5. Nurturing Freedom of Expression through Teaching Global Media Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Freedom of expression is both a life and death matter and a bread and butter issue. Free media that allow a diversity of voices to be heard and all ideas to be discussed play a central role in the sustaining and monitoring of good government, as well as in the fostering of economic development and the encouraging of corporate transparency and accountability. Students in both developed and developing nations need to understand that there is no global issue or political arena in which the statement of problems and the framing of possible solutions are not influenced by media coverage. The Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change convened for the first time universities from around the world, media organizations and International Institutions such as the Alliance of Civilizations and UNESCO to work jointly in the building of a global media literacy (GML) curriculum, related lesson plans, exercises and resources to teach students to evaluate the media they read, hear and see, as well as teach them to speak out for themselves. The GML materials are written by a global community for a global community and aim to prepare students the world over for active and inclusive roles in information societies.

KEY WORDS

Media literacy, freedom of expression, transparency, accountability, civil society.

A few years ago, the Nobel committee commissioned a report on the link between peace and news coverage. «Good news coverage, as opposed to propaganda or inaccurate reports, can be essential to peace», Professor Geir Lundestad, the secretary of the committee, said. «Today there are constant rumours and exaggerations and these fuel conflicts. If someone has accurate information, then it can often reduce conflicts»[1].

Media have never been more vital for the nurturing of civil society but freedom of expression is now in retreat. So much attention has gone into managing the new technologies, considering the viability of existing business models, coping with the dramatic demographic shifts in audiences and condemning the seemingly insatiable demand for scandal-mongering, that there has been little public space for expressing other concerns.

But press freedom organizations have recorded the global losses -the violations of free speech, the targeting of journalists, the repression of both bricks-and-mortar as well as virtual media outlets. Finally, the depredations on free expression and a free press have become impossible to ignore. By the end of the summer of 2008, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 31 journalists world-wide had died because of their work as journalists, and another 15 had died in suspicious circumstances. In 2007, according to the Paris-based World Association of Newspapers, 95 media employees were killed –44 in Iraq alone, 8 in Somalia, 6 in Sri Lanka and 5 in Pakistan. Other 110 media workers died in 2006 -among them such leading voices as Russian investigative reporter Anna Politkovskaya. Then there have been the cases of both individual and system-wide repression of journalists. In November 2007, when Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf suspended the country's constitution, for example, he also shut down TV stations, stopped foreign cable newscasts and imposed controls over the content of news reports. Punishments against journalists ranged from heavy fines and suspension of broadcast licenses to sentences of up to three years in prison.

It shouldn't take threats and assassinations and blanket censorship to put freedom of expression centre stage. Press freedom is not just essential in times of political crisis. Free media that allow a diversity of voices to be heard and all ideas to be discussed play a central role in the sustaining and monitoring of good government, as well as in the fostering of economic development and the encouraging of corporate transparency and accountability. Freedom of expression is both a life and death matter and a bread and butter issue. Freedom of expression is fundamental to the public's ability to live a safe life as well as to live a good one.

How can that case be made to a global public, often ignorant of its rights and uncertain of the links between rights and good governance?

One key way is through education, starting with K-12 schools and continuing through colleges and universities. Courses, case studies and assignments can give students not just the tools to criticize media for their tabloid news habits or their pandering to an attractive –but not heterogeneous– demographic, but can demonstrate to students that without a diversity of voices able to express their ideas, without a

media that can represent all opinions, there can be no free, open and fair society. Without the ability to hear all voices, without the protection for all voices, only the powerful voices will be heard. Without the ability to hear other voices, without the protection for those other voices, one's own voice is in danger of being silenced.

Teaching all students to evaluate what they read, hear and see and teaching them to notice what isn't being said and isn't being shown is crucial to their eventual exercise of their own rights as citizens and their own access to economic, political and social opportunities. Teaching all students to speak out for themselves –to the media, through the media, and even by creating their own media– is essential to moving them beyond a passive consumption of media and instilling in them the habit of active civic engagement.

1. Teaching Rights: Teaching Global Media Literacy

The right to freedom of expression and freedom of information is recognized as a human right under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and recognized in international human rights law in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The ICCPR recognizes the right to freedom of speech as «the right to hold opinions without interference. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression».

The United States locates its right to free speech and a free press in the First Amendment, part of the Bill of Rights to the US Constitution: «Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances».

In 2004, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation in the United States commissioned the Department of Public Policy at the University of Connecticut to «assess whether a relationship exists between the presence and nature of media programmes in high schools and levels of appreciation and knowledge of First Amendment rights». More than 100,000 students were surveyed across the United States, as well as nearly 8,000 teachers and more than 500 administrators at 544 public and private high schools.

The Knight-funded «Future of the First Amendment» study remains the most comprehensive American survey ever conducted on attitudes about free speech and freedom of the press in secondary schools. The findings were provocative. Here are the two top findings:

• «High school students tend to express little appreciation for the First Amendment. Nearly three-fourths (73 percent) either say they don't know how they feel about the First Amendment, or they take it for granted. After the text of the First Amendment was read to students, more than a third of them (35 percent) thought that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees. Nearly a quarter (21 percent) did not know enough about the First Amendment to even give an opinion.

Of those who did express an opinion, an even higher percentage (44 percent) agreed that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees».

• «Students are less likely than adults to think that people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions or newspapers should be allowed to publish freely without government approval of stories… Students who have taken more media and / or First Amendment classes are more likely to think that people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions… In general, the more students participated in media-related activities [such as working on a school newspaper], the more they appreciated certain First Amendment rights».

Consider the implications of those final sentences: students who take courses on media, who learn about the human rights to free speech and free press, and who actively participate in student media organizations are more likely than their peers to believe that people who hold unpopular opinions have a right to express them –and that others have a right to hear them. This then suggests a relationship among students pro-actively learning about the media, students working on their own media outlet, and students' respect and support for the rights of free expression and freedom of information for themselves and others.

If one posits a powerful connection among learning, doing and understanding, then the argument for teaching media literacy is a compelling one. And equally, there is a compelling case to be made that the teaching of media literacy should be global – the content of the course should be global, because the effects of media messages certainly are.

There is no global issue or political arena in which the statement of problems and the framing of possible solutions are not influenced by media coverage. Students in both developed and developing nations need to understand the different ways media shape the world and the essential ways in which media can foster civil society and ensure transparency and accountability, through offering access to information, for example, or underwriting investigative reporting of critical sectors of society. Students also need to understand the various ways media can subvert civil society, transparency and accountability, through such venues as hate radio and viral slurs transmitted via text messages, for example, or simply through powerful media elites stenographically reporting the messages of the government (as occurred in many media outlets in the United States during the lead-up to the Iraq War in 2003, for instance).

How to teach students those lessons? One way is to create global and comparative materials –courses, case studies and assignments– that give both insight into media's framing of and influence on issues and events and that also educate and empower students about how they themselves can use media to effect positive change.

These are formidable tasks, especially if considered on the global level, but a number of international organizations and universities have seen common cause in this agenda and come together to tackle the challenge through a new initiative dedicated to creating a global curriculum and student toolkit on media literacy.

The Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change is that new initiative – launched by the International Centre for Media and the Public Agenda (ICMPA) at the University of Maryland and the Salzburg Global Seminar, an independent, non-governmental organization based in Austria that for 60 years has convened international leaders from different cultures and institutions to solve issues of global concern. ICMPA and Salzburg identified the need for a Media Literacy initiative, and then considered how to get other institutions engaged.

While media literacy has been gaining strength as an academic discipline in Europe, Asia and the Americas for the past decade or more, and governments and schools worldwide are mandating media literacy courses, the Academy is the first time that universities around the world have jointly worked to build a media literacy curriculum for global use.

Since the Summer of 2007, the three-week Academy programme has brought together top undergraduate, MA and PhD students with a global faculty to study and live at the Seminar's home in Salzburg, Austria, in the 18th century Schloss Leopold-skron. Funded by the partnering universities, by international organizations, national foundations, governments, corporations, and private philanthropists, professors and students have together worked in cross-national teams to research and write case studies and related exercises about how media affect the public's understanding of their own societies, governments, and regions. The Academy's media literacy resources are written by a global community for a global community and are accessible by students and schools from the developed as well as the developing world. The contributors to this effort come from the United Kingdom and Uganda, as well as China, Chile, College Park (Maryland) and beyond.

Of special interest to both the private and the public funders and the partnering universities from all continents –Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Latin and North America– is the creation of curricula that can teach students how media can help bridge cultural and political divides and robustly foster freedom of expression from all sectors of society: young people and adults, men and women, majority and minority groups, corporate, governmental and public sectors.

The university environment is increasingly where innovation in education curricula is beginning. But it's not easy to change universities. While the bureaucratic infrastructure may be less entrenched than in primary and secondary school systems, a critical mass of people calling for change is still essential. So in order to encourage that critical mass developing, ICMPA and Salzburg decided to recruit not just individual students to come to the Academy or individual faculty members to teach at the Academy, but to invite both students and faculty members from specific universities from across the world to join in partnership. The idea was this: each university would commit to sending to the Salzburg Academy one faculty member (or administrator, such as a dean) as well as three to five students. That faculty member and those students would interact with other international students and teachers during the session in Salzburg, but then would return with the shared experience and sufficient personnel resources to be able to institute the lessons from Salzburg back at the home

institution. We've found that it takes a committed, dynamic and often well-placed faculty member or administrator to actually create a new course, a new programme or a new initiative that crosses university silos – from one discipline to another or even one degree level to another (undergraduate to graduate curriculum, say).

ICMPA and Salzburg have therefore made that agenda one of the pre-conditions for universities signing on as partners in the Academy: universities need to commit to using the jointly created curriculum and lesson plans in their courses back «home». And that has indeed happened -some universities have created new courses and programmes to teach «Global Media Literacy» and some are using the materials in pre-existing communication, journalism, public policy and general education courses.

When the faculty and the students from the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City who attended the first Salzburg Academy in 2007 returned back to their university, for example, they presented the work that had been created by the global teams in Salzburg to the entire faculty. As a result of that presentation, the faculty decided to authorize the creation of a graduate course in Global Media Literacy to be housed in the department of communication. That course found such an audience that a second course, for first-year students, was inaugurated. That course, too, was a success, and then the students who had attended the Salzburg Academy were asked to create a third iteration of the Salzburg curriculum this time for a college-prep programme for talented high school students.

The dean and the students who attended the Academy from Tsinghua University in Beijing had to travel a different route to launch a new course back at their home institution. In order to teach a course at Tsinghua University, there must be first a textbook on the subject. So upon returning to Beijing in the fall of 2007, Xiguang Li, the dean of the school of journalism, requested funding from the university president to create a Chinese-language textbook based on the Salzburg-generated curriculum. With the funds the dean received, he hired another faculty member and the students who attended the Academy to write the textbook. That text has been written, and it is not only being used to teach Global Media Literacy to students across Tsinghua's academic departments, but it is being used as a core resource to train teachers from throughout China in Tsinghua's Summer teacher-training programme.

Following the success of the first year of the Academy, others have seen the opportunities that a Global Media Literacy curriculum offers. As a result, the institutional partners in the Academy have expanded beyond academe. UNESCO and the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAoC) both reached out to join with ICMPA and the Salzburg Global Seminar to create a «Community of Knowledge about Media», as Jordi Torrent, project manager for the UNAoC Media Literacy Education Initiative, has said.

The attraction of the Salzburg Academy's Global Media Literacy (GML) curriculum for UNESCO and the UNAoC and partnering media organizations, such as LinkTV, is that the curriculum and related lesson plans, exercises and resources aim to prepare students the world over for active and inclusive roles in information societies. In the case of LinkTV, partnering with the Academy met a need that the

news outlet had already identified: Link TV worked with faculty and students to create a new media literacy tool called «Know the News» that was launched in beta especially for the Salzburg Academy[2]. The remixing tool, now public, allows users to compare news coverage from around the world, test their knowledge of how news is shaped, and shape some news packages themselves.

In the case of UNESCO, the Academy could also meet a need that the organization had already sought to attend to: «No society can be free, open and fair without a diversity of voices», UNESCO has written. How to secure free, open and fair societies? In part through the schools. «This educational material», UNESCO wrote about the curricular material and student «toolkit» on the Academy site «is intended to deepen the understanding of freedom of expression and press freedom among young people»[3].

UNESCO contributed significantly to the shape and content of the project. Following UNESCO's launch of its «Model Curricula for Journalism Education for Developing Countries & Emerging Democracies» that it, together with Asian Media Information Centre (AMIC) and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) introduced in Singapore in June 2007, UNESCO saw two still unmet needs:

• A need to teach students other than those in journalism programmes and courses about the role of the media in disseminating and framing political and social issues –i.e. teach those students Media Literacy.

• A need to teach all students –including those in journalism courses– of the central place of free expression and a free press within and among nations –i.e. teach students about Freedom of Expression.

As George Papagiannis, programme officer at UNESCO's Division of Freedom of Expression, Democracy and Peace, noted at the close of the second session of the Salzburg Academy: «The tools that UNESCO and the Academy have created enable students around the world to make a difference in their communities. From these lesson plans and toolkits, students learn that free expression and a free press are vital to the survival and health of open societies».

The Salzburg Academy's Global Media Literacy curriculum is divided into two parts. Each part offers a series of education «lesson plans».

Part One - Critical Thinking & Critical Skills

The first half of the curriculum teaches students to value access to information and works to develop their critical capacities in comprehension, analysis and evaluation. Part One has three modules that teach students:

1) How to identify what «news» matters. This module teaches students such key concerns as how language influences audiences' reception of information, how images influence news messages and how core journalistic ethics and standards are essential for accuracy and credibility.

2) How to monitor media coverage. This module teaches students such lessons as how to

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monitor media's coverage of gender and race and how news coverage affects social and corporate institutions such as churches, schools and local businesses.

3) How to understand media's role in shaping global issues. This module teaches students how media report on critical issues such as terrorism. What are the under-reported terrorism stories, locally, regionally, globally? Or how do media cover Climate Change –as a scientific story, an economic challenge or a political problem?

Part Two - Freedom of Expression

The second half of the curriculum highlights the connections between media literacy and civil society –including the role media play in supporting good governance, economic development and informed citizenship. This half of the curriculum focuses on the essential role freedom of expression plays in allowing all voices to be heard, and teaches students the vital importance of media in sustaining and supporting that freedom. Part Two has three modules that teach students:

4) How to defend the importance of freedom of expression. This module teaches students about such pivotal matters as the essential role of investigative reporting in sustaining civil society, the value of good sourcing in reporting, and how the rule of law is essential for the survival of individuals' freedom of expression.

5) How to promote news literacy by creating and supporting good media. This module teaches students such hand-on concerns as how citizen organizations can responsibly use media to educate others, and about how important it is for citizens to actively engage with –even contribute to– both traditional and alternative forms of media.

6) How to motivate media to better cover global issues and events. This module teaches students how to conduct research studies that compare media coverage of events or issues. Audiences for the studies can use the studies' conclusions to evaluate their own media outlets –and media outlets themselves can use the studies' conclusions to improve their own reporting.

This multi-part curriculum is housed on the Salzburg Academy website, which is fully searchable (www.salzburg.umd.edu). The framework of the Academy curriculum allows university faculty, secondary school teachers and interested administrators either to create an entirely new course in Global Media Literacy or to pick and choose lessons and tools to augment existing classes. Once there, individuals can find resources either by moving sequentially through the six module topics, or by conducting an advanced search –such as looking for lesson plans about graphic images or looking for classroom exercises that call for role-playing. Visitors to the site can choose to comment on the lesson plans after registering on the site. They can also upload their own classroom exercises or resources –and they can download the lesson plans already up as a print document, enabling schools without consistent Internet access to use the materials in classrooms as well. Those who have registered for the website come from the ranks of teachers, students, media development experts, policy makers, journalists and home-schooling parents, among others.

2. Why Does Media Literacy Matter?

Consider China –not, on its face, the most open media environment in the world. In the Summer of 2007, Xiguang Li, dean of the journalism school at Tsinghua

University, attended the first session of the Salzburg Academy. At the start of the programme, he expressed serious concern about the state of journalism education in China. No matter how good the training at his university, he said, his journalism students were not being hired by Chinese media –privately-owned media outlets didn't want to pay for reporters and editors when they could get unpaid interns to do the work. And besides which, he noted, most of those media were tabloid-type outlets in which solid news –not to mention accuracy and balance– were hardly valued. Gossip and celebrity coverage dominated the non-Party print and online outlets. What was he to do as a journalism professor? He despaired and believed that while the work at the Academy was going to be interesting, it was not likely to make a dent in what he believed were the problems of journalism in his society.

The three weeks of work at the Academy transformed his opinion about the job in front of him and his colleagues. He now knew, he said, what he had to do. His work was not just to teach journalism students how to report on the events and issues around them, but to instruct all the students in the university about the importance of a free and fair media. Without an audience educated to understand how essential access to information is to the exercise of citizenship, he noted, there will be no pressure for quality journalism. He returned to Tsinghua with energy for a new cause: the creation of a textbook that would help teach China of the need for courses in Global Media Literacy.

How can media become a positive force for global change? When citizens call on mainstream media to act in the public interest and when citizens themselves both support traditional media and contribute to new media experiments that together can empower the community.

For that to happen, the public needs to be educated to understand the forces shaping the way information is produced, distributed and consumed. There are important «new» and «old» forces to understand: Google and YouTube, and websites such as Ushahidi and Global Voices, for example, epitomize «new media» –their immense potential and surprising effects. Reporters such as the assassinated Anna Politkovskaya represent «old media» –their literal struggle for survival and also their indispensable value.

There is no doubt that technology is changing the way all of us get and understand information. The trend is toward actively «searching» for what one wants to watch, read or listen to rather than passively taking in whatever editors or producers select. And YouTube, Ushahidi and Global Voices are all about viewers uploading their own contributions –videos, SMS messages, MP3 files. Through such new techniques of tagging, crowdsourcing and mapping, information can be passed on and comprehended in different and significant ways.

The fascination with the transformational effect of all this makes it easy to forget that «old-fashioned» –and expensive– reporting is still essential: there is no one who could replace Anna Politkovskaya, a traditional «old media» messenger, or the two German journalists killed in Afghanistan the same day.

Some of the journalists who died this year and last year and the year before were caught in the crossfire of ferocious wars; others were hunted down to prevent their stories from being told. But journalists are not being routinely killed just in Iraq or by terrorists. Investigative reporters who expose corrupt politicians, organized crime or the astonishing power of illicit traffickers of people, drugs or weapons are regularly murdered. Other types of reporters and media outlets are also silenced –either by outright censorship or by intimidation that can take the form of physical threats or, more commonly, economic intimidation through the imposition of ruinous license fees or the withdrawal of sponsored advertising.

Like the slaying of Politkovskaya, these killings, these kinds of intimidation offer dramatic illustrations that information matters. Insurgents, criminals, terrorists, corrupt politicians, corporate raiders and many others understand well that it is the months or years of digging by professional reporters, many of them supported by traditional news organizations, that will expose misdeeds and malfeasance. Politkovskaya's investigations and the work of other professionals provide the unambiguous evidence and credible «content» –documents, sources, doggedly checked and rechecked details– the public desperately needs for a functioning, civilized, open and ultimately free society.

Of course, technology expands the ways in which media –and we ourselves– can provide information in the public service. Ask Londoners about the political power of cell-phone pictures of the Underground and bus bombings uploaded to the photo-sharing site Flickr, or ask residents of New Orleans about the power of blogs covering the failed relief efforts after Hurricane Katrina. It is harder to quash the millions of citizen-journalists armed with photos, videos and blogs than it is to silence a single, bothersome reporter such as Politkovskaya. YouTube, Google, Flickr and many other Web sites offer valuable tools for keeping the world informed. But they are not a substitute for Politkovskaya and her colleagues.

So what do we need? We need a robust, active independent media, supported by a rule of law. We need a robust, active new media sector that journalists and citizens alike can learn from, contribute to, build on, pressure to keep fair and balanced. We need classes, in every grade, at every level of sophistication, that teach the young that media matter. We need the information, the institutions, the insights and the inspiration. We need Global Media Literacy.

Notes

[1] Gwladys Fouché, Journalists eligible for Nobel peace prize, The Guardian (www.guardian.co.uk/media/2006/oct/06/pressandpublishing.broadcasting) (2006-10-06).

[2] Available at www.linktv.org/knowthenews.

[3] See UNESCO's own story on its interest in media literacy and freedom of expression: Freedom of Expression Goes to School, UNESCO Courier, 2008, 4 (http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=26318&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).