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## Student promotes youth media literacy in developing world

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by Swetha Chirravur

Wojciech Gryc is no stranger to running international youth projects.

A third-year student at U of T Scarborough, he is the founder of an organization that promotes human rights and international issues among the world's youth.

Gryc started the organization and an online magazine back in 2003, while he was still in high school, as a response to the war in Iraq.

Gryc felt that there was a lack of youth voice in the media. The organization is called Five Minutes to Midnight (FMM), a reference to the "doomsday clock" marking the time prior to a nuclear disaster and the failure of diplomacy during the Cold War. The organization has evolved to include all topics within the human rights field, but it was started as a way for young people to share their views about the war in Iraq.

"We soon had a lot of people writing in, so we decided to start an online magazine rather than a blog that gets updated occasionally," says Gryc, 20, of Thornhill. The online magazine now attracts writers, subscribers and volunteers from more than 30 different countries and tackles controversial issues from all over the world -- something that Gryc had not expected to happen. The magazine gives young people a voice and a media outlet and helps them to become aware of, and get involved in, political and international issues.

Gryc was named among the "Top 20 Under 20" by the Youth in Motion Education Foundation two years ago, as well as receiving numerous other awards for his work in such projects.

The Polish-born Canadian is now doing a double major in the International Development Studies (IDS) Co-op program and applied mathematics at U of T Scarborough. He continues to pursue projects that promote international media awareness among youth.

Recently, he and fellow student Émanuèle Lapierre-Fortin, a fourth-year IDS major at U of T Scarborough, spent time in Chad, an impoverished nation in Central Africa. There they worked on a media literacy project.

Improving media literacy for organizations, governments or youth groups and providing them with the technology and expertise needed to produce their own local media projects is the aim of the project, called the Article 13 Initiative. Whether it is a newspaper or web site, the initiative helps develop the media project for the group and promotes youth expression. It also enables media outlets in the developing world to learn about and gain access to free, non-proprietary software to produce their newspaper or web site. Funded by FMM and the University of Toronto's Project Open Source Open Access, the initiative included offering workshops to a youth media groups in N'Djamena, Chad, on how to use the free software.

Volunteers at a French-language youth newsletter in Chad called *Rafiqi Presse Jeunes* were experiencing difficulties due to the limited technical resources available to them when producing the paper. "Chad was a natural choice because they had trouble with technical issues while running the newspaper from a net café," said Gryc. Together, Gryc and Lapierre-Fortin led 40 hours of computer and desktop software workshops over three weeks during what was supposed to be their Christmas break.

"Because of a teachers' strike earlier that month, the school had reopened during their holidays," says Gryc. "On top of that, conflicts between rebel groups were happening in the city before we arrived, so the students attended school before the workshops and had to leave before sunset because it wasn't safe otherwise."

Conditions were not ideal, Gryc said, but even the young people with limited computer experience found it relatively easy to learn the software such as Open Office, Scribus desktop publishing, and the use of the digital camera. Since Internet access was limited, a resource CD with a French-language introduction to the software was prepared to help the volunteers develop technical publishing skills.

Following the success of the Chad newsletter, Lapierre-Fortin continues to develop similar initiatives in the neighboring country of Burkina Faso, where she is currently doing her overseas placement as part of the IDS co-op program.

Gryc plans to travel to Kenya this summer, where he hopes to run a similar computer workshop in the Kibera area of Nairobi, one of the poorest communities in Africa. "In a way, it will be more of a challenge in terms of using the software, and because their level of education is lower than the high



**NEWSPAPER TEAM:** U of T Scarborough students Wojciech Gryc and Émanuèle Lapierre-Fortin (back row, fifth and sixth from left) relax and socialize at the home of one of the youth newspaper volunteers and their families in N'Djamena, Chad. The students were in Africa to help on a media literacy project to produce the youth newsletter, *Rafiqi Presse Jeunes*.

school graduates we worked with in Chad," says Gryc.

One of the project's goals is to raise money to provide seed grants and set up laptops for youth groups that are interested in spreading literacy in the area, Gryc says. "We don't want to push the project or a political message on anyone. If they are interested in developing their organization we are happy to help them," says Gryc.

There are other similar projects in Ghana and Nepal that provide tutorials to local grassroots youth groups to develop a platform to have their voices heard. "We mostly work with grassroots-oriented youth organizations because I find that even with the presence of large NGOs, a lot of youth come to contact with grassroots organizations foremost." He plans to go overseas yet again next year as part of his IDS co-op placement.

Professor Leslie Chan of the social sciences department provided mentorship to the initiative and supports Gryc's efforts for the open source cause. "I'm very proud of the young man, because he comes from a mathematics background but has a strong social conscience as well, and he wants to make a difference in peoples' lives," says Chan. "Wojciech has combined his theoretical and math knowledge with practical social outcomes. His accomplishments are outstanding, not just in terms of his academic skills but also based on his world experience."

"I'm also very pleased with the fact that our students are using new technology as a means of enhancing lives in the developing world, and dealing with development issues," says Chan. "These technologies can enable organizations around the world to collaborate and work together to achieve critical missions at low costs, provided that they have the know-how, and our students have been providing that know-how."

For more information on the organizations, visit the following web sites:

- **Five Minutes to Midnight:** [www.fiveminutestomidnight.org](http://www.fiveminutestomidnight.org). To see the online magazine, click on "latest issue."
- **Article 13 Initiative:** [www.a13i.org](http://www.a13i.org)
- **University of Toronto Project Open Source Open Access:** <http://open.utoronto.ca>
- **Rafiqui Presse Jeunes:** <http://www.rafiqui.net/>

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