

News Literacy: Learning About the World

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The present research aims at mapping the field of news literacy and emphasizes the need to shift focus from the digital divide to the social skills people need to become well-informed citizens in the 21st century. The article stresses the need for news literacy education and suggests strategies for teachers and parents for applying and promoting news literacy in current and future audiences. Furthermore it highlights the outcomes that news literacy can have and also the meaning of these outcomes in the life of individuals.

Keywords: news literacy, media, news literacy education, media literacy

*The illiterate of the 21st century
will not be those who cannot read and write,
but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn*
Alvin Toffler

Attempting to Define News Literacy

In today's world, media not only shape but also constitute our culture. The convergence of media and technology in a global society is changing the way we learn about the world and challenging the very foundations of education. It is no longer enough to be able to read the printed word; children, youth, and adults need the ability to critique and interpret the powerful images of a multimedia culture.¹ These changes, the result of the communication revolution of twentieth century, both in technological and content terms, have major economic and political significance, as well as profound impacts on each individual's life. The expression *information anxiety* was coined to capture one reaction to the ever-increasing information overload.² It is defined as "the ever-widening gap between the information we understand and the information that we think that we must understand."³ Although useful, this information is simply too much for any given individual to deal with in any valuable way. In one sense we have to remake ourselves into information processors.

According to a 2010 study from the Kaiser Family Foundation, eight- to eighteen-year-olds spend an average of seven hours and thirty-eight minutes a day on entertainment media—a twenty percent increase in the past five years.⁴ According to the same study "the use of every type of media has increased over the past ten years, with the exception of reading."⁵ In this case social media actually increased reading on screen but decreased reading printed materials, including newspapers and magazines. These findings suggest a major and critical change in terms of use and consumption of

every type of media, especially by younger audiences. They explain the decline of traditional media as it is witnessed by circulation figures. Most importantly, they stress the need for initiatives that will correspond to these changes in audiences.

In another study of American youth, eighty-four percent of respondents claim they are bombarded with information and “would benefit from learning more about how to gauge what news is trustworthy.”⁶ To appreciate the significance of contemporary media, we need to understand who produces them, under what constraints and conditions, and why.⁷ People need skills and understanding in order to use information effectively. Citizens need to understand the news process and imperatives behind journalistic work.⁸ News literacy can become a valuable tool.

News literacy is not about the analysis of messages; it is about an awareness of why those messages are there. It is not enough to know that they are produced, or even in a technical sense, how they are produced. News literacy can be regarded as the ability of the person to use and critically evaluate news source information and therefore assess the credibility of information. Informing individuals of journalists’ goals and roles should increase their knowledge of the context in which media content is produced. This, in turn, may reduce hostile media perceptions and increase credibility perceptions, as Vraga, Tully, Akin, Rojas suggest.⁹ News-literate users are aware of their decision-making and are in control of their exposures. News literacy “respond[s] to the growing challenge of assuring that young people get the information they need to become well-informed citizens and voters in the 21st century.”¹⁰

News literacy is a new kind of literacy “rooted in the real world of instant information, global interactivity, and messages created on multiple media platforms.”¹¹ Traditional and new media provide powerful new ways of representing and manipulating information. News literacy promotes a critical stand towards news and information consumption. Knowing how to produce media doesn’t necessarily make one media literate. A person must also apply critical thinking to media production to be news literate.¹²

News literacy is, therefore, more than a question of comprehension. It is concerned with the form and scope of that comprehension. “Three concerns,” writes Jenkins, “suggest the need for policy and pedagogical interventions for news literacy:

The Participation Gap—the unequal access to the opportunities, experiences, skills, and knowledge that will prepare youth for full participation in the world of tomorrow;

The Transparency Problem—the challenges young people face in learning to see clearly the ways that media shape perceptions of the world;

The Ethics Challenge—the breakdown of traditional forms of professional training and socialization that might prepare young people for their increasingly public roles as media makers and community participants.”¹³

Young people who develop news literacy also develop an informed and critical understanding of news, news production techniques, and the impact of those approaches/techniques.

News literacy is a process of describing, interpreting, and evaluating news. It has been characterized as one that introduces new associations or attributes a new meaning to original communicative act.¹⁴ News literacy can reveal the effects of media systems, particularly their impact on individuals and society. It can generate individual reactions to media experiences, energizing the media user in an attempt to shift him or her from an inactive to an active role. In other words, news literacy can help promote an informed and engaged citizenship.

News Literacy Pedagogy

Young people’s lack of interest in news, like their disconnection from politics, reflects a perception of disempowerment.¹⁵ By and large, young people are not considered political agents. Even in the

areas of social life that affect and concern them—most notably education—political debate is conducted almost entirely “over their heads.”¹⁶ We argue that developing pedagogical approaches for news literacy can generate interest for news, especially in younger generations. One goal is to shift their focus to opportunities for participation. Active participants develop the cultural competencies and social skills needed to become well-informed citizens in the twenty-first century.

News literacy pedagogy is rooted in notions of critical literacy, bridging “formal” literacies and experiences from cultural practices outside school. As such we consider four essential components of news literacy when applied into classroom: (1) representation, (2) language, (3) production, and (4) audience.¹⁷

Representation is a critical component for news literacy. It is the ability to assess and reflect on issues such as authority, reliability, and bias. Students need to notice whose voices are being heard and whose are silenced. It is a very important element that allows an audience to differentiate journalism and its ethics from directed or irresponsible information—rumors presented as news.

Language is the ability to understand the “grammar” of various forms of communication and the codes and conventions of different genres. It is important for the producer and equally important for the audience, as we see in studies on discourse analysis of news reveal. *Production* entails a fundamental understanding of who is communicating to whom and why. It encompasses awareness of commercial interests and influences. News production in particular influences content and the importance of explanations.¹⁸

Finally, *audience* is an awareness of one’s own position. Is the consumer being targeted by communications? Is he or she participating in communications as a critical recipient, an active cultural consumer, and/or a co-producer? Students should understand these ideas not only as analytical skills of “reading” media¹⁹ but also as more productive activities of “writing” media,²⁰ or, as we suggest, consuming news.

Our approach suggests three strategies for the teacher or the parent: (1) analyze the news perspective, (2) search for the news context, and (3) develop alternative sources of information. These strategies are interconnected. Analyzing the news perspective means putting the news in the right context to avoid confusion between news and information. Searching for context is seeing through techniques that distract the reader from the news itself (e.g., infotainment). Developing alternative sources of information provides exposure to many views and many differing interpretations of what is happening in the world.

Applying news literacy promotes the following outcomes:

Play—the capacity to experiment with one’s surroundings as a form of problem-solving

Performance—the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery

Simulation—the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes

Appropriation—the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content

Multitasking—the ability to scan one’s environment and shift focus as needed to salient details

Distributed Cognition—the ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities

Collective Intelligence—the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal

Judgment—the ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources

Transmedia Navigation—the ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities

Networking—the ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information

Negotiation—the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms.²¹

Play, performance, and simulation are skills that media literate people have. These outcomes represent different schools of thought that work on problem-solving. Appropriation, networking and negotiation are critical skills that work towards media content. Distributed cognition, collective intelligence, and judgment have to do with critical knowledge applied to different goals and sources. Multitasking allows media literate people to shift their attention to core details. Transmedia navigation is a literacy-enabled skill that follows the flow of news stories using various channels, sources, etc.

In addition to the skills enumerated above, “five key questions”²² should also be the cornerstone of news literacy education. These are:

1. Who created the message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently from me?
4. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in—or omitted from—this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?²³

News Literacy Outcomes

Employing news literacy is teaching *about* media rather than teaching *with* media. It is an approach that “aims to increase students’ understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality.”²⁴ It is concerned with developing an informed and critical understanding of the nature of mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques.

Applying news literacy in the classroom means that teachers will help students develop the skills to be citizens in an information age. Asking critical questions about what they watch, see, listen to, and read is at the heart of news literacy. An expanded approach connects literacy across all subject areas. This is why news literacy practitioners should include not only the practice of critical reading but also the process of writing media messages, allowing students to create their own media messages by using all types of available technologies (cameras, sound technologies, computers, mobiles, etc.). Media decoding and media production are excellent ways of integrating critical thinking about scientific issues into the classroom. In particular, “media decoding teaches a rigorous, well-reasoned, and reflective academic process, accessible to all students, that critically examines conflicting perspectives. Media production takes these skills a step further and asks students to engage in a complex and creative process of constructing their own media messages, typically after making judgments about the science and defining their own views about the issues.”²⁵

Educators must recognize that literacy learning is not only an academic endeavor but also a negotiation of social identities and thus a social practice that can delimit or offer new possibilities for students’ self images and life choices.”²⁶

The focus of news literacy should be process and content. The goal is to critically engage audiences with the increased volume of mediated messages. News literacy education should include a dynamic relationship among teachers and journalists, a number of classes on value and meaning of journalistic sources, journalistic mistakes that can lead to manipulation, social media during crisis, the identity of the journalist in the new digital era, etc.²⁷ Furthermore, news literacy outcomes should be characterized by the principle of inquiry—learning to ask vital questions about the content, the production, and the language of news that a person sees, watches, or reads. News

literacy “encompass[es] the preparation of young people for their roles and responsibilities as citizens.”²⁸ “It is about the cultivation of discursive, interacting, and intercultural skills through which younger generations are encouraged to become constructively engaged in the civic and political aspects of public life.”²⁹ In other words, news literacy is closely connected with individual and social development.

News literacy should be seen as part of a broader approach of *pedagogy of empowered citizenship*,³⁰ incorporating and promoting civic competence and active citizenship as a compound of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Empowered citizens have knowledge about how society works and the skills needed to participate effectively. Its pedagogy recognizes the complexity of a process in which multiple factors contribute to how individuals construct a multifaceted self-identity. News literacy, approached in this way, can empower students to become ‘critical thinkers and transformative actors.’³¹

The challenge for news literacy pedagogy is to stimulate more questions and coach the learner to discover how to go below the surface. “One of [the] key goals is to stop focusing quite so much on ‘do kids have computers in their classroom?’ and start focusing more on ‘do kids have basic social skills and cultural competencies, so that when they do get computers in their classroom, they can participate fully?’”³² A pedagogical approach such as Problem Based Learning (PBL) can be employed for applying news literacy in the classroom, since this can “enable settings where students have to engage in identifying and collecting relevant material from the news to address problems that are meaningful and relevant to them. . . . [T]his entails an element of knowledge production (identifying a solution to a problem, rather than only acquiring a given body of knowledge) and can involve (multimodal) dissemination”³³ that changes the current habits of news consumption.

Furthermore, we need a cognitive theory of broader media literacy to clarify how people make filtering decisions when they watch a massive flow of media messages, how they make connections of symbols in the messages, and how they construct novel meaning.³⁴ Acquiring this knowledge could help the news literacy researcher design educational interventions for parents and teachers. It could also help individuals alter their behavior in such a way to use the media rather than allowing the media to use them.³⁵

News literacy challenges prior explanatory narratives and generates new textual readings. This leads to new knowledge and understandings. It can become a tool to teach young generations critical-thinking skills, enabling them to be more frequently consumers and creators of credible information across all media and platforms, especially now that new media have become de-massified.³⁶

The increase in mass media channels allows users to select for a seemingly infinitely diverse menu.³⁷ “Our world is now filled with a firehose of information coming at us 24 hours per day,” said former president and CEO of National Public Radio Gary Knell. “That’s why it is more important than ever that we learn how to separate fact from opinion and become fully information literate.”³⁸ The goal is for each person to possess “the skills to discern news from infotainment, fact from opinion, and trustworthy information sources from untrustworthy,” said former Federal Communications Commissioner Michael Copps.³⁹ Holistic media literacy education can be effective in providing students with tools to help them grapple with the influence of media in their daily lives.⁴⁰ The need for young people to develop their own standards for truthful, reliable information is all the more important because today’s students are producers as well as consumers. The changing roles of the “citizen-consumer” in our increasingly complex mediated world details the criteria for a “full citizenship in the information society.”⁴¹

There are limitations in applying news literacy. Audiences actively shape their readings of television

texts within contextual constraints.⁴² An active, news literate audience would be able to construct their own interpretations of texts within the constraints of their cultural system. These constraints affect individuals, their perceptions, and, mainly their interpretations. News literacy should be approached and endorsed as an “affinity space”⁴³ that is sustained by common endeavors that bridge differences in age, class, race, gender, and educational level. News literacy as an affinity space implies that most of the approach will be based upon taking advantage of the new media environment as an informal learning culture that offers powerful opportunities for learning and engaging more deeply.

News literacy can assist the individual actively constructing “a discrete and independent social reality.”⁴⁴ This individual requires the ability to make critical distinctions between increasingly complex messages constructed and transmitted by interactive communication systems. To be effective, however, news literacy pedagogy “must integrate any consideration of media impact into a sound pedagogical approach.”⁴⁵ Promoting news literacy programs in schools can strengthen the capacity of individuals to engage *with* information and *in* the public sphere. And while there has been a shift to make mass media technologies more interactive, news literacy requires a re-orientation. Audiences must be engaged to use all these new features. The audience, as citizens and media consumers, needs to keep reporting and researching, as well as learning how media (especially digital media) work.⁴⁶ It will be even more useful to have “a clear understanding of how journalism works.”⁴⁷

The decline in readership and use of traditional media will continue unless audiences become more news literate. We must engage the new interactive forms of media technologies and the flux of information. If we are to survive in the information society, there is a profound sense that we must develop skills as critics.⁴⁸ Every person should be able to describe, interpret, and evaluate his or her information environment, especially now that new media are developing unique and powerful structures for information. Our focus is not on individual accomplishment but rather the emergence of a context that supports widespread participation in the production, distribution, and critical understanding of news source information. “As the world grows increasingly complex, success and prosperity will be linked to people’s ability to think, act, adapt and communicate creatively.”⁴⁹

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