

Chapter 10

The Freedom of Critical Thinking: Examining Efforts to Teach American News Literacy Principles in Hong Kong, Vietnam, and Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how college educators in Hong Kong, Vietnam, and Malaysia adopted and adapted lessons gleaned from a news literacy curriculum developed by journalism instructors at Stony Brook University in New York. In doing so, the chapter situates the emerging field of news literacy within parameters of its parent field, media literacy, and current trends in digitization, globalization, and information freedom. Details on how educators in Asia made a pedagogy designed for American citizens relevant to their students and how they negotiated country-specific social, cultural, and political contexts are included. Future directions in research include more in-depth and comparative understandings of the processes at work in localizing media literacy frameworks as well as an exploration of what media literacy educators in the United States and other democracies can learn from their counterparts in countries where accessing, creating, and disseminating information could be considered subversive activities.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In Fall 2014, the world's news media were focused on Hong Kong where tens of thousands of people took to the streets to demand representation in upcoming elections. Some western media

framed the demonstrations as a clash between democracy-aspiring young people versus the Communist Party of China, which resisted calls for local input in the selection of candidates for the Hong Kong Chief Executive position. Western media sources referred to the movement as the

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“umbrella revolution” because protestors were armed with little more than umbrellas to help shield themselves from clouds of pepper-spray (The Economist, 2014). In Chinese state-run media, the demonstrations, if they were mentioned at all, were framed as an impediment to economic progress or a hassle to commuters, and searches on Baidu, the dominant search engine in China, using the phrase “umbrella revolution” turned up no results, while the same search on Google outside of Chinese borders generated thousands of stories, images, and links (Thanh Ha, 2014). One of the main reasons for the difference in coverage of the same event is the Chinese government’s position on information and civil disobedience: information should be tightly controlled, dissent should be discouraged, and political protestors should be punished.

Even as authoritarian approaches to information access and dissemination reign supreme in China and many other countries around the world, interest in “global” media literacy education based on programs developed in democracies has been intensifying. There is good reason for this: The world is becoming increasingly connected through the widespread proliferation of mobile phone and computing technologies and the rising popularity of social media platforms made possible by Internet-enabled devices. According to the Pew Research Center (2014), cell phones have become part of everyday life for billions of people around the world, while access to the Internet is steadily increasing and smartphone ownership is gaining a foothold in many emerging and developing nations. These figures make it seem as though McLuhan’s (1964/1994) conceptualization of a “global village” is alive and well in the digital age. That is, a world in which geographic distances, national borders, and cultural, political and linguistic differences become less prominent thanks to the global reach and influence of electronic media. But the information realities for those who live, work,

and teach in countries governed by authoritarian regimes or dictatorships are drastically different than those who live in nation states that promote and protect rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom to peacefully assemble and protest.

In the United States, for example, media literacy educators generally teach students how to access, evaluate, analyze, and create media messages (Aufderheide, 1993), with many paying close attention to the perceived ill-effects of advertising and/or media products produced by profit-seeking corporations. The thinking is that commercial media enterprises, news media organizations in particular, create and distribute messages designed to attract audiences, instead of to fully inform them, thereby threatening the ability of citizens to make reasoned decisions about their governance (Kellner & Share, 2007). Thus, media literacy educators encourage students to critically examine and question the audience and authorship, meanings and production techniques, and potential interpretations of media messages, as outlined in the popular “Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages” teaching tool (National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2009). The news literacy program developed and taught by faculty in the Stony Brook University School of Journalism shares the same analytic focus on mediated messages, but with several noteworthy theoretical and practical differences.

At the turn of the 21st century, the structural shift in the delivery of journalism from print and electronic media to digital platforms caused concern for the owners of newspapers and operators of news stations across the United States, while news workers and scholars sounded the philosophical alarm. The Pew Research Center described 2005 as the year of “unpleasant surprises” for the newspaper industry because every indicator of the health of a newspaper was on a steep downward path (Project for Excellence in Journalism,

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