



# Conceptualizing News Literacy

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**Abstract:** *The nascent field of news literacy is often described as a subset of media literacy. A review of international scholarship with regard to news literacy conceptualizations confirms that there are diverse and competing notions of its definition and purpose: while the civic component of news literacy clearly distinguishes it from media literacy and other new literacies, there is a noticeable divide between journalism-driven and media literacy-derived approaches. Qualitative data analysis was used to identify patterns in a subset of approximately 120 examples of current English-language international scholarship. By proposing three preliminary taxonomic classifications of news literacy – protectionist versus empowerment; skills versus knowledge; and levels of abstraction – this conceptual paper provides orientation in the field.*

**Keywords:** *Literacy, media literacy, news literacy, taxonomy.*

## Article History

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Defining “news literacy” is a challenge when the definitions of both *news* and *literacy* are in flux. Where “news” was once a valuable commodity gathered by professional journalists and distributed regularly to mass audiences, it is now ubiquitous, available 24-7, often free, and increasingly customized (Ashley, 2020). Today’s news consumers must be able to navigate an increasingly complicated news ecosystem in order to find news they can trust. Similarly, the meaning of “literacy” has also evolved. Since the 1970s, the scope of literacy began to expand in education from the ability to read and write to become a meaning-making activity that requires different skills for different types of media messages: “Literacy today [...] is inevitably and necessarily multimedia literacy; and to this extent, traditional forms of literacy teaching are no longer adequate” (Buckingham, 2003, p. 35). Multiple new literacies have emerged in lockstep with the development of digital technologies (Stordy, 2015), including not only media and news literacy, but also computer, data, digital, economic, health, historical, information, MIL (media and information literacy), new, scientific, and visual literacy.

The term *news literacy* first emerged among journalism educators around 2006 (Fleming, 2017). News literacy has been characterized as a subset and “crucial emerging field” of scholarship and education within the larger field of media literacy (Mihailidis, 2012, xii-2). As a subfield of media literacy (Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2013; Kendrick & Fullerton, 2019; Mihailidis, 2012; Palsa & Ruokamo, 2015; Tully, Vraga, & Smithson, 2018) it has inherited to an extent the same fruitless debate on definitions, scope, and aims that has plagued media literacy since the early 1990s (Maksl, Craft, Ashley, & Miller, 2017). There is to date no universally accepted formulation of news literacy. Its various permutations include *news literacy*, *news media literacy*, *critical news media literacy*, and *critical news literacy*. A recent paper co-published by a constellation of news literacy scholars went so far as to claim that the “[current] state of the field is chaotic” (Vraga, Tully, Maksl, Craft, & Ashley, 2020, p. 13).

Yet even though “chaos” may be overstating the status quo, navigating today’s news information environment has indeed become an increasingly complex task. The key goals of media literacy education, such as enhancing critical thinking skills (Silverblatt, 2004, 2014); analysis and evaluation (Aufderheide, 1993; Hobbs, 2010); conscious processing of media messages (Potter, 2004); and promoting civic agency (Mihailidis, 2019) may be applied specifically to news content and news products. Whether such application allows news literacy to emerge as a full-fledged, independent discipline may be beside the point. Allowing for a degree of “semantic interoperability” with respect to news literacy definitions would better reflect the diversity of news and news consumers, as Malik et al. argue (2013, p. 9). The more important goal must surely be to produce savvy and empowered readers and disseminators of various kinds of media messages, including news.

The purpose of this paper is to address the question of whether meaningful classifications of news literacy definitions can be established at all. Doing so may help clarify the current state of this cross-disciplinary field, but also provide a framework for future scholarly work in this domain.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on a systematic literature review of news literacy which was carried out in 2019. The literature review describes the current state of research and identifies both scholarly and non-academic organizations and institutions active in the field. While its theoretical focus lies on English-language scholarship originating primarily in the US and UK, the review encompasses English-language scientific papers published by international scholars. Due to the nature of the topic itself – **news literacy** – material published by non-academics such as journalists, media commentators, educational outreach organizations and programs has also been included in the literature review.

Searches were carried out on ERIC, SSCI, Google Scholar, ProQuest and commercial search engines as well as on the theses and dissertation databases OATD, BASE, and NDLTD. The literature review has been continually augmented with works published since 2019, with particular effort devoted to identifying new papers by scholars or practitioners already included in the original literature review.

Using the full literature review as a base, an electronic search was carried out during the months of August and September 2020 to identify whether, and how often, the terms *news literacy*, *news media literacy*, *critical news media literacy* and/or *critical news literacy* were used in the body of papers or published materials. This step yielded approximately 120 peer-reviewed papers that used one of the terms at least once. Several monographs and encyclopedia entries published by scholars in the field were also identified. Occurrences of the terms that were limited to citations or bibliographies were excluded for the purpose of this study. Backward and forward searches of citations were carried out selectively to ensure the completeness of the set. In a next step, qualitative data analysis software tools were used to extract a collection of relevant terms and concepts. These key operative words, including “skills,” “knowledge,” “civic,” “democracy,” “act,” and “produce” (see also Table 1.) were counted, analyzed, and used to identify possible relationships.

## 3. RESULTS

Of the approximately 120 works identified that use the term *news literacy* (or variants thereof) in the body of the work, only 37 offer any type of specific definition of the term itself. The rest – around 80 – use the term, but do not define or otherwise elaborate on it. Instead, these papers often situate news literacy

within the existing media literacy landscape; it is characterized as one “strand” in the “big tent” of media literacy education which embraces critical media literacy as well as digital, information and visual literacies (RobbGrieco & Hobbs, 2013, p. 22). It is often described as a subset or outgrowth of media literacy which applies the general media literacy principles of act, access, analyze, and create to news-based texts (Ashley et al., 2013; Jones-Jang, Mortensen, & Liu, 2019; Kamerer, 2013; Kartal, Yazgan, & Kincal, 2017; Kendrick & Fullerton, 2019; Mihailidis, 2012; Notley & Dezuanni, 2019; Sivek, 2018). Toepfl (2014) characterizes critical news literacy as part of the media literacy tradition, yet emphasizes that its facets vary according to whether it is applied in countries with democratic or non-democratic regimes. Others situate news literacy within other related literacies such as digital media literacy (Dezuanni, Notley, & Corser, 2020) or information and digital literacies (CIVIX, 2020). Kendrick & Fullerton (2019) point to the intersection of news literacy with civic literacy. Finally, news literacy is occasionally offered as just one of many in a long list of literacies (Palsa & Ruokamo, 2015; Stordy, 2015).

Of the 37 works that define news literacy, 21 propose original or own definitions. The remainder cite previously published definitions forwarded by other scholars or organizations. Twelve of the 21 original definitions are offered by one or more scholars in the loose collective of Ashley, Craft, Maksl, Tully and Vraga. Four definitions originate with or are directly associated with the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University (Center for News Literacy, 2019), and an additional five definitions are proposed by journalists, practitioners, or educational organizations.

Malik et al. underscore that what sets news literacy apart from other literacies is its “connection to civic engagement” (2013, p. 7). The US-based News Literacy Project cites the promotion of “engaged participation in civic life” as the ultimate aim of news literacy (2020, p. 5). The 21 original definitions and/or statements of purpose located in this study tend to confirm this clear differentiating characteristic: eighteen refer expressly to the civic and/or democratic aspects.

**Table 1. Occurrences of operative words in news literacy definitions and statements of purpose**

Term	Total number of mentions
Ability, abilities	13
Act, active, action	9
Analyze, analysis	6
Assess	4
Attitude(s)	3
Civic	7

Citizen, citizenship	citizenry,	13
Create, creation		5
Credible, credibility		4
Critical, critically		20
Democracy, democratic		11
Empower, empowered		8
Engage, engagement	engaged,	16
Evaluate		6
Fact, fact-based		3
Information		18
Informed		7
Knowledge, knowledgeable		13
Meaningful		1
Mindful		2
Navigate		1
News consumer(s)		3
News consumption		9
News production		15
Productive		1
Skill, skills, skillset		16
Understand, understanding		16
Verify, verification		2

*Note: Key operative words counted in the group of 21 works proposing original or own news literacy definitions and/or statements of purpose. Due to the small number of units of analysis, permutations of the same word are grouped together. Only the first mention of the term is included in the count.*

#### 4. DISCUSSION

News literacy is still a young discipline with a relatively small yet rapidly growing body of scholarly research. As its definition and purpose evolve, there will likely be more material with which to create truly meaningful taxonomies. Before delineating three possible modes of classification, it is useful to track the evolution of definitions offered by one or more of the scholars who have co-authored multiple papers in the discipline since 2010: those belonging to the aforementioned loose constellation of Ashley, Maksl, Craft, Tully and Vraga.

In 2010, Ashley, Poepsel and Willis employ the term *media literacy* in their exploration of the ways in which knowledge of media ownership influences opinions on print news credibility (2010). In “Developing a News Media Literacy Scale” (2013), Ashley, Maksl and Craft describe *news media literacy* as a “subset of

the broader field of media literacy” without providing an explicit definition of the term. Two years later, Maksl, Ashley and Craft again use *news media literacy* (2015), describing it as an “emerging subfield” of media literacy. Ashley later writes (2020, p. 50) that the authors deliberately used *news media literacy* in the 2015 study to underline their allegiance to the discipline’s roots in media literacy, as opposed to journalism. The same authors employed *news media literacy* again in “News Media Literacy and Political Engagement: What’s The connection?” (Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2017). Yet in another paper published in the same year, *news literacy* was the main term used in their evaluation of the Stony Brook University curriculum (Maksl et al., 2017). They describe the overlap and competition among different literacies, and describe news literacy in spatial terms: “If a definition of news literacy is the destination, then the journey to reach it passes through several other literacy neighborhoods” (2017, p. 229). Ashley offers an autonomous definition for news literacy in the *International Encyclopedia of Journalism* (2019b): “Starting from the premise that an informed citizenry is central to democratic self-governance, news literacy is comprised of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that news audiences need to successfully engage with news media. [ . . . ].” The most recent collective effort of the scholars Vraga, Tully, Maksl, Craft and Ashley employs the term *news literacy*, which they define as “Knowledge of the personal and social processes by which news is produced, distributed, and consumed, and skills that allow users some control over these processes” (2020, p. 15). In his 2020 monograph *News Literacy and Democracy*, Ashley claims that *news literacy* “has emerged as a domain of its own” and while distinct from media literacy, still belongs to its overarching realm (2020, p. 17).

In addition to identifying how the term has developed thus far, patterns may also be discerned in the 37 instances located for this study. These may be elaborated in three preliminary modes of classification. The first is based on the general protectionist and empowerment paradigms in the media literacy education tradition (RobbGrieco & Hobbs, 2013, p. 2). A second draws on the skills and knowledge-based framework developed by Potter (2004). A third presents news literacy as one level of abstraction in a framework proposed by Palsa & Ruokamo (2015). Each of the four permutations of the term (*news literacy*, *news media literacy*, *critical news media literacy*, and *critical news literacy*) have been merged in the creation of these classifications.

## 5. NEWS LITERACY PARADIGMS

The varying approaches to defining news literacy may be generally categorized as fundamentally protectionist, or empowering (Mihailidis, 2012; RobbGrieco & Hobbs, 2013). The protectionist paradigm presupposes a more “correct” way to consume news and aims to cultivate appreciation of it (Fleming, 2014). It encourages news consumers to think like journalists, and to employ the traditional tools and techniques of the journalism trade (e.g. verification,

consulting multiple sources, using an accuracy checklist etc.). In contrast, the empowerment paradigm stems from the critical/cultural tradition in which the individual not only interprets and deconstructs (news) media messages, but can also actively contribute to message creation and dissemination. In news literacy, the protectionist approach drills down on concrete news products and messages, while the empowerment approach encourages contemplation of the wider socioeconomic, cultural and institutional contexts. The protectionist paradigm is most closely associated with proponents based in the United States, while the empowerment paradigm is more global in scope (Fleming, 2017).

**Table 2. News Literacy Paradigms**

	<b>Protectionist Paradigm</b>	<b>Empowerment Paradigm</b>
Origins	Journalism, journalists, J-school approach (“think like a journalist”)	Critical/cultural approach (based on media literacy in US, media education in UK)
General stance vis-à-vis media	Aims to mitigate potentially harmful media effects by cultivating appreciation for certain media forms and messages	Encourages individual construction and negotiation of meaning in all media forms
Orientation	Content-oriented: examines and evaluates specific news texts or news products	Context-oriented: considers the larger socioeconomic, cultural, institutional contexts
Desired actions	Skill cultivation: journalistic tools of fact-checking, verification, accuracy checklists, sourcing practices	Ability to access, analyze, create, reflect, act in all media
Geographic sphere	“American”	Global
Proponents	Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University; News Literacy Project (US); Poynter Institute; Radio Television Digital News Association (US); Howard Schneider (founder of Stony Brook program)	Seth Ashley; Renee Hobbs; Malik, Cortesi & Gasser (2013); Paul Mihailidis; Stephen D. Reese

## 6. SKILLS VERSUS KNOWLEDGE-BASED APPROACH

The skills versus knowledge-based taxonomy follows Potter’s (2004) classification of media literacy definitions. After counting explicit mentions of an operative set of terms across all 37 definitions, four main areas of focus were delineated: 1) “skills” (the related terms “abilities,” “competencies” were also counted in this category); 2) “knowledge” (including “understanding,”

“comprehension”); 3) the combination of both “skills” and “knowledge.” This study adds a fourth and crucial aspect, the “civic” component.

Table 3 classifies the original definitions according to the four areas. The modest number of definitions (units of analysis) hinders the creation of substantive classifications, yet a heightened emphasis on “skills” can be discerned among the journalism-centric authors and organizations based in the US (e.g. Center for News Literacy and its founder Schneider, the News Literacy Project, Radio Television Digital News Association). Variations of “civic” (“citizen,” “citizenship,” etc.) were included in eight definitions, thus underscoring its centrality to the discipline. This aligns with Mihailidis, who locates news literacy at the intersection of journalism, technology, and citizenship (2012); and Malik et al., who stress that it is the “connection to civic engagement” that sets news literacy apart from the other literacies (2013, p. 7). Appendix 1 offers verbatim excerpts of wording within each definitional focus area.

**Table 3. News Literacy Definitional Focus**

<b>Definitional focus</b>	<b>Author(s)/Year</b> (listed in alphabetical order by author)
Focus on skills	Ashley et al. 2017 Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University (US) Kajimoto & Fleming 2019 News Literacy Project (US) Radio Television Digital News Association (US) Schneider, Howard (Stony Brook University)
Focus on knowledge	Maksl et al. 2015 Reese 2012 RobbGrieco & Hobbs 2013
Focus on both skills and knowledge	Ashley 2019 Ashley 2019a Ashley 2020 Malik et al. 2013 Tully et al. 2018 Vraga et al. 2020
Mention of civic component	Ashley 2019 Ashley 2019a Ashley 2020 Kajimoto & Fleming 2019 Malik et al. 2013 Mihailidis 2012 News Literacy Project (US) RobbGrieco & Hobbs 2013

## 7. LEVEL OF ABSTRACTION FRAMEWORK

One thread identified in this study is a reluctance among scholars to insist on the universality of any one news literacy definition. In their preference for semantic flexibility, Malik et al. emphasize the importance of understanding the building blocks of news literacy: what people need news for, how and why they seek out news, and identifying how to help news consumers hone their skills in evaluating and disseminating news (2013, pp. 8–9). Mihailidis has alluded to the lack of clear definitional boundaries between news and media literacy. Yet rather than limiting the concept from the outset, he suggests a more flexible approach that enables “definitional rigor and fluency” to arise naturally in the course of scholarship and pedagogy (2012, p. 3). Palsa & Ruokamo (2015) eschew altogether any attempt to establish a global definition of media literacy, proposing instead to recognize the legitimacy of multiliteracies and arrange these on the basis of high, medium, and low levels of abstraction.

This more holistic view of literacies may indeed be of use when considering news literacy. Adapting the Palsa & Ruokamo framework to this end, media literacy – in this instance, the overall desired outcome of education – is thus the highest level of abstraction. News literacy is situated in the middle, and is employed as a targeted application of media literacy concepts to news-based texts. At the lowest level of abstraction are literacies that feed into both news and media literacy, such as headline literacy (Johnson, Paal, Waggoner, & Bleier, 2020), which involves the ways in which news consumers identify and evaluate the reliability of news headlines, particularly in social media-rich information environments.

**Table 4. Framework of abstraction for literacies (based on Palsa & Ruokamo, 2015)**

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High level of abstraction
<i>Media literacy as desired outcome of educational efforts</i>
Medium level of abstraction
<i>News literacy as targeted application of media literacy concepts</i>
Low level of abstraction
<i>Headline literacy as highly specific and contextualized application of news literacy concepts</i>

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## 8. CONCLUSION

This study underscores the current lack of any single, universally accepted definition of news literacy in the English-language literature. Most scholarly works included in this study apply the foundational definition of media literacy to news-based texts instead of providing a new or original definition of news literacy. Moreover, as a stand-alone discipline, news literacy competes not only with media literacy, but with a range of other new or newish literacies, in particular digital and information literacy. Yet news literacy is consistently

distinguished from other literacies by way of its civic component. This study suggests that among the relatively small group of scholars and practitioners that employs the term, classification of conceptualizations may follow the protectionist versus empowerment paradigm; a skills versus knowledge-based approach; or within a framework of levels of abstraction. This classification could serve as an initial taxonomic foundation which may be built upon as the discipline develops.

A clear limitation of this study is the small number of extant original definitions of news literacy. However, as the field matures and the corpus of scholarly research expands, future researchers will have more material to draw on in order to create more substantive classifications. The overall scope of evaluation could be enlarged to include news literacy scholarship originating in non-Anglo countries and explore the dimensions of the term in other languages. The present rapid pace of publication in the field will likely continue as researchers explore how news literacy is helping - or not helping - news consumers navigate the complexities of news ecospheres, and whether news literacy functions as a corrective to the scourge of "fake news" and misinformation.

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## APPENDIX 1.

News Literacy Definitional Focus as described in Table 3.

*In alphabetical/chronological order for each category.*

### SKILL-BASED DEFINITIONS

Ashley et al.

"News media literacy takes the broad goals of media literacy – the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media [...] – and applies them to news content specifically with a focus on the contexts of news production." (2017, p. 81)

Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University

"News Literacy is the ability to use critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports, whether they come via print, television, radio, the internet or social media." (2019)

Kajimoto & Fleming

"News literacy is an emerging field within the disciplines of media literacy, journalism education, information technology, and other related areas, although there is no unified definition or consensus among researchers as to what exactly the news literacy curriculum should entail. Its core mission is broadly recognized as 'citizen empowerment' in that the critical-thinking skills necessary to the evaluation of news reports and the ability to identify fact-based, quality information encourage active participation and engagement among well-informed citizens." (2019)

News Literacy Project (US)

"News literacy is the ability to determine the credibility of news and other content, to identify different types of information and to use the standards of authoritative, fact-based journalism to discern credible sources and content from misinformation and unreliable sources. Being more news-literate also means recognizing the critical role of the First Amendment and a free press in a democracy and interacting with news and other information in ways that promote engaged participation in civic life." (2020, p. 5)

Radio Television Digital News Association (US)

"News literacy is the acquisition of 21st-century, critical-thinking skills for analyzing and judging the reliability of news and information, differentiating among facts, opinions and assertions in the media we consume, create and distribute." (2020)

Schneider, Howard (Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University)

"News literacy is the ability to decide for yourself whether the news reports you receive, whether they come from television, the Internet, newspapers, or magazines, whether those reports are reliable. And by reliable I mean whether you can **act** on the information. Can you take an action? Can you reach a conclusion? Can you make a judgment? Or is the information suspect or insufficient – and how do you know?" (2019)

## KNOWLEDGE-BASED DEFINITIONS

Maksl et al.

"News media literacy is oriented toward understanding how and why people engage with news media, how they make sense of what they consume, and how individuals are affected by their own news consumption." (2015, p. 29)

Reese, Stephen D.

"By news literacy I essentially mean an understanding of how news 'works,' including the underlying media and technological systems that support certain meanings embedded in media 'texts' and the creative process that yields them [. . .]; [global] news literacy, then, means the ability to understand, 'decode,' and create media with particular awareness of one's social location within an international context." (2012, p. 65)

RobbGrieco & Hobbs

"This strand [of media literacy] helps learners understand and participate in the roles and responsibilities that newsmakers, news consumers, news texts, and news organizations play in a healthy society. Practitioners focus on key questions of representation and reality, and of techniques used to construct messages in the news." (2013, p. 22)

## BOTH SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

Ashley (*International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies*)

"Starting from the premise that an informed citizenry is central to democratic self-governance, news literacy is comprised of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that news audiences need to successfully engage with news media [. . .]." (2019b)

Ashley (*International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy*)

"[The] emerging field of news literacy includes the knowledge and skills necessary for empowered audiences to engage with news media and civic life in meaningful and productive ways." (2019a)

Ashley

"*News literacy* is the critical evaluation of information content as well as the contexts where it is produced and consumed. We can think of news literacy as the set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that a person brings to their personal consumption of information and to their understanding of the structure of the news media landscape." (2020, p. 9)

Malik et al.

"News literacy is at the intersection of [media and information literacies], as news is a type of information which can be delivered through the media. However, its connection to civic engagement is what conceptually distinguishes it from other information or media." (2013, p. 7)

Tully et al.

"NML [news media literacy] [. . .] emphasizes the development of knowledge, skills and a personal sense of control about media choices"; "[. . .] NML, then,

focuses on the necessary abilities relevant to becoming a critical news consumer." (2018, 3-4)

Vraga et al.

News literacy is "knowledge of the personal and social processes by which news is produced, distributed, and consumed, and skills that allow users some control over these processes." (2020, p. 15)

**CIVIC COMPONENT (WHERE NOT ALREADY INCLUDED ABOVE)**

Mihailidis

"The news literacy educational movement is premised on exploring how to best prepare journalists and citizens for lives of active inquiry and participatory citizenship in information societies worldwide." (2012, p. 8)