The Citizen Reporter

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 whether industry and government guidelines on journalism should be applied to citizen journalists. Finally, students write and comment on blogs expressing their opinion on one of the issues raised in the lesson.

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 aboriginals, persons with disabilities, visible minorities and religious 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 Accuracy and Completeness
- Rating a News Source for Diversity Representation
- Excerpts from the Canadian Association of Journalists Ethics Guidelines

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Procedure

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.)

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 visible minority, compared to roughly half the population of the area, and visible minorities made up only one in six newsroom decision-makers. As well, both persons with disabilities and gays and lesbians have spoken repeatedly about barriers to participation in journalism in Canada.

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). Ask students: do they think citizen journalists are as reliable as traditional news sources? Will they provide a better range of diversity representation? Discuss these questions briefly with the class but do not attempt to reach a consensus.

Divide the class into two groups. Distribute *Rating a News Source for Accuracy and Completeness* to one group and *Rating a News Source for Diversity Representation* to the other.

Group one will now investigate a *current news story*, using:

- two “mainstream” news sources (such as a newspaper or TV newscast; these could either be accessed online or the group could use print newspapers and/or recorded newscasts) and
Group two will now browse the **top five stories** at:

- two “mainstream” news sources (such as a newspaper or TV newscast; these could either be accessed online or the group could use print newspapers and/or recorded newscasts) as well as **Twitter** (use Trending Topics) and a citizen journalism site such as such as **Digital Journal** (http://www.digitaljournal.com/), **All Voices** (http://www.allvoices.com/) or **Global Voices** (http://globalvoicesonline.org/). They will then report back to the class on how the different sources scored in terms of **diversity representation** using **Rating a News Source for Diversity Representation**.

Once the two groups have shared the results of their research, ask students what they see as the relative strengths and weaknesses of mainstream media and citizen journalism. Will citizen journalism improve the representation of diversity in the media? Is it a duty for us all to act as citizen journalists?

Distribute the handout **Excerpts from the Canadian Association of Journalists Ethics Guidelines**. Have students go through it and consider which of the guidelines apply in the following situations:

- a) When they are posting about their personal opinions or experiences to a blog, social network, online forum, etc.
- b) When they are sharing something online that they have reason to think **could be** news (a photo or a post about something likely to be newsworthy, such as an accident, a natural disaster, etc.)
- c) When they are **acting as journalists or journalistic sources online** (such as sharing a post or photo of a protest or a political event, contacting a journalist directly, etc.)

Have students share and discuss their opinions with a partner, then have each pair of students share and discuss their opinions with the whole class.

**Evaluation Task**

Students will write a blog entry (or film a video blog entry) expressing an opinion on one of the issues raised in the lesson, such as:

- the need for diversity in the newsroom
- the need for news outlets to represent minority groups
- the use of citizen journalism as a news source
- the right or duty of citizens to act as journalists
- the ethics of citizen journalism
- the duty of citizen journalists to represent the diversity of Canadian society

This can be done either with an online blogging platform such as **WordPress** (http://wordpress.org) or **Blogger** (http://www.blogger.com) or may be done as “paper blogs”: blog entries are posted on oversized pieces of paper on classroom walls and then other students leave comments using sticky notes. Students are required to comment on at least five other students’ blogs.
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.
March 3, 1991: The beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles Police Department officers is videotaped by a bystander. Airing of this footage led to the arrest and trial of four of the officers. Their acquittal sparked the Los Angeles riots of 1992.
January 1998: Blogger Matt Drudge’s *The Drudge Report* gains prominence by publishing a piece on U.S. President Bill Clinton’s affair with a White House intern, a story Drudge claims *Newsweek* had censored. *The Drudge Report*, and political bloggers in general, become an important voice in U.S. politics over the next decade.
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, the ground invasion and the chaos that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein.
2008: A series of terrorist attacks strike Mumbai, India. Western and Indian media get most of their information from witnesses who share news and photos on Internet services such as Flickr and Twitter.
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.
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.
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.
Rating a News Source for Accuracy and Completeness

Read a story on your topic from each of your news sources and rate each story based on four criteria:

**Facts:** Is the story based on facts (statements which have been proven using evidence such as quotes or citations) or opinions (unproven statements that are just what somebody thinks)?

**Fairness:** Does the story present all sides of an issue? Does it present information without trying to persuade you that one side or the other is right?

**Sourcing:** How many sources does the story use to get information? From what you can tell, are those sources reliable?

**Completeness:** Are there important parts or elements of this story that are left out? (Once you have gone through all four sources, return to this question to see what was included in some sources and not others.)

Source: _______________________________________________________________________

Is the story…

Based on facts or opinions?

Evidence:

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

*Fair or biased?*

Evidence:

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________
Based on *multiple sources*?

Evidence:

_______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
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_______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

*Complete:*

Evidence:

_______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
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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 visible minorities, Aboriginals, gays and lesbians or persons with disabilities.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News source</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number of stories</th>
<th>Number of stories that feature diversity</th>
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2. Using only the stories that talk about or feature visible diversity, fill out the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Placement of story</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Role of minority group in the story</th>
<th>Length of story</th>
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**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. (The equivalent to the headline in TV news would be the anchor’s introduction to the 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.

**Placement 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:** Members of minority 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 minority 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? If experts are interviewed, are the experts members of the minority group?
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.

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

We do not solicit gifts or favours for personal use, and should promptly return unsolicited gifts of more than nominal value. If it is impractical to return the gift, we will give it to an appropriate charity.

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.
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).

Digital media: Special Issues

When we publish outside links, we make an effort to ensure the sites are credible; in other words, we think before we link.

We try to obtain permission whenever possible to use online photos and videos, and we always credit the source of the material, by naming the author and where the photo or video was previously posted.

## Task Assessment Rubric: Blog/Vlog

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Learning Expectations</strong></th>
<th><strong>Achievement</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Use</strong></td>
<td>Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skills and competencies that fall under “use” range from basic technical know-how — using computer programs such as word processors, web browsers, email and other communication tools — to the more sophisticated abilities for accessing and using knowledge resources such as search engines and online databases and emerging technologies such as cloud computing.</td>
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<td><strong>Community Engagement:</strong></td>
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<td>exhibit leadership as a digital citizen by communicating their opinion on a topic relevant to the lesson use digital media to be part of a community by commenting on other students blogs/vlogs</td>
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<td><strong>Making and Remixing:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>communicate information and ideas effectively to multiple audiences using the blog/vlog formats participate in society through participating in an online conversation</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Understand</strong></td>
<td>Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Understand” includes recognizing how networked technology affects our behaviour and our perceptions, beliefs and feelings about the world around us. “Understand” also prepares us for a knowledge economy as we develop information management skills for finding, evaluating and effectively using information to communicate, collaborate and solve problems.</td>
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<td><strong>Ethics and Empathy</strong></td>
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<td>show awareness of the ethical considerations of citizen journalism</td>
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<td><strong>Community Engagement:</strong></td>
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<td>understand how meaning is produced through multi-media (text, images, audio, video) and how culture is produced through the Internet and social media in particular show awareness of the issues relating to citizen journalism</td>
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<td><strong>Making and Remixing:</strong></td>
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<td>use applications effectively and productively understand the potential of digital devices and resources for her/his schoolwork understand the different purposes and contexts of digital publishing understand how meaning is produced through multi-media (text, images, audio, video) and how culture is produced through the Internet and social media in particular show an understanding of the forms and techniques of the medium and genre: the chosen topic, issue and solution were clear the product displayed an insight into a topic and opinion }</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning Expectations</td>
<td>Achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Create</strong></td>
<td><strong>Insufficient (R)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“Create” is the ability to produce content and effectively communicate through a variety of digital media tools. It includes being able to adapt what we produce for various contexts and audiences; to create and communicate using rich media such as images, video and sound; and to effectively and responsibly engage with user-generated content such as blogs and discussion forums, video and photo sharing, social gaming and other forms of social media. The ability to create using digital media ensures that Canadians are active contributors to digital society.</td>
<td>Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Community Engagement:</strong> make valuable contributions to the public knowledge domain by publishing and commenting on blogs/vlogs</td>
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<td><strong>Making and Remixing:</strong> effectively apply the forms and techniques of the medium and genre: text or video was created with care and relevant to the topic at hand visual components were complementary to the text or audio text and graphics or images were effectively integrated</td>
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