Online youth need critical thinking skills

by LARRY MAGID

Extra Information: Walter Cronkite (1916-2009) was a world famous TV News Anchor and broadcast journalist from CBS Evening News, New York. He was well known for breaking several historically significant stories in his career, such as the death of President John F. Kennedy, the first moon landings, and the famous Martin Luther King civil rights speech (Wikipedia).

I both envy and worry about young people who are growing up in the age of the Internet.

I envy them for their lifelong access to a media that's diversified enough to bring them news, information, and opinion from an enormous number of sources.

There's something to be said for having access to thousands of media outlets. Unlike those of us who grew up in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, young people who smartly use the Internet to consume news today don't have to worry about everything being filtered by a small, elite, and typically white male cadre of journalists working for one of only three broadcast networks or one or two local newspapers. And it's no longer a one-way street. Today's news consumers can also be producers thanks to blogs, social-networking sites, YouTube, podcasting, and microblogs like Twitter.

But, as I look back at the career of Walter Cronkite, who died last Friday, I also worry that young people are finding it harder to come by trusted sources for news and information. The Internet's strength as a news resource is also its weakness. We never will nor should return to the days of only a handful of media outlets, but today's diversified media landscape and especially the Internet, do bring new challenges to consumers of news.

We no longer live in a world where a man like Walter Cronkite can tell us "the way it is."

One of the things I loved about the "CBS Evening News" with Walter Cronkite was that it was watched by a high enough percentage of the population that it created a shared experience. When we heard Walter tell us "that's the way it is," we had something that we could all talk about the next day. We all knew it was true even if we didn't all agree on how we should interpret the implications of what Cronkite told us happened.

Every day after returning from work, my father would open up his copy of the Los Angeles Daily Mirror (the long-defunct afternoon paper published by the same company as the Los Angeles Times"). He would then turn on the black and white TV to watch Cronkite on CBS or perhaps Huntley-Brinkley on NBC but, more often than not it was Cronkite who shared our living room for that half hour. As a young boy, I didn't necessarily pay close attention to the news but I did absorb portions of it. When big stories broke, my dad would summon me to watch the news with him or summarize over dinner what he read in the Mirror.

Not always, but sometimes at school the next day, kids would talk about some of those stories along with the entertainment shows most of us watched such as the "Ed Sullivan Show" or Walt Disney's "Wonderful World of Color."

Looking back, it seemed as if all of America--or at least the slice of it I knew--had a shared experience. If nothing else, our family shared its media experience, probably because we had only one TV set, one newspaper subscription, and no Internet. The closest thing I had to my own personal media was my bedroom table radio and, eventually, a transistor radio that I got to control all by myself.

We also had dinner together every night in a room with no TV, a household telephone that almost never rang during dinner hour, and no mobile devices that let us exchange text messages with people outside the room. The only people we could hear from or talk to were each other. Having dinner together was one tradition my wife and I maintained with our children.

I'm not longing to return to the repressed, racist, sexist, and homophobic days of the 50s and 60s and I don't think we'll ever--or should ever--have another "most

trusted man in America" like Walter Cronkite, but I do see some value in looking at what we might be missing as we move forward, not to repeat the past but to ensure a better future.

Without an almost universally respected news anchor to tell us "the way it is," we have to figure it out for ourselves. It's not that we don't have resources--we have more than ever and that's a good thing. But it does put more pressure on us to think critically about what we see, hear, read, and say.

Today's media environment provides an opportunity--and responsibility--for parents and schools to teach critical thinking. Not only must young people learn to "consider the source" of what they take in but also think critically about what they post in a world where just about every young person is now potentially an author, photographer, and videographer. Kids--who may never even know who Walter Cronkite was--need to have a miniature version of him inside their head by asking questions such as "Is this true?" and "How do I know it's true?." And when they're about to post they need to think carefully before they broadcast their own versions of "the way it is."

This post was adopted from an article that appeared on SafeKids.com, and provided courtesy of Larry Magid (http://news.cnet.com)

Extra Sources

"Walter Cronkite." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 27 Feb. 2013. Web. 27 Feb. 2013. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Cronkite>.