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# Learning to value media freedom in an age of spin

Mark Pearson

*Bond University*, [m.pearson@griffith.edu.au](mailto:m.pearson@griffith.edu.au)

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## **Learning to value media freedom in an age of spin**

*Mark Pearson PhD*

*Professor and Head of Journalism, Bond University*

*Address to the Gold Coast Bulletin's Media Literacy and Schools seminar  
'Media Literacy in the Digital Age', Gregor Heiner Lecture Theatre, Bond  
University, March 13, 2007.*

Can anyone identify these men?

**\*\*\* CHANGE SLIDE**

Show Socrates, Milton, Jefferson and Mill and explain ...

**\*\*\* CHANGE SLIDE**

Show Universal Declaration of Human Rights and explain

**\*\*\* CHANGE SLIDE**

Enough of the literacy debate. What about a media literacy debate? What is the level of media literacy among young people today?

Yes, primary school children learn a little about the different media types and the products they create.

High school pupils learn a little in their English and social sciences curricula about what they call media “texts” and, in programs influenced by cultural studies, are taught to analyse them “critically”.

For “critically” read “negatively” and “suspiciously”.

As a journalist and academic, I am all for healthy scepticism. My concern is that the fine line between scepticism and cynicism is being crossed and our young adults are being trained to be media critics rather than astute media consumers.

Newspapers in Education programs need to be seen as more than just a wing of the marketing department, trying to boost circulation by dropping a few extra bundles at the local school.

Editors and publishers need to take the higher ground and start a media literacy debate in the community.

My own local newspaper, the Gold Coast Bulletin, has done just that by hosting a workshop for school leaders titled “Media Literacy in the Digital Age”. It’s a healthy start.

To my mind, there are five key elements needed for developing a new media literacy in the school curriculum. They are:

**\*\*\* CHANGE SLIDE**

## **1. Valuing truth over image and substance over spin**

Public relations and image management has become a bigger industry than journalism itself. There are more spin doctors (agents, PR practitioners, media relations officers ... they go by many names) than there are journalists and they are often paid much more than journalists. Several studies show the primary author of much of the material published in the mainstream media is, in fact, such a person. They serve a different master to the journalist. Yes, a journalist works for an employer, but most also believe they are serving the public. Spin doctors are just serving their client. Journalists are truth-tellers. Spin doctors are message managers. Young people need to be taught to distinguish the two and to put a premium on truth. Sadly, governments and corporations discourage whistle-blowing and truth-telling. Employees get into trouble for talking to journalists. It is a career limiting move to tell the truth about your organisation when policies dictate that the media be “handled” by a department of spin. Most often, the truth gets smothered or processed beyond recognition.

## **2. Showing the importance of media truth-telling in history**

Part of this appreciation comes from getting an historical understanding of the importance of great journalism throughout history ... the impact of CEW Bean’s despatches from Gallipoli, Wilfred Burchett’s accounts of the scenes in Hiroshima in 1945, Nick Ut’s photograph of the burnt naked Vietnamese girl running down the road, Bernstein and Woodward’s Watergate investigations and Phil Dickie and Chris Masters’ reports on 1980s

corruption in Queensland. These were journalistic truths that changed the course of history and they continue today on a smaller scale in every community with a decent local newspaper.

### **3. Demonstrating media freedom is the right of the citizenry**

As US publisher Arthur Sulzburger said in 1990, “the benefit of freedom of the press belongs to everyone – to the citizen as well as the publisher ... The crux is not the publisher’s ‘freedom to print’; it is, rather, the citizen’s ‘right to know’. This is too often forgotten, sometimes even by the media themselves. Democracy depends on a free and unfettered media because it is only through independent and accurate scrutiny can we be confident our social and political systems are working effectively. Students are taught about other rights – like the newly fashionable right to privacy – as if they are somehow superior to media freedom. Critics lambast the media for their so-called invasion of privacy and governments pass laws restricting media access to information about citizens. We are learning to value private rights over public rights, and losing our sense of community in the process.

### **4. Learning to distinguish journalism from infotainment**

As part of media literacy, students need to be taught to identify the charlatans of journalism – the tabloid television turkeys who parade as journalists but who rarely produce actual reportage. Every day professional journalists shoulder the stigma of the previous night’s commercial current affairs television programs and their sensationalised and fabricated intrusions into people’s living rooms. They do untold damage to the

reputation of journalism and the future of media freedom and we should call them to account for it at every opportunity.

### **5. Singing the praises of quality journalism as well as issuing criticism where it is due**

That is justified criticism ... and we need to have that in our school curriculum. But we also need to highlight the media's achievements and the successes they create have when media freedom does some good for our society. More classroom time and student projects need to be spent examining the impact of quality journalism on society and the importance of those great works of journalism to our democratic process. If the local newspaper's front page lead exposing the hospital waiting lists led the government to appoint a new doctor then students need to recognise this important victory for media freedom.

If we are to achieve any of this we need some champions. Newspaper editors scream from the leader pages when media freedom is challenged, as they should, but everyone expects them to do that. The Press Council writes its submissions to Parliament when media freedoms are challenged by politicians. They do a good job of it, and so they should. A few judges like NSW Chief Justice Jim Spigelman still hold press freedom in high regard, and state as much from the bench.

And media freedom still has a handful of friends among journalism academics like myself, although many educators reserve their public

comments exclusively for criticism of journalists' ethical breaches or ownership machinations.

We need to groom some new champions of press freedom for this new era. But to do so we need to convince the next generation of the value of a free media to democracy and citizenship.

It is time for those who genuinely believe in the value of press freedom to invest in its future before a new generation of media critics expunges it forever.