critical mass of consumers (and “prosumers”) who demand – and produce – more accurate, reliable, independent information.

An opposite worry is that students will emerge from the course apathetic or cynical about traditional media, after spending fourteen weeks learning all the ways they are being manipulated. This tendency revealed itself in one of the smaller recitation classes at Stony Brook on a sunny October afternoon:

The students were in near-revolt. Their homework had been to watch three YouTube videos from the Iraq war and identify in which “news neighborhood” each resides – raw data, straight news, opinion, propaganda, or entertainment. As a prompt, students were shown a crowded lecture slide describing the “taxonomy” of each neighborhood, considering such factors as methods, practitioners, goals, and outcomes. And they were reminded of their mantra: Verification, Independence, Accountability.

One of the videos showed US and Iraqi soldiers firing on insurgents from inside a building in Baghdad. Another was a CBS news clip from an embedded reporter in Fallujah. A third was a sort of home movie created by an American soldier in Iraq.²¹ The Baghdad video looked like raw footage, but the address – www.mnf-iraq.com – could have been a giveaway, if any student knew it stood for “multinational force in Iraq,” the US-backed military operation. Few did. Meanwhile, the correspondent in Fallujah loaded her reportage with seeming value judgments: calling an insurgent hit on her unit “an unusually lucky strike,” for example, and describing allied casualties as “relatively low.”

Frustrated by the hidden clues and blurred lines in the information onslaught, the students reverted to a familiar default position: nothing can be trusted. “I think it’s

all propaganda,” one student in the recitation complained. “It’s all just coming from one side.” Another student asked, “Can propaganda be the truth?”

Tempers were getting short. One young woman was annoyed at the whole enterprise: why do we have to do all this work? “The fact that I have to question it myself, that they’re trying to tell me something and maybe actually it’s something else, that’s what I’m angry about right now.”

Just as the class seemed to teeter on the edge of anarchy, instructor Scott Kravet – a graduate student in philosophy – seized the moment with a neat encapsulation of new literacy’s goals. “Life isn’t just having things handed to you,” he said. “You have to be active. There’s no proof in life, there’s no certainty. But knowing these questions is better than not knowing them.”

* * *

Even the students who complain the course is too hard say in large percentages that they would recommend it to a friend. But four years into the news literacy experiment, is it working? The Center for News Literacy lists ten indicators of success, divided between key skills (for example, knowing how to deconstruct a news story in order to evaluate its reliability) and key concepts (such as appreciating the importance of free flow of information in a democracy).^{*} Not surprisingly, skills are easier to assess than concepts, which are easier to assess than habits or attitudes.

Stony Brook has done two major assessments of news literacy outcomes since it began in 2008. The first surveyed 208 students –135 in the news literacy class and 73 in a control group closely matched demographically – at the beginning of the fall 2008 semester, the end of the semester, and one year later, in the fall of 2009. The students were asked a raft of questions about their news habits, civic behavior and attitudes about the press. Then they were asked to evaluate the reliability of several different news stories, in print and video.

^{*} See Appendix B for the complete list of outcomes.

The assessments found that, over the course of the semester, the news literacy students increased their overall news consumption, their positive rating of the news media, and their understanding of the press as important watchdogs in a democracy. But they showed little difference from the control group in their ability to spot flaws in news reports. With the exception of two simulated television news stories, the first assessment concluded, “The course had limited effect on students’ ability to accurately code news stories in the fall of 2008, and this trend persisted in 2009.”²²

Dean Miller, director of the Center for News Literacy, which oversees the assessments, admits to being “frustrated” by the results. “We wanted these kids to walk on water,” he said. “And they didn’t.”²³

A similar pattern emerged in a more recent wave of assessments, 2010-2011. (These involved a larger group of 494 students, but they are incomplete because the 2011 results were not available by the deadline for this paper.) The difference between the news literacy students and the control group was again more salient in the “civic measurements” than in the skills-based questions. “The studies show News Literacy students pay more attention to current events, know more about politics and government, are more likely to register and vote and are often better-able to spot flaws in news reports,” Miller notes in a memo.²⁴ But he recognizes that the news literacy students didn’t score in ways that are “really clearly superior,” which is his goal.

There are several potential difficulties with self-assessments of civic habits by the news literacy students. One is that students know the “right” answers, want to be seen as good citizens, and so overstate their levels of civic engagement. The second potential problem is that students mature over time in any case. News professionals who despair over the apathy of 18 to 24 year-olds regularly find that the cohort becomes suddenly engaged when members reach their 30s, buy homes, and start families.

A third problem could be with the survey itself. It is possible that the skills-based questions were simply too easy – that the flaws in verification or sourcing too obvious – so that even students who had never taken the class could spot which story was more reliable. For example, in the 2010-2011 survey, both the news literacy students and the

control group correctly attested that a story was more reliable when it cited scientific research than when it relied on personal anecdote. “You never know if your instrument is sensitive enough,” said Miller.

The assessments, like the news literacy curriculum itself, are a work in progress. They will continually need to be tweaked for effectiveness. But school administrators (and funders) shouldn’t be too impatient. This student generation has come of age under the influence of a seriously debased media culture. It won’t be deconstructed, much less rebuilt, overnight.

How durable are the skills and lessons taught at Stony Brook? Do the habits honed in class remain once “real life” comes crashing back in? To get a sense of that, this researcher conducted an electronic survey of students who took the class in the fall of 2008.* There were 34 respondents to the survey, 25 of whom completed it. The respondents were probably self-selecting, as it is likely only those who were most engaged in the class would still care about it enough to answer a survey three years later. Still, the answers suggest that for students who take the course seriously, changes in news consumption can be enduring.

The students answering the survey reported they were more engaged, empowered, and skilled consumers, and many had adopted new habits of mind. Fifty-six percent indicated that they now verify stories before retweeting or linking to them, and 52 percent said that they check out emails that they receive before forwarding. Nearly three-quarters agreed with the statement: “After having taken the course, I feel that I have the power to find out what’s really going on in the world.”

The students in the survey listed as skills gained in the course the ability to evaluate bias, confirm stories across multiple sources, and deconstruct information – whether in a newspaper article, video, blog post or tweet.

“I’m always verifying sources and things I hear,” wrote one respondent. “I make sure I have all of the correct information before making a judgment or a decision.”

* See Appendix C for the survey questionnaire.

Another former student took a broader view. "I believe this class honed an inquisitive mentality which I have kept with me since. The need to always be asking questions of the world around us, and that we should never take the words of another at face value, may seem cynical, yet are highly useful in today's times."

Can the Stony Brook program be brought to scale?

Currently, the curriculum Schneider developed has been adopted or adapted at 29 universities from Maine to Florida, although none is as well-developed (or well-funded) as Stony Brook. Additionally, some 85 high school or community college teachers have participated in a two-week summer training institute Stony Brook has offered since 2007. Most have developed courses or units in their own classrooms.

In September, 2011, Stony Brook received a \$330,000 grant from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation to help spread the news literacy gospel. The money will be used to pay for another summer institute, this one in Chicago, to develop an on-line training course for teachers, and to perfect assessment tools that high schools can use to measure outcomes.

Author and former reporter Frederick Blevens teaches an honors college course in news literacy at Florida International University in Miami based on the Stony Brook model. The student body at FIU is 61 percent Hispanic, and Blevens has been recognized nationally for his efforts to export news literacy skills to the greater Sweetwater community around the university. "The courses are oversubscribed," he said. "They are full six to eight months before the semester begins."²⁵

But Blevens says the circumstances and environment at Stony Brook – deep administrative support and relatively plentiful resources – don't translate to other schools like his. "Most of us are out here, lonely little merchants at our universities trying to scrape up a few courses," he said. That makes comparisons difficult. "It's the difference between running an experiment in an ideal laboratory and trying to mix your chemicals in a shot glass."

* * *

The last words go to the Times-Picayune's Thevenot, who viscerally understands the importance of verifying a story, and the consequences of not doing so. "I think the whole notion that the Internet has somehow changed the basic fundamentals of news and information is off base," he wrote in an e-mail exchange. "It's a distribution method like any other – paper, radio, town crier, whatever. It's the accuracy and depth of the content that matters, and that will never change."²⁶

What has changed is that traditional journalists no longer control the secrets of the temple – nor should they. Amid the many blurred lines in the new media landscape is the line between professional reporters and "prosumers." Today every citizen needs to learn Thevenot's lesson, as he wrote in the aftermath of Katrina: Always question your sources, including asking about *their* sources. "How do you know that? Did you see it? Who told you this? Are you 100 percent sure this happened? Who else can confirm it?"²⁷ In an age when everyone is a journalist, everyone needs to open the freezer.

Appendix A: The News Literacy Syllabus

http://www.centerfornewsliteracy.org/?page_id=14

News Literacy

The Stony Brook Model

For more information, contact:

The Center for News Literacy, Stony Brook University

631-632-7637, or Eliabeth.Farley@sunysb.edu

I. Purpose of the course:

This course is designed to teach students how to take skillful possession of their power as citizens by becoming perceptive news consumers. Armed with critical-thinking skills, a firm grasp of relevant history, plus practical knowledge about the news media, students learn how to find the reliable information they need to make decisions, take action or make judgments. At a time when the digital revolution is spawning an unprecedented flood of information and disinformation each day, the course will seek to help students recognize the differences between news and propaganda, news and opinion, bias and fairness, assertion and verification, and evidence and inference.

II. Intended Outcomes:

- Analyze the key elements of a news account, including weight of evidence, credibility of sources and of context, to judge its reliability.
- Distinguish between news and opinion and analyze the logic/rhetoric employed in opinion journalism.
- Identify and distinguish between news media bias and audience bias.
- Blend personal scholarship and course materials to write forcefully about news media standards and practices, as well as First Amendment issues and issues of fairness and bias.

- Connect current news accounts to universal concepts of community and citizenship.
- Assess the impact of digital information technologies and place them in their historical context.

III. Required texts and materials:

1. *“The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect,”* Kovach and Rosenstiel.
2. *“News Literacy JRN101b/103g”* digital textbook; (a licensed selection of chapters from relevant books, sold in digital form only).
3. Virtual Course Reader (A collected set of readings of material in the public domain).

IV. Other requirements and recommendations:

Students are required to follow the news every day. In addition to reading and watching a news website to be announced in lecture, you must watch, listen to and/or read news online, via broadcast and by reading the free newspapers delivered to dorms and other campus locations.

V. Participation and Quizzes:

You will be graded on how well you prepare for class, follow the news and engage in class discussions and debates. **You will also be quizzed starting on week 3.** Quiz questions will cover current events, the previous week’s lecture and any readings, videos, homework assignments and other material you have been assigned. Quizzes will encourage you to keep up with the news as well as to make concrete connections between the concepts you’re learning in class and the real-time events being covered in the news media.

VI.Schedule:

1. Week of Aug. 30	
Tuesday, Aug. 31 Lecture 1: Why News Literacy Matters: From Johann to Jon	Thursday, Sept. 2 Recitation 1: What the Public Thinks of the News Media and Why
An introduction and overview of the course, highlighted by a multi-media show of coming attractions, including examples of timely print and broadcast stories that illustrate why news literacy matters to students – and society. We define “the news media,” and put the course in the context of the accelerating communications revolution. Students leave this class with an understanding of the course’s goals and the core definition of News Literacy: The ability to judge the credibility and reliability of news reports—and why that matters to them.	Students discuss their “news blackout” experiences as well as the results of the student media survey. Class focuses on where and how students get their news, with discussion of which news sources the students will use during the semester. How do students view the news media? How does it compare with the general public’s view? What’s the source of the public’s current unease? Is it justified? What’s a news consumer to do?
2. Week of Sept. 6	
Tuesday, Sept. 7 Lecture 2: The Power of Information	Thursday, Sept. 9 No Class
We explore the universal need to receive and share information and the function news has played in every recorded society: To alert, to connect and to divert. We examine the role technology has played in amplifying information – from smoke signals to television – and how this also has enabled the sender to control the news. This leads to a broader discussion of how information is power and why there is a global battle for information control. Students leave this class with a clear understanding of why there is a need for a free flow of information and why some people are willing to kill (and journalists are willing to die) over information.	
3. Week of Sept. 13	
Tuesday, Sept. 14 Lecture 3: Know Your Neighborhood – What Makes Journalism Different	Thursday, Sept. 16 Quiz 1 Recitation 2: The Blurring of the Lines
What makes journalism different from other kinds of information? The first rule for a smart news consumer is this: Always know what information “neighborhood” you’re in. This lecture explores the differences between news, propaganda, publicity, advertising, entertainment and raw	Together, students complete and review the Information Grid. Students debate whether Jon Stewart is a journalist and whether a consumer can find reliable news reports on YouTube. We also cover The Battle

information? Students begin work on an Information Grid that defines these “neighborhoods.” In the journalism neighborhood, a news consumer should always find three key values: verification, independence and accountability. But the lines on the grid are blurring, often by design, and it’s easy to be deceived as to what journalism is and who is a journalist. The class watches Video News Releases, war “coverage” on YouTube and Jon Stewart.	over Information: China and Iran as timely examples in the news of the struggle for information control. What is the role of new technologies spreading the word about Iran’s disputed election? Why do governments try to control news? What is the difference between news and propaganda? Does the United States government try to control news? What does the law say about propaganda in the United States?
4. Week of Sept. 20	
Tuesday, Sept. 21 Lecture 4: The Mission of the American Press	Thursday, Sept. 23 Quiz 2 Recitation 3: <i>The New York Times</i> and National Security
This class looks at the philosophical and practical underpinnings of a free press in America and the ongoing tension in a democracy between the press and the government. We examine the First Amendment and what freedom of the press really means, looking at landmark Supreme Court cases (<i>Near vs. Minnesota, Pentagon Papers and others</i>). We examine the role of the press in wartime, issues of censorship and press responsibility and the role of the press as a “watchdog.”	Case study: Did <i>The New York Times</i> act responsibly or commit treason in disclosing Operation Swift? Students debate which principle takes precedence: national security or the public’s right to know. They conduct a mock trial of the <i>Times</i> ’ reporters.
5. Week of Sept. 27	
Tuesday, Sept. 28 Lecture 5: What Is News and Who Decides?	Thursday, Sept. 30 Quiz 3 Recitation 4: You Be the Editor
What makes some information news? This class examines news drivers, news values and how the news process works. What is the decision-making process that determines whether a story gets published or broadcast? Who decides? How do editors balance the interesting and the important? What is “news play,” or presentation, and why does it matter? What is proportionality? What is sensationalism? Are news decisions driven by the profit motive or social responsibility or some combination of the two? Students examine the question of whether there is too much bad news.	Students decide what to put on the front page of the “ <i>SB World</i> .” After an examination of the types of issues editors must deal with every day, students break into small news meetings and plan the front page of a campus newspaper.
6. Week of Oct. 4	
Tuesday, Oct. 5 Lecture 6: Opinion: The License to Kill	Thursday, Oct. 7 Recitation 5: <u>Test #1</u> and Opinion review
What is the difference between news and opinion	Test covers all material to date. Any

within the journalism neighborhood and why are the lines blurring so rapidly? How can you differentiate news from opinion in a newspaper, on television, on the Internet? What is a columnist? A commentator? Are bloggers journalists? Is Keith Olbermann presenting news or opinion? How can a news consumer identify the difference? And why does it matter?	remaining class time: Students review the differences between news and opinion using their assignments as examples.
7. Week of Oct. 11	
Tuesday, Oct. 12 Lecture 7: Fairness and Bias.	Thursday, Oct. 14 Quiz 4 Recitation 6: Exploring Fairness and Bias: Case Studies
This class explores one of the most controversial and contentious issues surrounding the press. Is the news media fair and balanced? What do those terms mean? How can a news consumer tell? What is bias? What's the difference between <i>media</i> bias and <i>audience</i> bias?	A discussion of the issues of fairness and bias. Students divide into groups and examine whether stories are fair. Students also discuss their responses to an Internet-based test of their own possible biases.
8. Week of Oct. 18	
Tuesday, Oct. 19 Lecture 8: Truth and Verification: What Is Journalistic Truth? How Do Journalists Verify Information?	Thursday, Oct. 21 Quiz 5 Recitation 7: How Journalists Verify Information.
What do journalists mean by "truth"? How does journalistic truth differ from philosophical truth, or scientific truth? What standards do journalists use to try to verify information? This class explores the pursuit of journalistic "truth" and the verification process. What are the differences between direct and indirect evidence, assertion and verification, evidence and inference? How news consumers can assess journalistic evidence and why the verification process breaks down.	Case study: Anderson Cooper's reporting about the tsunami in Sri Lanka. Students identify key factors in his verification process. Class also reviews the difference between assertion and verification and how separating the two can help news consumers weigh evidence. If time permits, students will engage in verification exercises.
9. Week of Oct. 25	
Tuesday, Oct. 26 Lecture 9: Evaluating Sources	Thursday, Oct. 28 Quiz 6 Recitation 8: Evaluating Sources
By looking at news coverage of Hurricane Katrina and how it relates to themes in the lecture, students learn to ask what makes some news sources reliable and others unreliable? What standards should news consumers use to weigh the credibility of sources quoted in news reports. Definitions of self-interest, independence and authority are explored.	Case study: Using Anderson Cooper's reporting about the tsunami and other examples, students begin to practice real-time source evaluation and debate such issues as: Does self-interest automatically degrade the credibility of a source? What obligation do reporters have to be transparent about their sources' self-interests, authority or background?
10. Week of Nov. 1	

Tuesday, Nov. 2 Lecture 10: Deconstructing the News	Thursday, Nov. 4 Quiz 7 Recitation 9: How to Deconstruct a Story
This key class examines how to “deconstruct” news stories to judge their credibility and reliability by asking a series of key questions. The class reprises previous classes on evidence, sourcing, and fairness, but also explores context, transparency and thoroughness.	Students practice deconstructing several news stories together. Class also reviews assignment dealing with The Washington Post story on Walter Reed Hospital.
11. Week of Nov. 8	
Tuesday, Nov. 9 Lecture 11: The Power of Images and Sound	Thursday, Nov. 11 Recitation 10: TEST #2
Photographs, recorded sound and moving pictures (film and video) are among journalists’ most powerful tools of verification. Because of their visceral impact, they can arouse emotions, sometimes in useful ways, sometimes in manipulative ways. As modern culture becomes increasingly visual, what is the impact on the news consumer’s search for reliable information? What special challenges arise when digital technologies can easily alter images and sound?	Test covers all material to date. Any remaining class time: Students discuss the power of images and sound to verify facts, but also to arouse news consumers’ emotions.
12. Week of Nov. 15	
Tuesday, Nov. 16 Lecture 12: Deconstructing TV News	Thursday, Nov. 18 Quiz 8 Recitation 11: What Do Ethics Have to Do with It, Anyway?
Students apply the principles of deconstruction to TV news stories. Working with Associate Dean of Journalism Marcy McGinnis (Former Senior Vice President in charge of News at CBS) this lecture presents and analyzes a series of “winners” and “sinners” and how you can tell the difference.	Self-censorship, when and why the news media withhold information, the First Amendment vs. the right to a fair trial or the right to privacy, the right to privacy vs. the right to know: How do these affect content and credibility? Students break into groups and examine a series of ethical case studies and “make the calls.”
13. Week of Nov. 22	
Tuesday, Nov. 23 Correction Day follows Thursday schedule Quiz 9 Recitation 12: Economic Stories and the Use and Misuse of Numbers	Thursday, Nov. 25
A look at how statistics can be used and misused by journalists, and how a savvy news consumer can tell when the numbers in stories really add up.	Thanksgiving Day No Class
14. Week of Nov. 29	
Tuesday, Nov. 30 Lecture 13: Internet: We’re All News Consumers and Publishers in the	Thursday, Dec. 2 Quiz 10 Recitation 13: The Internet: A Blessing or a

Digital Age	Course?
<p>This class looks at the new opportunities—and responsibilities—for news consumers to not only find news, but to participate as “citizen journalists” in news production in the digital age. Students will discuss the multiple means by which they can now influence and even contribute to news coverage via the Web, texting and social media.</p>	<p>A discussion of the revolutionary changes the Internet has spawned and the potential positive and negative consequences for news consumers. Students also review an assignment deconstructing a major TV news story.</p>
15. Week of Dec. 6	
Tuesday, Dec. 7 Lecture 14: The Future of News	Thursday, Dec. 9 Recitation: Course review and practicing for the final
<p>From Ben Franklin to Rupert Murdoch, American media outlets have always been driven by both profit and public service. How do the sweeping changes and economic problems in the news industry today affect the quality of journalism? Who will pay for watchdog journalism? Will new digital models and technologies make it more difficult—or easier—to find reliable information?</p>	
16. Week of Dec. 13: Finals	
Wednesday, Dec. 15 Final Exam: 8:15 to 11 p.m.	

Appendix B: The Ten Outcomes

NEWS LITERACY: OUTCOMES

What Students Need to Know and What They Need to Know How to Do

Key Skills

1. Recognize the difference between journalism and other kinds of information and between journalists and other information purveyors.
2. In the context of journalism, recognize the difference between news and opinion.
3. In the context of news stories, analyze the difference between assertion and verification and between evidence and inference.
4. Evaluate and “deconstruct” news reports based on the quality of evidence presented and the reliability of sources; understand and apply these principles across all news media platforms.
5. Distinguish between news media bias and *audience* bias.

Key Concepts

1. Appreciate the power of reliable information and the importance of a free flow of information in a democratic society.

2. Understand the nature and mission of the American press and its relationship with the government; compare and contrast to other systems around the world.
3. Understand how journalists work and make decisions and why they make mistakes.
4. Understand how the digital revolution and the structural changes in the news media can affect news consumers; understand our new responsibilities as *publishers* as well as consumers.
5. Understand why news matters and why becoming a more discerning news consumer can change individual lives and the life of the country.

Appendix C: The News Literacy Survey

On October 27, we asked an assistant to Dean Miller to send an email containing a link to take a web survey. This was initially sent to 20 people who had taken the Stony Brook News Literacy course who had indicated that they were willing to be contacted in the future. Several weeks later, she sent an email to 562 other email addresses associated with people who had taken the course in 2008. From those 582 email contacts, we received 35 responses, 26 of them complete. Our survey follows:

Thank you for taking this survey on Stony Brook's News Literacy program! We appreciate your willingness to help with this research by completing our survey. Please answer each question carefully and honestly. All information you provide will remain confidential.

1. Right now, what year in school are you?
 - 1 Sophomore
 - 2 Junior
 - 3 Senior
 - 4 College graduate
 - 5 Did not complete degree; no longer enrolled

2. What year in school were you when you took News Literacy?
 - 1 Freshman
 - 2 Sophomore
 - 3 Junior
 - 4 Senior

3. Name the TOP TWO ways in which you get the majority of your news.
(RANDOMIZE ORDER)
 - 1 Conversations with friends and family
 - 2 Social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr)
 - 3 Newspapers, in print or online (e.g. The New York Times, www.nytimes.com, NY Times app for iPhone, iPad, Android, or Kindle)
 - 4 Magazines, in print or online (e.g. Time, The Economist, National Review)
 - 5 Television news (e.g. ABC, PBS, Fox News, CNN)
 - 6 Radio (e.g. NPR)
 - 7 Blogs (e.g. Daily Kos, Gawker, Gothamist)

4. How much time do you spend following, reading, watching, or listening to the news?
 - 1 30 minutes or less per day
 - 2 One to two hours per day
 - 3 Two to four hours per day
 - 4 More than four hours per day

5. Since taking the course, do you read or watch the news more, less, or about the same?
 - 1 More than before I took the course
 - 2 Less than before I took the course
 - 3 About the same

6. What kind of news do you read or watch MOST OFTEN in the news media? (RANDOMIZE ORDER)
 - 1 News about your local area
 - 2 National politics and current events (in the United States)
 - 3 Sports news
 - 4 International affairs and world events
 - 5 Business and finance news
 - 6 Entertainment and celebrity news
 - 7 Other, please specify:

7. Please indicate which of these you trust the MOST for your news. (RANDOMIZE ORDER)
 - 1 Conversations with friends and family
 - 2 Social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr)
 - 3 Newspapers, in print or online (e.g. Newsday, www.nydailynews.com, New York Times app for iPhone/iPad/Android/Kindle)
 - 4 Magazines, in print or online (e.g. Time, The Economist, National Review)
 - 5 Television (e.g. ABC, PBS, Fox News, CNN)
 - 6 Radio (e.g. NPR, WFAN)
 - 7 Blogs (e.g. Daily Kos, Gawker, Gothamist)

8. Why do you trust this the most? (OPEN-ENDED)

9. Please indicate which of these you trust the LEAST for your news. (RANDOMIZE ORDER)
 - 1 Conversations with friends and family
 - 2 Social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr)
 - 3 Newspapers, in print or online (e.g. Newsday, www.nydailynews.com, New York Times app for iPhone/iPad/Android/Kindle)
 - 4 Magazines, in print or online (e.g. Time, The Economist, National Review)
 - 5 Television (e.g. ABC, PBS, Fox News, CNN)
 - 6 Radio (e.g. NPR, WFAN)
 - 7 Blogs (e.g. Daily Kos, Gawker, Gothamist)

10. Why do you trust this the least?
(OPEN-ENDED)
11. Before you took News Literacy, would you say...
1 I trusted most news stories more than I do now
2 I trusted most news stories less than I do now
3 No change
12. Do you think that the news media has...
1 ...too much power and influence on what happens in government and public affairs.
2 ...too little power and influence on what happens in government and public affairs.
3 ...about the right amount of power and influence on what happens in government and public affairs.

Below are some pairs of statements. After reading each pair, please mark whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right.
(ROTATE 14, 15, 16, and 17. 18 ALWAYS APPEARS LAST.)

13. I believe that some news outlets and reporters are credible, and I prefer to read or watch stories from them because I believe they are more truthful.
OR
I believe that all news outlets and reporters are biased, and I don't believe a story until I have personally verified it.
1 FIRST statement STRONGLY
2 FIRST statement NOT SO STRONGLY
3 SECOND statement NOT SO STRONGLY
4 SECOND statement STRONGLY
5 Both
6 Neither
14. When I retweet or link to a news story, I usually verify it so that my friends will be able to trust it.
OR
When I retweet or link to a news story, I usually don't verify it, because my friends can make their own decisions.
1 FIRST statement STRONGLY
2 FIRST statement NOT SO STRONGLY
3 SECOND statement NOT SO STRONGLY
4 SECOND statement STRONGLY
5 Both
6 Neither
15. When someone forwards me an email with a rumor I hadn't heard before, I usually don't check to see if it's true.
OR

When someone forwards me an email with a rumor I hadn't heard before, I try to research and debunk it.

- 1 FIRST statement STRONGLY
- 2 FIRST statement NOT SO STRONGLY
- 3 SECOND statement NOT SO STRONGLY
- 4 SECOND statement STRONGLY
- 5 Both
- 6 Neither

16. Do you think that by criticizing leaders, news organizations keep political leaders from doing their job?

OR

Do you think that by criticizing leaders, news organizations keep political leaders from doing the wrong things?

- 1 FIRST statement STRONGLY
- 2 FIRST statement NOT SO STRONGLY
- 3 SECOND statement NOT SO STRONGLY
- 4 SECOND statement STRONGLY
- 5 Both
- 6 Neither

17. After having taken the course, I feel that I have the power to find out what's really going on in the world.

OR

After having taken the course, I feel powerless to cut through the lies and bias and find out what's going on in the world.

- 1 FIRST statement STRONGLY
- 2 FIRST statement NOT SO STRONGLY
- 3 SECOND statement NOT SO STRONGLY
- 4 SECOND statement STRONGLY
- 5 Both
- 6 Neither

18. What was your favorite class lecture in the News Literacy course?

- 1 Why News Literacy Matters
- 2 The Power of Information
- 3 Know Your Neighborhood – What Makes Journalism Different
- 4 The Mission of the American Press
- 5 What is News and Who Decides?
- 6 Opinion: The License to Kill
- 7 Fairness and Bias
- 8 Truth and Verification
- 9 Evaluating Sources
- 10 'Deconstructing' the News
- 11 The Power of Images
- 12 Deconstructing TV News
- 13 Internet: We're All News Consumers and Publishers in the Digital Age

14 The Future of News

19. I felt that the amount of material covered in the News Literacy course was...
- 1 ... not enough.
 - 2 ... too much.
 - 3 ... just right.
20. Were there any skills that you learned in the course that you use on a regular basis?
- 1 Yes
 - 2 No
21. (IF YES) What skills did you learn in the course that you use on a regular basis?
(OPEN-ENDED)
22. (IF NO) Why do you think that you did not learn any skills in the course that you use on a regular basis? Was there a particular reason that none of the skills managed to stick?
(OPEN-ENDED)
23. As you may know, there have been related events that alumni of the News Literacy program have been encouraged to attend. Have you attended any of the following?
(CHOOSE ANY THAT APPLY)
- 1 A lecture in the "My Life As" speaker series
 - 2 "Page One" film screening
 - 3 News Literacy Conference
 - 4 Discussion with a prominent speaker (e.g. Marcus Brauchli, Arianna Huffington, etc.)
 - 5 None of the above
 - 6 Other, please specify:
24. Are you registered to vote?
- 1 Yes, I registered before taking News Literacy
 - 2 Yes, I registered during or after the News Literacy course
 - 3 No
25. Can you name the member of the U.S. House of Representatives who currently represents Stony Brook, New York?
- 1 Peter King
 - 2 Tim Bishop
 - 3 Rick Lazio
 - 4 Steve Israel
26. Finally, a few questions for statistical purposes. What is your gender?
- 1 Male
 - 2 Female

27. In what year were you born?
__ (Enter a four-digit year, e.g. 1900)
28. Were you born in the US?
1 Yes
2 No
29. (IF NO) How many years have you lived in the US?
__ (Enter a number of years, e.g. 10)
30. Is English your first language?
1 Yes
2 No
31. Do you know any other alumni of the News Literacy course who might be interested in taking this survey? Please forward the link to them!
<http://www.newsliteracysurvey.com>. Note: each person should only take this survey once.

Endnotes

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⁵ Adam Clark Estes, "CNN's Citizen Journalism Plans Expand," *The Atlantic Wire*, November 14, 2011. <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/business/2011/11/cnns-citizen-journalism-plans-expand/44959/>

⁶ Andrew Kohut et al, "Views of the News Media: 1985-2011" (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2011). <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/9-22-2011%20Media%20Attitudes%20Release.pdf>

⁷ Kenneth Dautrich and Eric Newton, "Future of the First Amendment 2011" (John S. and James L Knight Foundation, 2011). http://www.knightfoundation.org/media/uploads/article_pdfs/Future-of-the-First-Amendment-2011-full.pdf

⁸ "Statement from James O'Keefe," *BigGovernment.com*, accessed December 7, 2011. <http://biggovernment.com/jokeefe/2010/01/29/statement-from-james-okeefe/>

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¹⁰ Jim Kennedy, "A New Model for News: Studying the Deep Structure of Young-Adult News Consumption" (Associated Press, 2008). <http://www.ap.org/newmodel.pdf>

¹¹ Jennifer Fleming, "Truthiness and Trust: New Media Literacy Strategies in the Digital Age," in *Media Literacy*, ed. Kathleen Tyner. Vol. 4 of *New Agendas in Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 144.

¹² Alberto Ibargüen. Phone interview with author. October 10, 2011.

¹³ Sam Kilb, "Class Profiles," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2011, ED12. <http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2011/11/01/education/edl-06dataintro-public-gfx.html>

¹⁴ "Undergraduate Majors: All Students," accessed December 1, <http://www.stonybrook.edu/offires/departments/UGMajorsAll.pdf>

¹⁵ Dustin Herlich. Interview with author. October 5, 2011.

¹⁶ Interview with Howard Schneider.

¹⁷ "Ellen," news literacy student. Interview with author. Stony Brook, NY. October 5, 2011. (Names of the students have been changed.)

¹⁸ "Matthew," news literacy student. Interview with author. Stony Brook, NY. October 5, 2011.

¹⁹ "Roberta," news literacy graduate. Interview with author. Stony Brook, NY. October 6, 2011.

²⁰ Megan Garber, "Leap of Faith," Columbia Journalism Review July/August 2009.
http://www.cjr.org/feature/leap_of_faith_1.php?page=all

²¹ The first video they watched was "Battle on Haifa Street," Baghdad, Iraq,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlNORX006-c>

The second video was "falujah cbs story," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WztMvtp34A>

The third was "My Iraq Music Video," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aEOO8O4E8tc>

²² Internal Stony Brook Memo: "News Literacy Assessment / Change in Students Over the Course of the Fall 2008 Semester"

²³ Dean Miller. Phone Interview with author. November 28, 2011.

²⁴ Dean Miller, "News Literacy Outcomes Summary, April 2010." Non-circulating memo.

²⁵ Fred Blevens. Phone interview with author. November 8, 2011.

²⁶ Brian Thevenot. Email exchange with author. November 15, 2011.

²⁷ Brian Thevenot, "Myth-making in New Orleans," American Journalism Review, December/January 2006. <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=3998>