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Following the money: philanthropy and news literacy education

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Abstract: This qualitative case study explores philanthropic investment in news literacy education with a focus on programs informed and inspired by journalistic principles and practices such as the ones developed at the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy and the News Literacy Project. Collectively, these programs attracted the majority of foundation funding dedicated to the emerging field between 2006 and 2015. By highlighting the perspectives of those involved in news literacy grantmaking, a more complete picture of news literacy education in the United States emerges. The results suggest that news literacy funding was at first largely experimental and curricula developed by journalists-turned-educators significantly influenced how foundation executives defined news literacy skills and how their organizations positioned news literacy investments. The findings also indicate that as news literacy funding evolved and matured along with the discipline, some foundation decision makers said they prefer module-based programs geared towards middle and high school students, while others stated they would like to see more meaningful connections between news literacy, media literacy, and digital literacy pedagogies.

Introduction

In response to sweeping changes to journalism professions brought on by digitization (see Downie and Schudson 2009), Howard Schneider, founding dean of the Stony Brook University School of Journalism, argued that journalism educators should not only focus on preparing majors for jobs in journalism, they should also educate those on the "demand side" of the information equation through news literacy instruction.

Schneider (2007) reasoned that young people schooled in the principles and practices of the press would develop critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports and come to appreciate investigative, watchdog journalism many deem essential for democracy to function well. More than \$3 million was raised from a variety of philanthropic organizations to support the development, instruction, and expansion of the Stony Brook conceptualization of news literacy. In fact, a trendsetting \$1.7 million grant

from the Knight Foundation in 2006 to create a Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook¹ and to teach a newly developed news literacy course to 10,000 Stony Brook undergraduates proved pivotal in popularizing the term “news literacy.”

The News Literacy Project² represents another program born from journalistic methods and mindsets that has attracted significant investment and attention from philanthropists. Founded by former *Los Angeles Times* investigative reporter Alan Miller, the News Literacy Project curriculum is designed to help middle and high school students use the standards of quality journalism to sort fact from fiction and to develop an appreciation for the role of a free press in democracy. It also manages a network of seasoned journalists who go into classrooms in New York, Chicago, the Washington, D.C., area and Houston to help make news literacy lessons more impactful. Since the News Literacy Project's inception in 2008, more than 25,000 students have participated in its programs, and close to \$5 million from national, regional and family foundations has been raised to advance its instructional aims.

In addition to multimillion-dollar investments in the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy and the News Literacy Project, foundations have dedicated hundreds of thousands of more dollars to other news literacy-related initiatives including research papers (Craft, Maksl, and Ashley 2013; Hobbs 2010a) conferences (Wallace 2014), massive open online courses (Arizona State University 2015), and curricular resources (American Press Institute 2012; The Poynter Institute 2015), yet the perspectives of funding decision makers have largely been overlooked. To date, no published scholarly research is available that investigates why news literacy matters to funders, even though they have arguably been the most influential stakeholders in shaping the meaning and direction of news literacy education.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the motivations, understandings, and future directions of news literacy grantmaking. By following the money, so to speak, a more complete picture of news literacy education in the United States is revealed. The findings suggest that news literacy grantmaking is rooted in journalistic beliefs about news, information and democracy, and news literacy has evolved from an experimental concept to more strategic, evidence-based programs. Looking ahead, those interested in funding news literacy projects in the future stated they prefer module-based approaches, and they believe the interests of educators and young citizens would be served best if news literacy curricula were integrated into a larger spectrum of digital and media literacies aimed at improving civic education and engagement.

Background and theoretical orientations

The link between philanthropy and education in the United States is well established (Bernstein 2014; Brundage Sears 1922/1990; Thelin and Trollinger 2014). In fact, journalism education begins, for all practical purposes, when newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer “pressed many dollars into the somewhat reluctant hands of Columbia University” (Carey 1978: 848). In the early 1900s, Pulitzer sought to legitimize journalism as a new area of study and rebuild a tarnished reputation by attaching his name to an Ivy League institution. Even with the lure of millions of dollars in endowment funds, it took Pulitzer more than 10 years to convince Columbia to start a journalism program (Boylan 2003). Scholarly critics were against the move, arguing that the university was no place for professional education, while newspaper workers attacked the idea on the premise that the most appropriate place for aspiring journalists to learn journalism was on the job. But Pulitzer (1904: 655) argued that the best kind of education for journalists was university-

1 For more information on the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy, go to: <http://www.centerfornewsliteracy.org/>

2 For more information on the News Literacy Project, go to: <http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/>

level instruction designed to develop character and an appreciation for the public good. He wrote: “It is the idea of work for the community, not commerce, not for one’s self, but primarily for the public, that needs to be taught [in journalism schools].”

Pulitzer’s \$2 million investment in journalism education at Columbia³ not only reflects the philanthropic activities of his contemporaries—contemporaries such John D. Rockefeller who gave \$34.7 million to the University of Chicago, Leland and Jane Stanford’s \$20 million donation to start a new university in California, and Henry C. Frick’s bequest of \$15 million to Princeton (Kimball and Johnson 2012)—it also echoes a desire and a responsibility to affect positive social change through giving, which is summed up best in Andrew Carnegie’s (1889/1906: 537) famous quote, “The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced,” in *The Gospel of Wealth*. The philanthropic field in the United States has evolved and expanded significantly since Pulitzer and Carnegie’s time to more than 75,000 foundations with combined assets of close to \$650 billion (Foundation Center 2015). However, the thinking behind philanthropic investments has remained constant for more than a century: The use of wealth to help address income inequities and to affect social and cultural change in the name of the greater good.

While the altruistic intent of philanthropy “runs deep in the American grain and national character” (Thelin and Trollinger 2014: 2), the large sums of money associated with voluntary giving for the public good signify substantial power and influence. As such, Fleishman (2007: xvi) uses the word *polyarchy* to encapsulate the unique role foundations play in modern America because it suggests the existence of many, separate, independent power centers. He writes: “In America’s civic (not-for-the-profit) sector, it is the foundations that put the power of concentrated money behind individuals and the associations they form, thereby transforming American pluralism into a polyarchy with effective firepower.”

Moving now to the contemporary “firepower” of media funders exclusively, more than \$2 billion was directed towards media-related philanthropic projects in the United States between 2009 and 2012, according to data compiled and analyzed by researchers at Media Impact Funders. Media Impact Funders (2012) is a network of foundations, government agencies, donor affinity groups, philanthropic advisors, and individual donors that invest in media and technology programs to create “social change.” To help inform members, researchers at Media Impact Funders pull together data on media-related grants of more than \$10,000 from grantmaker reports, IRS tax returns, grantmaker web sites, annual reports, the philanthropic press, and various other sources. Media Impact Funders tracks data on grants directed towards media literacy, journalism education, and news literacy programs hence the importance of the organization’s data to this project.

The Freedom Forum, Inc., the Ford Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Annenberg Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation are among the largest nonprofit funders of media-related projects (Media Impact Funders 2012). The category of investment⁴ that received the most attention and investment in recent years has been “journalism, news, and information,” with a marked increase in the investigative journalism category. Promi-

3 The University of Missouri established the first journalism school in 1908. Missouri was considered first in the United States because Pulitzer’s \$2 million gift to Columbia, which equates to roughly \$50 million today, was not endowed until after his death in 1911. Journalism classes at Columbia began in 1912. Today, the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism offers one of the most-coveted journalism degrees in the world, and the Pulitzer Prize, also part of the publisher’s bequest to the university, is the most prestigious award in American journalism.

4 Media Impact Funders codes grants into 29 different “media activity” categories. Advocacy journalism, audio, citizen journalism, constituency journalism, freedom of expression/1st Amendment, journalism education, media access and policy, media literacy, and public broadcasting are among the list. The Media Impact Funders website, (<http://mediaimpactfunders.org/media-grants-data/>), includes a full listing of and definitions for each category. It is important to note that grants can apply to multiple categories in the taxonomy. For example, a grant to NPR for news programming would be coded as “journalism, news, and information” as well as “radio.”

ment investigative journalism grant recipients include organizations such as Pro Publica, the Center for Public Integrity, and the Center for Investigative Reporting. The thinking is that investigative journalism, which many view as high quality, fact-based, democracy-enhancing watchdog journalism (Schudson 2008), might not survive in a highly competitive and fragmented digital media environment, so not-for-profit funding sources are needed to guarantee its survival. Westphal (2009: 3) reasons: “In a world without philanthropists and foundations, the practice of investigative reporting might not be long ... It’s expensive, it’s time-consuming, it has an unreliable payoff—and there’s no obvious free market way to make sure it gets done in the new-media world.”

Lewis (2012) takes an in-depth look at the strategic transition from “journalism” to “information” at one of the largest media grantmakers, the Knight Foundation, which has been funding projects in the news industry for decades. In a qualitative case study, Lewis (2012: 311) finds that the foundation has been able to expand its influence and trigger innovation in journalism by supporting projects aimed at renegotiating traditional boundaries between the “professional logic” of journalists and the “participatory logic” of digital media empowered audiences. Of note, the Knight Foundation was the first major foundation to make a significant investment in news literacy education informed by journalistic perspectives starting with the \$1.7 million Stony Brook grant in 2006. Eric Newton, a Knight Foundation vice president at the time of the investment, said: “A college that could teach its students to tell quality journalism from junk could, in theory, change the way they consume news. At the very least, we expect it to boost student awareness of the value of a free press” (cited in Finder, 2007).

For all intents and purposes, news literacy education is a specialized approach to media literacy education, given the intent of news literacy instructors is to sharpen critical thinking skills about media content. Media literacy education is a diverse, interdisciplinary, and growing field with roots in education, media studies and critical/cultural perspectives (Buckingham 2003; Potter 2010). Loosely defined, to be media literate means one has developed an ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide 1993; Christ & Potter 1998). A number of frameworks have emerged to assist in the instruction of media literacy skill development in American classrooms including, but not limited to, the National Association for Media Literacy Education’s (2007, 2009) core principles of media literacy education and associated key questions to ask when analysing media messages, and the Center for Media Literacy’s (2009) questions to consider about media content. These questions include: 1) Who created this message? 2) What creative techniques are used to attract my attention? 3) How might different people understand this message differently? 4) What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message? 5) Why is this message being sent?

The key differences between all-encompassing frameworks such as the ones put forth by the National Association for Media Literacy Education and the Center for Media Literacy and approaches to news literacy can be found in instructional focus and disciplinary origins. As the name implies, *news* literacy educators focus on teaching critical analysis skills about news texts exclusively, whereas media literacy lessons can be applied to any type of media content including feature films, comic books, advertisements, and news, to name just a few. Generally speaking, the thinking behind the news literacy movement is that news analysis instruction needs unique analytic optics given the non-fiction nature of news as well as the belief that news outlets play a central role in developing a well-informed citizenry. Altschull (1995: 5) calls this line of reasoning the democratic assumption: “In a democracy ... decisions made by the people in the voting booths are based on information made available to them. That information is provided primarily by the news media. Hence, the news media are indispensable to the survival of democracy.”

Much like media literacy, there is no one way to define or teach news literacy, which is where disciplinary origins of educators come into play (Buckingham et al. 2005; Potter 2010). RobbGrieco and Hobbs (2013) divide news literacy education into two instructional paradigms: Global and journalism school. Global versions of news literacy reflect more general approaches to media literacy in the sense that practitioners typically adhere to frameworks that guide students to question media representations versus reality, to analyze the techniques used to construct messages, and to hypothesize about the potential effects of messages on audiences. Mihailidis’ (2009) experiment with media literacy instruction at the university level is consistent with this approach. He finds that the frameworks are effective in the development of critical media analysis skills. At the same time, however, he reports they did little to develop an understanding of the media’s role in democratic society.

Ashley, Maksl, and Craft (2013) first turn to critical media literacy as well as a previously tested smoking media literacy instrument for conceptual cues in the design of a News Media Literacy scale aimed at measuring understandings of news production and consumption. The researchers later shift the theoretical grounding of the NML scale in a McCormick Foundation funded project that examines the levels of news literacy in hundreds of teenagers. In this study, Maksl, Ashley, and Craft (2015) adapt Potter’s (2004) model of media literacy to news media. More specifically, the NML scale was adjusted to assess awareness of personal information processing habits and knowledge about news content and industries. Maksl, Ashley, and Craft (2015: 37) comment that Potter’s model provided a “useful framework” to evaluate levels of news media literacy, and they conclude: “News literate teens are defined by their intrinsic motivations toward news consumption, greater skepticism about the news content they receive, and greater knowledge about current events. They are also likely to be more selective and proactive in choosing what news to consume.”

The other news literacy paradigm identified by RobbGrieco and Hobbs (2013) is known as the “journalism school” approach because lessons echo journalistic views on information and they celebrate the value of a free, investigative, and accurate press in democracy. Scholarship on the journalism school approach includes Fleming’s (2014) qualitative examination of the Stony Brook curriculum. She reports that Stony Brook instructors focused on teaching students how to assess the veracity of information in news texts and understand journalistic decision-making and values. At the same time, she notes that there were potential ideological blind spots in the Stony Brook curriculum because instructors didn’t question structural and institutional factors that influence news. The lack of critical perspectives in the Stony Brook curriculum has caused concern for some media literacy scholars (Hobbs 2010b, 2011). The argument is that critical perspectives such as Herman and Chomsky’s (1988/2002) propaganda model—perspectives that prompt students to identify, question, and challenge often unseen commercial and political biases embedded in news texts and production practices—are essential if the goal of news literacy instruction is for students to become critical consumers of news. Other published materials on the Stony Brook program include Klurfeld and Schneider’s (2014) reflection on developing and teaching the news literacy course and Loth’s (2012) descriptive account of the curriculum. No specific scholarly research is available on the News Literacy Project, but stories about its philosophy and activities have appeared in popular press outlets (Bui 2013; Candelriello 2011; Cunningham and Miller 2010).

Connecting these ideas back to trends and data in media philanthropy, a comprehensive assessment of news literacy investments is difficult to come by because news literacy is not one of the topics tagged specifically in the Media Impact Funders database. Not to mention, funded programs aimed at educating general audiences about news might not

include any reference to “news literacy.” Even without a dedicated news literacy category, foundations can self-report news literacy as the focus of a project, so researchers may be able to manually find grants across multiple categories through key word searches. For example, a search of “news literacy” brings up more than 50 grants tied to a variety of categories with “media, multiple areas” being the most common, followed by “media literacy,” and “journalism, news, and information.”

The Robert R. McCormick Foundation was the largest and most frequent news literacy grantmaker between 2009 and 2012. The top recipient of funds associated with news literacy in general during the same timeframe was the News Literacy Project with 42 grants totaling nearly \$1.8 million (Media Impact Funders 2012). When one takes into account grants previous to 2009 such as the Knight Foundation’s trendsetting \$1.7 million Stony Brook investment in 2006 and its \$250,000 grant to the News Literacy Project in 2007 as well as grant programs after 2012 such as the McCormick Foundation’s “News Literacy/Why News Matters” \$6 million grant-making initiative that started in 2013, it is fair to say that more than \$12 million in foundation funds have been directed to news literacy programs in the U.S. since 2006, with the majority of investments supporting journalism-based variants of news literacy reflected in Stony Brook and News Literacy Project curricula. These figures raise several questions: 1) How do foundation executives approach news literacy education grantmaking? 2) How do they define news literacy and connect it with the mission of their organizations? 3) What is the future of news literacy education grantmaking?

Methods

To understand the motivations behind philanthropic support of news literacy initiatives, two types of qualitative data were collected and analyzed: Interviews and documents (Patton 2001). Over the course of eight weeks (April 2015 – May 2015), the researcher conducted phone and/or email interviews with six people associated with foundations that supported the two most high profile and well-funded programs to date, the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy and the News Literacy Project. The researcher also concurrently gathered and analyzed materials published by philanthropic organizations that have supported news literacy efforts—materials such as mission statements, project spreadsheets, press releases, and media clippings—as well as media grants data derived from Media Impact Funders. Given the focus of this study is on the perspectives of foundation leaders directing and managing news literacy grants, interviews served as primary sources of evidence; documents were considered supplemental sources.

Four of the six interviewees agreed to be identified in materials resulting from this research: Eric Newton of the Knight Foundation (interviewed May 12, 2015), Clark Bell of the McCormick Foundation (interviewed May 11, 2015), Julie Sandorf of the Revson Foundation (interviewed May 8, 2015), and George Irish of the Hearst Foundations (interviewed May 27, 2015). Contacts at the Dow Jones Foundation preferred to respond collectively to questions sent via email (interviewed May 14, 2015) and thus wanted all references and quotes to be attributed to the Dow Jones Foundation, instead of any one individual. The sixth interviewee (interviewed May 20, 2015) opted to remain anonymous because he has since moved on from his foundation program officer position. He was assigned the pseudonym Mark Ruiz.

The resulting case study database included six interview transcripts and more than 100 documents. These data were qualitatively analyzed to identify patterns, themes, and key

words that would suggest consistency among and contradictions between how foundation stakeholders view news literacy education. From this close analysis of the evidence, three broad themes were discovered.

Results

Overview of the findings

First, investments in news literacy education were largely viewed by foundation decision-makers as experimental. In other words, many grants, particularly those awarded in the first few years of news literacy grantmaking, were seen as seed money to help get intriguing instructional ideas off of the ground at a time when the future of quality journalism seemed in jeopardy and the onslaught of information available through increasingly diverse digital channels and technologies seemed poised to overwhelm and confuse young and old news audiences alike.

Second, the argument that news literacy educators could teach young people how to sort fact from fiction and identify and appreciate high quality journalism for the sake of democracy made practical and conceptual sense to many working in organizations that funded news literacy projects, given their professional experiences in journalism and/or the missions and backgrounds of their foundations. To put this differently, the major grantmakers and grantees in the news literacy funding space shared similar views and values about news, information, and democracy.

Third, as news literacy education funding evolved and matured several foundation decision makers came to believe that news literacy education should be positioned and funded as one curricular spoke in a larger wheel of literacies deemed essential for active and full citizenship in the digital age. In addition, most of those interviewed favored module-based programs such as the ones offered by the News Literacy Project, believing they would be the most effective and realistic, especially in middle and high school classrooms, given the crowded, bureaucratic, and politicized K-12 curriculum realities in the United States. These patterns are explored further in the following three sections: “An Experimental Concept,” “Shared Values and Similar Missions,” and “A Civic-Oriented, Module-Based Future.”

An experimental concept

In the years since the Knight Foundation’s \$1.7 million, six-year investment in Howard Schneider’s ambitious demand side journalism education experiment at Stony Brook University in 2006, the term “news literacy” has become common in media literacy, journalism education, and philanthropic communities. Foundations that have dedicated thousands of dollars, and in several cases millions of dollars, to news literacy initiatives between 2006 and 2015 include but are not limited to the Knight Foundation, the McCormick Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the Gannett Foundation, the Hearst Foundations, and the Dow Jones Foundation. Even so, those interviewed for this study considered news literacy investments by and large experimental.

Eric Newton, who was senior adviser to the president of the Knight Foundation when data were collected for this study,⁵ said that the strategy at the time of the news literacy investments he was involved with as director and vice president of the Knight Foundation journalism program was one of “broad” experimentation. Newton said that they started

⁵ Eric Newton has since moved on from the Knight Foundation to Arizona State University’s Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, where he is Innovation Chief and Professor of Practice.

“scores of projects” to see which ones would gain traction and what they could learn from the experiences. He commented: “We didn’t have a formal initiative with overall goals in the area of news, digital, civic or media literacy. Our overall goal was simply to experiment.”

In addition to the Stony Brook grant and a \$250,000, two-year investment in the News Literacy Project in 2007, Newton listed other programs in the “scores” of news-related education programs funded by the foundation. For example, Globaloria received \$227,500 in 2009 to create web-games that focused on First Amendment, news literacy, and other journalism topics. Globaloria programs have since been integrated into middle and high schools across West Virginia. Newton also pointed to news literacy curricular materials, blogs, and other resources available through the “News University” website (The Poynter Institute 2015) as well as youth news literacy resources developed at the American Press Institute (2012).

At the same time, Newton said that the idea to teach audiences about the practices and principles of the press was nothing new to him because of his familiarity with programs at the Newseum and the Freedom Forum. In fact, Newton said that his experiences at these organizations prompted him to suggest the title “News Literacy” to Schneider when they were discussing what to call the course he was developing at Stony Brook. According to Newton, Schneider liked the “News Literacy” name because he, in part, wanted to avoid calling the class “Media Literacy.” Newton added that even though education about news for general audiences was not necessarily a new idea at the time of the Stony Brook grant, he admitted that it was “fair to say that Stony Brook popularized the [news literacy] phrase.”

Ultimately, Newton said that none of the Knight Foundation news literacy grants were renewed due to the experimental intent of the investments as well as a shift in funding priorities at the institutional level (for more on funding philosophies and strategies at the Knight Foundation, see Anheier and Leat 2006; Lewis 2012). One to three year grants were the norm for the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy and the News Literacy Project (Media Impact Funders 2012). One major exception was the \$1.7 million, six-year Stony Brook grant from Knight. The extended timeframe was needed so 10,000 students could complete the newly created “News Literacy” course, which was a stipulation of the grant. The 10,000-student benchmark was met in fall 2014. On the changing priorities and preferences of foundations, Newton pointed out:

“Foundations can be as simple as one person, a funder who knows what he or she wants at first sight and really doesn’t need to describe it, to large organizations with crafted public positions on strategic initiatives. To make things even more complex, foundations can frequently change funding priorities or never change them.”

Mark Ruiz, who was a program officer responsible for managing hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants awarded to both the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy and the News Literacy Project, noted a similar shift in priorities at the institutional level. He said the foundation he worked for was well known for providing funds to a large number of small projects to help them get off of the ground, but a change in leadership brought a change in funding strategy and a change in expectations of grantees. More specifically, Ruiz said executives wanted the foundation to focus on larger and therefore fewer evidence-based projects with high impact. In the journalism space that meant a shift to funding news content programs. Ruiz said that there was still some “wiggle room for exploration,” but not as much as before.

According to Clark Bell, who was director of the McCormick Foundation’s journalism program at the time data were collected for this study, the foundation started tracking

news literacy as a potential funding area in 2008. The foundation first experimented with news literacy through a journalism grantee, Chicago Youth Voices, because it complemented the foundation’s news audience building funding strategy. Bell said news literacy grant making at the foundation has been primarily focused on the Chicago area and has increasingly centered on youth programs, both in and out of school. Leading up to the McCormick Foundation’s “News Literacy/Why News Matters” three-year, \$6 million grant making initiative that started in 2013, Bell said that the foundation spent about \$2 million on news literacy activities, including substantial investments in the Stony Brook program (\$505,000) and the News Literacy Project (\$400,000). Clark estimated that total foundation news literacy expenditures by the end of the Why News Matters program will add up to about \$8 million.

The McCormick Foundation’s “News Literacy/Why News Matters” initiative has emerged as the most substantial and sustained grantmaking program dedicated to news literacy exclusively. Media organizations, high schools, universities, two-year colleges, community organizations and libraries throughout the Chicago area were invited to submit proposals for funding to support programs that had the potential to “educate and energize” citizens about the value of news and to help them assess information. Some of the grantees include the City College of Chicago (\$200,000), Columbia College (\$375,000), the Girl Scouts of Greater Chicago and Northwest Indiana (\$100,000), Illinois Press Foundation (\$200,000), Local Initiatives Support Corporation (\$100,000), Newspaper Education Foundation (\$150,000), and Street-Level Youth Media (\$150,000). The foundation also sponsored news literacy coverage in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (see Adler, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Jolly, 2014a; Jolly, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2014e, 2014f), and it hosted a fall 2014 News Literacy Summit (Wallace, 2014).

While there was a dominant theme of experimentation, some foundation executives decided to opt out of early news literacy funding all together until programs could prove their viability and effectiveness as well as develop long term strategies. George Irish, Eastern Director at the Hearst Foundations, said the foundations first received a grant proposal from the News Literacy Project in 2009, but sensed that the organization was still in its nascent stage. Five years later, Irish said that he had seen steady progress and concluded that the News Literacy Project was beyond the “concept stage” and “on the right track and much needed, particularly in the burgeoning digital media space.” In April 2015, the Hearst Foundations awarded a one-year, \$75,000 grant, their first in the news literacy education space, to the News Literacy Project.

Shared values and similar missions

It seems as though one important reason the architects of journalism-based variants of news literacy were so successful in fundraising early on in the development of their programs was because their worldviews, and the curricula spawned from them, were consistent with the worldviews of many foundation decision makers, particularly those at organizations that were born from newspaper fortunes such as the Knight Foundation, the McCormick Foundation, and the Dow Jones Foundation. These organizations already had well-developed and dedicated journalism funding programs mostly staffed by former journalists when Stony Brook’s Howard Schneider, a former *Newsday* reporter and editor, and the News Literacy Project’s Alan Miller, a former *Los Angeles Times* reporter, came looking for funding.

For example, Clark Bell of the McCormick Foundation previously worked as a reporter or editor at numerous publications including the *Dallas Times Herald*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and the *Chicago Daily News*. With assets of more than \$1.5 billion, the Chicago-

based McCormick Foundation was established in 1955 under the Last Will and Testament of Col. Robert R. McCormick, long time publisher and editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. Bell talked about changes brought on by digitization to news industries and how those changes affected funding decisions and strategic directions. He defined news literacy as an “ability to use critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports and information sources,” and mentioned that he believes news literacy is all about questioning where information comes from: “You have to question photos; you have to question videos; you have to question texts; you have to question people and politicians. It’s basically critical thinking skills.”

Eric Newton of the Knight Foundation led the *Oakland Tribune* newsroom before moving onto opportunities at the Freedom Forum and Newseum. With an endowment of more than \$2 billion, the Miami-based Knight Foundation was established in 1950 by John S. and James L. Knight to carry on the philanthropic activities of their newspaper publisher father, Charles Landon Knight. Broadly speaking, Newton defined news literacy as the “ability to find, understand, share, use and create news.” He said that this definition is reflected in Hobbs’ (2010a) Knight Foundation-funded report, *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action*. He added that he sees a lot of similarities between non-fiction media literacy frameworks and news literacy programs.

George Irish of the Hearst Foundations served in multiple executive positions at Hearst Newspapers, including president. The Hearst Foundation and the William Randolph Hearst Foundation, referred to collectively as the Hearst Foundations, have a current asset value of approximately \$1 billion. The foundations were established in the 1940s by William Randolph Hearst who is best known for creating the largest chain of newspapers in the late 19th century. Even with deep roots in journalism, Irish said the foundations typically steer clear of journalism investments to avoid any grantmaking that could be deemed beneficial to the Hearst Corporation. For Irish and his colleagues at the foundations, the News Literacy Project represented an opportunity to address literacy concerns in low-income communities. He stated that news literacy is achieved when one is able to “sort fact from fiction.”

Mark Ruiz, who worked at a major national newspaper before joining a leading foundation that supported several news literacy initiatives, said news literacy skills are essential for both individuals and news industries. Ruiz said that he believes that a news organization is as only as good as its consumers so the notion that a demanding readership or viewership that holds news media accountable would make journalists do much better jobs at producing content. Ruiz defined news literacy as the “ability of an individual to determine if the quality or integrity of a news report meets the standards and ethics of the field. Is it balanced? Is it transparent? Does it provide the sourcing that is necessary? Does it significantly add to the public knowledge?”

Funders at the Dow Jones Foundation said that four grants totaling \$185,000 awarded to the News Literacy Project came about as the result of professional journalism networks. They called the News Literacy Project an “appealing funding opportunity” because it matched the goals of the foundation’s literacy and education initiatives, and it touched on the journalism program area. Dow Jones Foundation funders added that more than 20 *Wall Street Journal* journalists have participated in News Literacy Project activities ranging from teaching classes in inner-city schools to working on video projects. They defined news literacy as the “ability of news consumers to tell the difference between fair, accurate and timely news and analysis compared with unreported gossip, propaganda and inaccurate, self-promoting ‘news.’”

The connection to journalism was not as explicit for several other major news literacy funders, which is where the democracy-enhancing, social change missions of many foun-

dations became more prominent in news literacy grantmaking. For example, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation has assets valued at approximately \$6.3 billion to assist in its mission to support “creative people and effective institutions committed to building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world.” The MacArthur Foundation awarded two grants to the News Literacy Project totaling \$675,000. Created with gifts and bequests from Edsel and Henry Ford, the Ford Foundation is the second largest private foundation in the United States, with an endowment of more than \$10 billion. Its goals include strengthening democratic values, reducing poverty and injustice, promoting international cooperation, and advancing human achievement. The Ford Foundation provided two grants to the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy totaling \$385,000. It also funded three News Literacy Project grants totaling \$525,000.

The largest funder of the News Literacy Project has been the Charles H. Revson Foundation. The New York-based foundation was established in 1956 by Revlon, Inc. founder Charles H. Revson. Its program areas include urban affairs, Jewish life, biomedical research, and education in New York City. Revson Foundation president, Julie Sandorf, defined news literacy as “learning the differences between fact and fiction; how to find and validate information so it is factual; and learning the basic tenets of a free press in this country.” She said the News Literacy Project fit in nicely with the aims of the foundation’s education unit: “Our education portfolio has been for the last twenty years in areas of civic education, holding government accountable and so on. Given the era we’re living in, [the News Literacy Project] seemed like a very timely and important thing to invest in.” The foundation has awarded the News Literacy Project two three-year grants totaling \$1.2 million. Sandorf said the biggest challenge for the News Literacy Project is how to get it adopted and adapted at scale in middle and high schools because the program is up against “big bureaucracies and all sorts of other competing interests and curricula bombarding schools on a daily basis. There’s a lot of noise out there.”

A civic-oriented, module-based future

The future of news literacy education funding seems to lie in the citizenship-building, democracy-enhancing potential of the pedagogy as well as the ability of news literacy educators to create evidence-based modules that can easily be integrated into a variety of grade levels and subjects that also complement the broader themes of digital and media literacy. Eric Newton of the Knight Foundation commented: “Increasingly all these forms of literacy are going to encompass the ability to make one’s way around cyberspace. So that’s important going forward.” Clark Bell of the McCormick Foundation noted foundations invest a great deal in education and in the age of mediated citizenship he believes that if news literacy educators move forward “sensibly and strategically” the field will emerge as an important component of civics instruction in the digital age: “For those of us in the foundation world, we’re looking for programs that increase civic engagement and participation and help people become better citizens.”

Bell added the idea of having free standing news literacy classes in “every eighth grade classroom [across the country] is not going to happen. There just isn’t enough time in the day.” Instead, Bell believed that module-based news literacy education programs that could be used across the curriculum seemed to be a more realistic and effective approach that has worked well at the McCormick Foundation: “We’re working math teachers, and science teachers, and history teachers, and English composition teachers to make sure they have the platform, the building blocks, the curriculum of news literacy, so they can add these resources and tools to their instruction.” Bell also said recent restructuring at the foundation had delayed grant making into 2016, but he fully expected that news literacy would continue to be part of the foundation’s strategic democracy-enhancing efforts:

“We’re still keenly interested in furthering the concepts and acceleration of news literacy as a movement.”

Mark Ruiz agreed news literacy might not be valued for much longer in the funding community as a stand-alone issue and instead could just become part of digital literacy initiatives in general. He favored the News Literacy Project’s module-approach because it makes it easier to integrate news literacy principles into every subject. Ruiz said module-based news literacy education has the potential to cut across the disciplinary spectrum and into the sciences and the humanities. He offered an example: “If there are news articles written on a subject, even an obituary of a mathematician, news literacy principles apply by prompting students to ask: Can the person who created this [obituary] be trusted? Is this a fair and accurate view of the deceased?”

Funders at the Dow Jones Foundation echoed the position that news literacy education should not be a stand-alone course and it should be worked in as a module into other subjects such as history. They added that news literacy education should start relatively early—maybe in the fourth or fifth grades—and continue through high school: “We’d like to see a world where students at a fairly young age are given this important lesson in critical thinking. That is, what is fact and what is rumor—and why knowing the difference is essential.”

Eric Newton of the Knight Foundation said the ability to tell non-fiction from fiction is important for people of all ages and is a “core piece” of news literacy. At the same time, Newton suggested news literacy should be grouped together with other “21st century literacies” that include traditional literacy, digital literacy, media literacy, and civics literacy. He pointed to a report prepared by the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities (2009: 2) to further explain his position. In the report, the commission argues that the future of American democracy requires “informed communities,” which are “places where the information ecology meets people’s personal and civic information needs.” Along these lines, Newton reasoned that educating citizens in the digital age means teaching them about political processes and institutions as well as how to access and make sense of information through a combination of digital literacy, media literacy, and news literacy lessons.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the millions of dollars in grants from foundations have significantly enhanced the scope and reach of news literacy programs grounded in journalistic principles and practices such as the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy and the News Literacy Project. More than 10,000 students have completed the news literacy course at Stony Brook and variants of the Stony Brook curriculum have been used by instructors at universities across the U.S. and around the world (Hornik and Kajimoto 2015). In addition, the News Literacy Project has reached more than 25,000 middle and high school students in the U.S., with plans to connect with thousands of more educators and students through its CHECKOLOGY™ virtual classroom, which launched in May 2016. Combined, these journalism-inspired instructional strategies aimed at teaching young people how to identify and analyze news make up one of the largest curricular movements in modern journalism and media literacy education. Not to mention, they have also significantly influenced the conceptual boundaries of news literacy education to emphasize the veracity of information and the importance of a free, investigative, and accurate press in democracy.

From the perspectives of foundation executives interviewed for this study, approaches to news literacy created by journalists at first represented promising experiments at a time of

dramatic changes in news industries and news consumption preferences. Because these approaches echoed widely held views in journalistic and philanthropic circles on the relationship between independent, verified, and accountable journalism and a vibrant democracy, news literacy education programs created by seasoned journalists seemed like logical investments. The thinking was young people taught how to separate fact from fiction through lessons inspired and informed by journalistic methods and mindsets would become better equipped to navigate the fast-moving, fragmented digital media environment. However, the third theme identified in this study is perhaps the most important finding: In the eyes of numerous grantmakers, news literacy education belongs under a comprehensive civics education umbrella.

As news literacy education matured and digital media developments such as social media and Smartphones continued to revolutionize and democratize the information ecosystem once ruled by journalistic gatekeepers, funders seemed to put a higher priority on all-encompassing evidence-based programs in which digital literacy, media literacy, and news literacy come together. This evolution in news literacy grantmaking seems to organically be aligning journalism-inspired variants of news literacy more closely with established and emerging media literacy paradigms that reflect critical approaches to news analysis, the participatory logic of modern news production and consumption, and multiperspectival understandings of the relationship between media and society. And, after ten years of news literacy grantmaking, funders said they tend to favor middle and high school news literacy modules, instead of stand-alone courses, because modules are accessible and they can easily be adapted to numerous grade levels and integrated into a variety of subjects. Understandably, this topic deserves further study as society moves deeper into the digital age and foundations decision makers move forward with investment strategies that seek to explore and influence the interconnections of citizenship, media, education, and democracy.

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Placing trust in others: how college students access and assess news and what it means for news literacy education

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Keywords: college students, credibility, journalism, mixed methods, news consumption, news literacy education, news media perceptions, mixed methods, personal influence

Abstract: This mixed-methods study (survey and subsequent in-depth interviews) investigates the role of personal influence in how students (n=135) across disciplines at a U.S. university find news, evaluate the credibility of news sources, and form their opinions about the news media. Specifically, this study explores how opinion leaders and primary socialization sources shape students' understanding and use of news at this stage of their development. Findings show that students place great trust in those around them to access and assess news, sometimes at the expense of making independent choices and judgments about the content they consume. Implications for news literacy education are discussed.

News organizations across the United States face an uncertain future as they seek to find sustainable economic models in the digital age (Pew 2013a; Picard 2010). Critical to their efforts are attracting the attention and earning the loyalty of young audiences as they develop their news consumption habits and form their views of the news media.

People in their teens and twenties are often portrayed as disinterested in the news (Bennett 2000), and more likely to gravitate toward satirical news than to the work of professional journalists (Pew 2012a; Hart and Hartelius 2007). Research shows that when young people follow the news, they often place a premium on convenience at the expense of credibility (Jarvis, Stroud, and Gilliland 2009). If young audiences do not regularly follow