

## LESSON PLAN

<b>Level:</b>	Grades 9 to 12
<b>About the Author:</b>	Matthew Johnson, Director of Education, MediaSmarts
<b>Duration:</b>	2 to 3 hours

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# The Citizen Reporter



This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.

## Overview

This lesson begins with a brief history of citizen journalism and a discussion of just what it is. Students are introduced to the key media literacy concept that *media are constructions that re-present reality* and consider how the traditionally White makeup of Canadian journalism might affect the content of Canadian news. They then discuss the effects of the increasing ability of ordinary citizens to cover, broadcast and comment on news and compare mainstream news sources and citizen journalism in terms of accuracy, completeness and diversity representation. Students then discuss the issue of ethics in citizen journalism and develop a proposed code of ethics for citizen journalists.

## Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- become aware of journalism as a craft
- learn to take a critical view of how news is gathered
- become aware of the decisions made in gathering and transmitting news
- become aware of the imbalance in media representation of historically under-represented groups

## Preparation and Materials

Load the slideshow *A History of Citizen Journalism* onto a digital projector or interactive whiteboard, or photocopy it onto transparencies.

Photocopy the following handouts:

- *Rating a News Source for Diversity Representation*
- *Excerpts from the Canadian Association of Journalists Ethics Guidelines*



## Procedure

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Begin by showing the class *A History of Citizen Journalism* and discuss each example. How was it significant? Based on the slideshow and class discussion, have the class come up with a definition of *citizen journalism*. Make sure to note that *citizens* may mean individual citizens or groups of citizens (but not governments or corporations) and that journalism may mean *gathering* news (taking pictures or video, reporting on events), *distributing* news (through media such as blogs, social networking sites or video sites, or by providing the news they gathered to mainstream news sources) or *interpreting* news (providing analysis based on their particular point of view).

Introduce students to the idea that media are *constructions* that *re-present reality* – every part of a media text is the result of a decision made consciously or unconsciously, regarding what to include and exclude as well as how to present what is included, and audiences perceive media texts – correctly or not – as representations of reality. This is particularly true of news, which we generally accept as an accurate and objective reflection of reality. (You may wish to give students the example of a documentary: we accept it as a representation of reality, but the director had to make decisions about what footage to include and what to leave out, what music to use on the soundtrack and even where to point the camera – pointing a camera in one direction automatically means you’re leaving out everything that camera isn’t pointing at.)

*If you feel your students need more explanation of this concept, show the Media Literacy 101 video “[Media Are Constructions](#).”*

Tell students that in both Canada and the United States journalists have typically been White and able-bodied, and that research suggests this is still true: a recent study showed that in the Greater Toronto Area only one in five reporters on news broadcasts is a member of a racialized group, compared to roughly half the population of the area, and visible minorities made up only one in six newsroom decision-makers. As well, women, persons with disabilities and 2SLBTQINA+ people have spoken repeatedly about barriers to participation in journalism in Canada. Journalists from under-represented groups also say that they often are not assigned stories about their communities on the grounds that they cannot be objective on the subject (a standard that is never applied to White reporters.)

Ask students how this lack of diversity might affect the *construction* of news stories (they will mostly be based on the assumptions and biases of people who are White, able-bodied and heterosexual) and how news stories *re-present reality* (audiences receive a limited and possibly distorted picture of the world).

Point out that thanks to the internet and other digital technologies, it’s now possible for anyone to be a journalist by recording and broadcasting what they witness (as well as their opinions).

Distribute *Rating a News Source for Diversity Representation*.

Each student will now use their handout to investigate the **home page** of:

- two “mainstream” news sources (such as a newspaper or TV newscast or news channel) and
- two citizen journalism sites:
  - Global Voices (<https://globalvoices.org/>)
  - Wikinews (<https://www.wikinews.org/>)

Next, have students form groups of three or four and compare their findings. What trends do they see in how mainstream and citizen journalism sites cover diverse groups?



Have each group report their findings and then ask students what they see as the relative strengths and weaknesses of mainstream media and citizen journalism (encourage them to draw on the examples from the slideshow as well.)

Prompt students to consider:

- Will citizen journalism improve the representation of diversity in the media?
- How might mainstream news organizations draw on citizen journalism?

Tell students that traditionally, we look at four factors when deciding whether or not a news source is reliable:

- Track record: How long have they been in business? Do other reliable sources see them as reliable?
- Balance: News outlets have no obligation to amplify hate, harassment or pseudoscience, but in general they should make sure that all sides of an issue are represented.
- Process: Do they do their own reporting? Do they check their facts and publish corrections when they make mistakes?
- Aim: Most legitimate news sources would lose money if they made mistakes and didn't correct them, but sources that make their money by shocking people or making them angry don't.

**Now ask: Keeping those in mind, what concerns might people have about the accuracy or objectivity of citizen journalism? (Remind students that most citizen news is delivered through social media, not aggregated sites like the ones studied in class.)**

### Evaluation Task

Distribute the handout *Ethics of Citizen Journalism* and go through it with the class. Have students develop a *code of ethics for citizen journalists* that covers the same areas as the CAJ's code of ethics excerpted there. (Students may work individually, in pairs or in groups as you prefer.)

### Extension Activity

Have students read the MediaSmarts resource *Making Your Voice Heard: A Media Toolkit for Youth* (<http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/making-your-voice-heard-media-toolkit-youth>) and use it to develop a plan to submit their opinion piece to a broadcaster, newspaper or other news outlet.

If any students wish to write about an issue relating to a group that you feel is dominant or advantaged (Whites, males, heterosexuals, etc.) take a few minutes to do the *Unpacking Privilege* mini-lesson and make your decision based on the students' analysis in that activity.



## Rating a News Source for Diversity Representation

1. Analyze your assigned news sources to determine how many stories feature diversity (talking about or including members of racialized people, Indigenous people, 2SLGBTQINA+ people or persons with disabilities.)

News source	Date	Number of stories	Number of stories that feature diversity



2. For each of your news sources, find **one** story that is connected to a diverse group. Using only the stories that talk about or feature visible diversity, fill out the table on the next page.

Source and headline	Prominence of story	Topic	Role of diverse group in the story	Author



### **Why is this important?**

**Headline:** The headline is what gets your attention and makes you decide whether or not to pay attention to a story. Headlines also colour how we read the rest of the story: a headline that is phrased positively or negatively, for instance, can make us read an otherwise neutral story in that way.

**Prominence of story:** Is it on the front page of a newspaper or website? If not, how far do you have to go to find it? What section is it in? (Something placed in “News” will be taken more seriously than something placed in “Life” or “Arts.”) In TV news the question is one of time: how far into the newscast does the story appear?

**Topic:** Is it a crime story? A political story? Entertainment? Members of diverse groups sometimes only appear in the news in connection with certain stories. Sometimes they will only appear in stories that are actually about them, and not in stories about more general topics which would affect them as well.

**Role of diverse group in the story:** How is the minority group portrayed in the story? Are they consistently cast in a particular role, such as *criminals* or *victims*? Are they shown as *active*, able to affect the world and their place in it, or *passive*? Do they have an opportunity to speak for themselves? Are any members of the group quoted? If so, in what roles? How prominent are their quotes compared to majority or authority voices? If experts are interviewed, are the experts members of the minority group?

**Author:** Are any of the people who wrote the article members of the diverse group? (If there is no bio listed, search for their names and the name of the news outlet.)



## Ethics of Citizen Journalism

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The Canadian Association of Journalists has a *code of ethics* that helps to guarantee that the news is accurate, fair, independent, and respectful to the people who are affected by it.

Read the excerpts (selections) from the Canadian Association of Journalists' Ethics Guidelines below. (If you'd like to see the full guidelines, see <https://caj.ca/ethics-guidelines>.)

Next, develop a *code of ethics for citizen journalists* to address ethical issues that might occur in citizen journalism. Your code should cover the same topics as the CAJ's ethics guidelines:

- Accuracy
- Fairness
- Right to Privacy
- Independence
- Conflict of Interest
- Transparency
- Diversity
- Accountability

Each article of your code of ethics should include an explanation of why this rule or principle is important for citizen journalism to be accurate, fair, independent and respectful.

### Excerpts from the Canadian Association of Journalists Ethics Guidelines

#### Accuracy

We are disciplined in our efforts to verify all facts. Accuracy is the moral imperative of journalists and news organizations, and should not be compromised, even by pressing deadlines of the 24-hour news cycle.

We seek documentation to support the reliability of those sources and their stories, and we are careful to distinguish between assertions and fact. The onus is on us to verify all information, even when it emerges on deadline.

When we make a mistake, whether in fact or in context, and regardless of the platform, we correct it promptly and in a transparent manner, acknowledging the nature of the error.

#### Fairness

We respect the rights of people involved in the news.

We avoid stereotypes of race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status. And we take particular care in crime stories.

We do not allow our own biases to impede fair and accurate reporting.



We respect each person's right to a fair trial.

### **Right to Privacy**

We do not manipulate people who are thrust into the spotlight because they are victims of crime or are associated with a tragedy. Nor do we do voyeuristic stories about them. When we contact them, we are sensitive to their situations, and report only information in which the public has a legitimate interest

### **Independence**

We do not give favoured treatment to advertisers and special interests. We resist their efforts to influence the news.

We serve democracy and the public interest by reporting the truth. This sometimes conflicts with various public and private interests, including those of sources, governments, advertisers and, on occasion, with our duty and obligation to an employer.

### **Conflict of Interest**

We lose our credibility as fair observers if we write opinion pieces about subjects we also cover as reporters.

Editorial boards and columnists or commentators endorse political candidates or political causes. Reporters do not.

### **Transparency**

We generally declare ourselves as journalists and do not conceal our identities, including when seeking information through social media. However, journalists may go undercover when it is in the public interest and the information is not obtainable any other way; in such cases, we openly explain this deception to the audience.

We normally identify sources of information. But we may use unnamed sources when there is a clear and pressing reason to protect anonymity, the material gained from the confidential source is of strong public interest, and there is no other reasonable way to obtain the information. When this happens, we explain the need for anonymity.

We avoid pseudonyms, but when their use is essential, and we meet the tests above, we tell our readers, listeners or viewers.

### **Diversity**

News organizations – including newspapers, websites, magazines, radio and television – provide forums for the free interchange of information and opinion. As such, we seek to include views from all segments of the population.

We also encourage our organizations to make room for the interests of all: minorities and majorities, those with power and those without it, holders of disparate and conflicting views.

### **Accountability**

We clearly identify news and opinion so that the audience knows which is which.

Photojournalists and videographers do not alter images or sound so that they mislead the public. When we do alter or stage images, we label them clearly (as a photo illustration or a staged video, for example).

When we make a mistake, we correct it promptly and transparently, acknowledging the nature of the error.



## A History of Citizen Journalism



**March 3, 1991: The beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles Police Department officers is videotaped by a bystander. The footage leads to the arrest and trial of four of the officers. Their acquittal sparks the Los Angeles riots of 1992.**

# A History of Citizen Journalism

## WHERE IS RAED ?

WHERE IS RAED? V2.0

RAED STARTED WRITING ON THIS BLOG. SALAM PAX KINDLY ASKS YOU TO ALWAYS CHECK WHO IS POSTING, RAED'S BRAIN DE-RAILS SOMETIMES. MY RAMBLINGS ARE IN ORANGE, HIS IN WHITE.



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"the West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact, non-Westerners never do."  
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*Samuel P. Huntington*

### BLOG ARCHIVE

- ▶ 2009 (1)
- ▶ 2004 (60)
- ▼ 2003 (170)
  - ▶ December (30)
  - ▶ November (11)
  - ▶ October (12)
  - ▶ September (1)
  - ▶ August (16)
  - ▶ July (13)
  - ▶ June (11)
  - ▶ May (9)
  - ▼ March (28)

The last two days we didn't have internet access. ...

MONDAY, MARCH 24, 2003

The last two days we didn't have internet access. I thought that was it and started what a friend called a "pblog", what you will read is what should have been the entries for the 22nd and 23rd.

Blogger and Google have created a mirror to this weblog at [dearraed.blogspot.com] for those of you who have trouble with the underscore in the URL. There are not enough words to thank the people at Blogger for their help and support.

22/3

4:30pm (day3)

half an hour ago the oil filled trenches were put on fire. First watching Al-jazeera they said that these were the places that got hit by bombs from an air raid a few minutes earlier bit when I went up to the roof to take a look I saw that there were too many of them, we heard only three explosions. I took pictures of the nearest. My cousin came and told me he saw police cars standing by one and setting it on fire. Now you can see the columns of smoke all over the city.

Today

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The sun

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... half an hour ago the oil filled trenches were put on fire. First watching Al-jazeera they said that these were the places that got hit by bombs from an air raid a few minutes earlier bit when I went up to the roof to take a look I saw that there were too many of them, we heard only three explosions. I took pictures of the nearest...

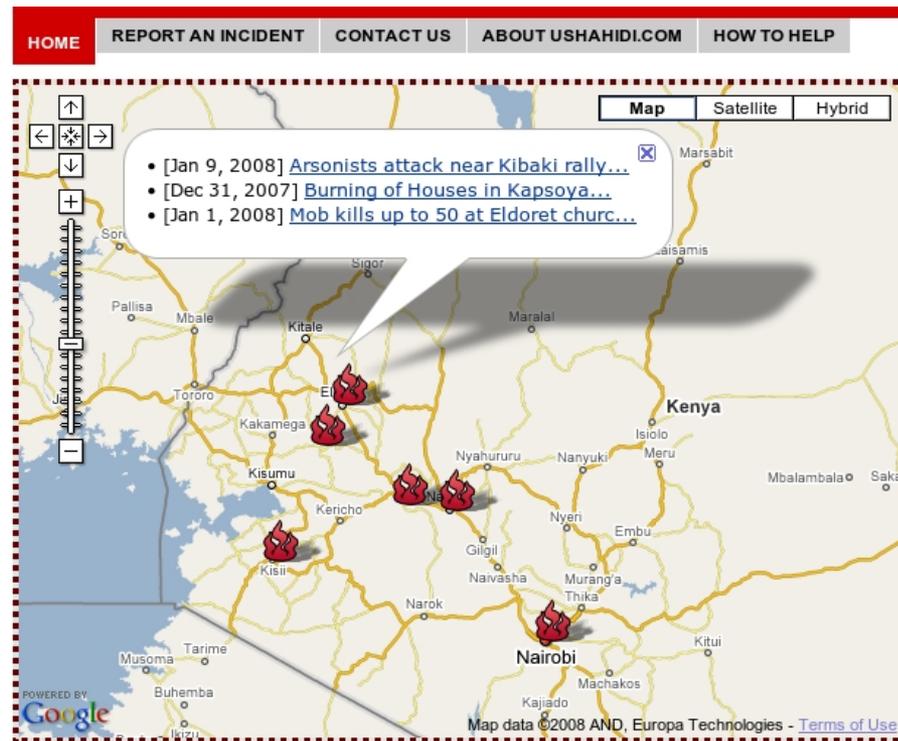
They are simply not prepared to deal with these things. People were lying on the floor with bandages and blood all over. If this is what "urban warfare" is going to look like we're in for disaster. And just now the images of US/UK prisoners and dead, we saw these on Iraqi TV earlier. This war is starting to show its ugly ugly face to the world.

The media wars have also started, Al-jazeera accusing the pentagon of not showing how horrific this war is turning out to be and Rumsfeld saying that it is regrettable that some TV stations have shown the images.

Today before noon I went out with my cousin to take a look at the city. Two things. 1) the attacks are precise. 2) they are attacking targets which are just too close to civilian areas in Baghdad. Looked at the Salam palace and the houses around it. Quite scary near it and you can see widows with broken glass till very far off. At another

**2003: Iraqi blogger "Salam Pax" provides coverage of the war in Iraq from the perspective of his home in Baghdad. His blog describes the bombing of the city and the chaos that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein.**

# A History of Citizen Journalism



**2008: Website *Ushahidi* (“testimony” in Swahili) is created to collect and map eyewitness reports of violence following the 2007 elections in Kenya. It has since been used to track political violence in South Africa and Congo, to monitor elections in India and Mexico, and to aid humanitarian efforts in places such as Haiti and Chile.**

# A History of Citizen Journalism



**2013: Following the Boston Marathon bombings, users of the online forum Reddit misidentify several people in photos as suspects. This mistaken information spreads onto other online sources and eventually to mainstream media, including the *New York Post*, before being corrected.**

## A History of Citizen Journalism



**2013: The shooting of African-American youth Trayvon Martin inspires the Twitter hashtag #blacklivesmatter, which gives its name to a political movement in the wake of other deaths of African-American youth – especially at the hands of police officers – in 2014 and 2015.**

# A History of Citizen Journalism



**Zoë Todd** ✓ @ZoeHTodd · Jan 8, 2018

First day at the new CBC Grande Prairie bureau - hope they like me at the office! The newsroom purrducer seems nice. Excited to spend the next three months reporting on and from the peace region for CBC News. Tips or story ideas? Help me out: zoe.todd@cbc.ca



20

60

220



**2018: CBC opens the first of its “pop-up” news bureaus, where reporters use citizen journalism tools such as smartphones and laptops to cover news in places with few or no news outlets.**

## A History of Citizen Journalism



**2020: 17-year-old Darnella Frazer films Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin killing George Floyd. The video goes viral, inspiring protests against police racism and brutality throughout the summer and providing evidence that contributes to Chauvin's conviction for murder.**

## A History of Citizen Journalism



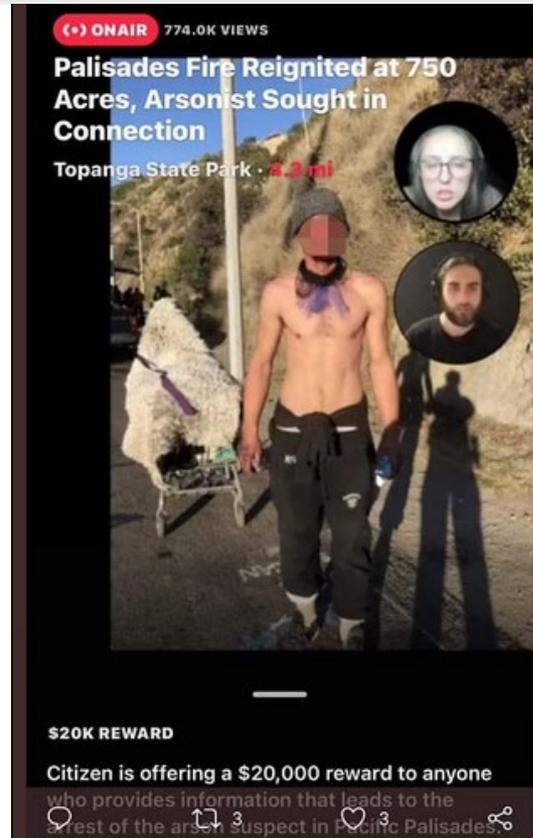
**2020: Mi'kmaw fishers use Facebook Live and TikTok to document acts of racism and violence against them, including a van and a lobster pound being destroyed by fire.**

## A History of Citizen Journalism



**2021: YouTubers in France and Germany are approached by a marketing company to spread disinformation about COVID vaccines. Both pretended to go along with it and then used their YouTube channels to report on the story.**

# A History of Citizen Journalism



**2021: Citizen, a neighbourhood watch app, offers a \$30,000 reward for footage of a person suspected of starting a wildfire in California. The suspect's name and photo are displayed for hours on the app before it becomes clear he is innocent.**