Lesson: Are “Citizen Reporters” Journalists?

OVERVIEW
Using clips from the film *High Tech, Low Life*, students will look at the work of two very different bloggers to understand the techniques and principles that distinguish journalism from other types of storytelling. They’ll also explore why the distinction matters.

The two bloggers depicted in the film live in China, where they are subject to government intimidation and censorship. This lesson plan is appropriate for use in courses in a variety of areas, including global studies (especially related to understanding China’s emphasis on “social harmony”), business ethics (specifically the impact of China’s market reforms and rapid industrialization) and U.S. government, civics and history (covering the content of the First Amendment, the role of a free press in a democracy and the history of shield laws in the United States).

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OBJECTIVES
By the end of this lesson, students will:
- Be able to use a nine-point summary of journalism standards to assess whether or not a blog is journalism
- Be able to summarize the role of a free press in a democracy
- Read and summarize an informational text
- Take notes on video clips from a documentary
- Write an evidence-based opinion in the form of a blog post

GRADE LEVELS
9-12

SUBJECT AREAS
Journalism
U.S. Government/Civics/History (First Amendment)
English/Language Arts (reading informational texts; writing evidence-based opinion)
Global Studies (modern China)
Business (ethics and economic development)

MATERIALS
Internet access and equipment to show the class online video
ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
One 50-minute class period, plus homework to prepare

FILM CLIPS

Clip 1: “Tiger Temple” (6:58 total)
This clip combines two scenes from the film. The first scene begins at 8:25 with Tiger Temple watching television and ends at 11:18 with Tiger Temple saying, “I’m getting old after all.” The second scene begins at 28:34 with Tiger Temple biking to Er Lou Village. It ends at 32:32 with villagers saying, “Mr. Zhang is our greatest hope.”

Clip 2: “Zola” (8:40 total)
This clip combines three scenes from the film. The first scene begins at 4:28 with Zola saying, “I used to be a nobody,” and ends at 8:05 with a slate indicating that as of 2012, 68 Chinese citizens remain in jail for online activities. The second scene begins at 23:00 with Zola saying, “I’m in Weng’an.” It ends at 27:00 with Zola on the bridge.

The final scene begins at 34:04 with Zola saying, “Even if this post is eventually blocked,” and ends at 35:13 with Zola reading a response to his blog that chides him for being disrespectful of the rape/murder victim he was covering.

ACTIVITY

1. In preparation for this lesson, make sure that students are familiar with the basic steps involved in practicing journalism (e.g., fact-checking). As homework (and an opportunity for students to practice reading an informational text), assign them to read and summarize the nine principles of journalism from the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism: www.journalism.org/resources/principles. To facilitate comprehension, you might consider requiring students to summarize each of the nine principles as a tweet. Ask them to bring their summaries to class.

2. Post the nine principles of journalism so everyone can see them and ask students to take out their summaries to reference during class. After the lesson you may want to collect the summaries as part of your assessment. Briefly review the list to ensure that everyone understands the principles.

3. Tell students they are going to use the principles to determine whether or not two different bloggers are journalists or not. They should take notes as they view, jotting down specific evidence that the blogger is either following the principles or is not. Briefly introduce the film clips by giving an overview of High Tech, Low Life (summary available...
at pbs.org/pov) and the two bloggers it profiles, Tiger Temple and Zola (not their real names).

4. Show the clips featuring Tiger Temple. After the clips, invite students to pair up and share their notes about whether or not Tiger Temple is using the techniques a journalist uses to gather and report information. Briefly solicit a few opinions (including the evidence on which they are based). Repeat this process with the Zola clips. If time allows, invite students to comment on other facets of the clips that piqued their interest.

5. Begin the wrap-up by asking students to compare the two bloggers’ motives, methods and outcomes. They should notice that Tiger Temple has explicitly political motives, while Zola is motivated by a desire for fame. Discuss whether or not a journalist’s motives matter.

6. Help students think about why it might be important to know whether reporters meet journalistic standards or not by asking them to consider the role of the press in a democracy. Introduce students to this explanation from U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black in the 1971 case New York Times Co. v. United States, which regarded the legality of publishing the Pentagon Papers: “The government’s power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the government. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people.” Discuss how this statement differs from the principles of journalism.

7. Assess students’ understanding by asking each of them to write a blog post responding to Tiger Temple or Zola (their choice). In addition to their comments on the specific stories that the blogger covers, students’ posts should include either recognition that the chosen blogger is a journalist or suggestions for what the blogger would need to do to be considered a journalist. In either case, students should cite specific evidence supporting their conclusions about the blogger’s status relative to journalism. Invite students to share their posts on a class wiki or blog.

EXTENSIONS

1. Explain the Chinese doctrine of “social harmony.” Have students contrast and compare this doctrine to the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as the basis for policies determining what journalists can and can’t do. Discuss why some states in the United States have granted journalists special protections (i.e., so-called shield laws) while China restricts the scope of acceptable journalism. Consider including discussion of historical examples of moments when freedom of the press has been limited in the United States.
2. Have students investigate the official Chinese government view of the country’s market reforms and rapid economic development. Compare and contrast official accounts with the bloggers’ reports from the film.

3. Share with students the results of a survey of high school students on the First Amendment: http://www.splc.org/fafuture/index.php
   Findings from the 2007 survey of approximately 5,500 students include the following:
   - Nearly 1/3 (32%) said the First Amendment goes too far.
   - Only 54% said newspapers should be allowed to print freely without government approval.
   - One in three (33%) said the press in the United States has too much freedom.
   Assign students to use examples from the High Tech, Low Life film clips to write persuasive letters to their peers about the importance of freedom of the press.
   To add a research component, invite students to administer the survey to students in their school and compile and analyze the results.

4. Help students create their own blogs. Require them to read and sign a blogging ethics policy like the one at www.blogwithintegrity.com/.

RESOURCES

Digital Media Law Project
www.dmlp.org/
This site offers a wealth of general resources related to online journalism ethics, laws and opportunities.

MediaShift: Your Guide to Citizen Journalism
In this 2006 post on the PBS blog MediaShift, Mark Glaser provides a concise overview of citizen journalism, defining terms and outlining controversies.

Center for Journalism Ethics: Citizen Journalism
www.journalismethics.info/citizen_journalism/blogging.htm
Commentary on journalism and blogging is supplied by this University of Wisconsin project.

Melissa Blogs: Protecting Bloggers and Citizen Journalists
http://melissablogs.com/2012/02/17/protecting-bloggers-and-citizen-journalists/
This post from politically conservative, independent blogger Melissa Clouthier is an easy read for students and could be used as a prompt for a writing assignment or discussion.

POV: High Tech, Low Life
www.pbs.org/pov/hightechlowlife/
The discussion guide for *High Tech, Low Life* (available via a link on the left side of the page in the section for educators and organizers) covers additional issues and includes prompts that you can use to help students think more deeply about the film clips.

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films
www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

**STANDARDS**

*Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects* (http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

**SL.9-10.1, SL.11-12.1** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-12 topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**SL.11-12.2** Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

**SL.11-12.3** Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used.

**RI.9-10.8** Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

**W.9-10.1, 11-12.1** Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

**W.9-10.4, 11-12.4** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

**W.9-10.6** Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology’s capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.
**McREL Benchmarks:** ([www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/](http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/)) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Language Arts, Standard 10: Understands the characteristics and components of the media.

United States History, Standard 8: Understands the institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how these elements were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Civics, Standard 8, Level IV, 9: Knows ways in which Americans have attempted to make the values and principles of the Constitution a reality.

Civics, Standard 19, Level IV, 7: Knows how to use criteria such as logical validity, factual accuracy, emotional appeal, distorted evidence and appeals to bias or prejudice in order to evaluate various forms of historical and contemporary political communication.

World History, Standard 45, Level IV, 3: Understands connections between globalizing trends in economy, technology and culture and dynamic assertions of traditional cultural identity and distinctiveness.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**
Faith Rogow, Ph.D., is the co-author of *The Teacher’s Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World* (Corwin, 2012) and was past president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. She has written discussion guides and lesson plans for more than 150 independent films.