

Who watches the watchmen? Students' understanding of media in a democracy

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Social studies education has a dual assignment – on the one hand it should socialise students into existing societal structures and legitimise democracy and its core institutions and on the other hand it should develop students' critical thinking. When teaching about social issues, such as mass medias' role in democratic societies, these assignments can be challenging to combine for teachers. The role of media in social studies have recently been focused on critical thinking, particularly how students can become better in spotting 'fake news' and develop students' online reasoning (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017). In general, the critical approach has been dominating in education. There has been a "tendency to approach the media from a position of concern, condemnation, and elitism" (Ferguson, 1999, p. 257) and the remedy has been described in terms of media literacy where students are taught critical perspectives on traditional media and social media (Potter, 2013). However, even though medias' role for democracy is central in both political science and media studies little attention has been given to how education could give both legitimising perspectives and critical thinking on media and democracy.

This paper reports from a research project where an inquiry-based segment in social studies was taught in upper secondary school. The project began with a pre-test that posed a question, framed as an elicitation task (Barton, 2015), to students concerning the importance of independent media in a democracy. Answers elucidated students' understandings and were organised as ideal types using categories drawn from citizenship education and political education (Børhaug, 2014). The categories were "compliance", "reaction" and "civic engagement". Tentative results show that many students convey understandings that media can either support compliance or evoke reaction, but few students express views that media also is an important instrument for civic engagement. Results from this study are used for suggesting design principles for a teaching that deconstructs and discusses the dual responsibilities of the media as an important instrument for students' democratic life.

References

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