

Invited essays

This edition's guest editors invited essays from key practitioners and academics on the theme of preparing future journalists - and citizens - for engagement in global digital culture.

The very old and very new challenge of news literacy

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*"News comes from a distance; it comes helter-skelter in inconceivable confusion; it deals with matters that are not easily understood; it arrives and is assimilated by busy and tired people who must take what is given to them."*¹

Nearly 100 years ago, when Walter Lippmann published his accounts of the immense difficulties of reconciling "the world outside and the pictures in our heads," most news came "from a distance" via newspapers and magazines.

And yet, even with this limited range and number of news purveyors, in *Liberty and the News* and, later, the highly influential *Public Opinion*, Lippmann describes "inconceivable confusion" among the busy and tired people who had to make sense of it. Lippmann's earlier career included a stint as a propagandist (and a very successful one) for the Creel Committee during the First World War, so he knew something about the construction of messages and the many forces along the path from sender to receiver that could shape their meaning, rendering the world outside opaque and unknowable. How was democracy going to work, Lippmann wondered, if people were incapable of being adequately informed about important issues? Indeed, Lippmann's view seemed so dire that John Dewey called *Public Opinion* "perhaps the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned."²

Everything—and nothing—has changed since then. Certainly the world must have seemed a complicated, confusing place in the newly industrialised, post-war era in which

Public Opinion appeared. Our present time is no less complicated, in either perception or reality. What's a bit startling, however, is how momentous change in one area—namely, the revolutionary expansion of mass communication capabilities—seems to have altered the experience of those busy and tired people so little. Yes, people can contribute to and engage with the news stream in ways that were impossible before. But that doesn't change the fact that for issues and events happening outside their direct experience, people still "must take what is given to them" by the news media and try to make sense of it. That task is arguably more, not less, difficult with the proliferation of sources and platforms.

Comparing Lippmann's words with today's realities isn't just a way of noting the old saying about how the more things change the more they stay the same (though it certainly does that too). Rather, I want to think more about how Lippmann's views might be useful as we consider where news literacy has been and is, or ought to be, going.

My research collaborators, Seth Ashley and Adam Maksl, and I began our work in news literacy with what we thought would be an answerable question: What is it? If we could define it, then maybe we could measure it. And if we could measure it, then we would have done something useful for researchers interested in investigating relationships between news literacy and other civically important things, such as political participation, as well as for educators who were developing curricula and programs and wanted to evaluate their effectiveness. It all seemed pretty straightforward.

Our initial theorizing regarding the "what is news literacy" question focused more on the "literacy" part than the "news" part. If literacy encompasses the ability to analyse and interpret news messages, then what might someone need to know about news to analyse and interpret it? This is a somewhat odd way to think about news, which is generally considered successful to the extent it doesn't require much analysing. It is designed to be taken at face value. Many people, especially those coming from the world of professional journalism, often define news literacy in terms that reflect this "face value" notion. In this view, news literacy is the ability to distinguish "real" news from the burgeoning numbers of imitators that might look like works of journalism on the surface, but are not the products of journalistic practices involving verification and so on. This definition influenced our thinking, and we began to consider news literacy in the context of—and as a product of—professional journalism. What does one need to know about the system that produces news to be able to interpret that news? In addition, we were thinking about journalism in terms of the roles it plays and the consequent responsibilities it has in a democracy. Those were, after all, the things that made news literacy important in the first place, it seemed to us.

All of this led us, early on, to spin our wheels a bit. We were looking at what people knew about what journalism *should* do. (It turns out that the college students who were the participants in that early research knew, or could at least guess, the "correct" answers about that.) While that's good to know, it wasn't really helping us figure out if they knew enough about how professional journalism *actually* works to be able to analyse the news messages it produces. Our next steps, then, focused more on identifying the tools someone might bring to the task of analysing news messages, and less on whether and how someone appreciates those messages. We adapted a model of media literacy that had never been operationalised before to create the News Media Literacy scale, which combines items measuring knowledge about the news media system (among other things) with items addressing psychological traits and motivations relevant to interpreting the news.

Doing this was not without controversy. The rich, if somewhat conceptually scattered, media literacy literature informing our work has been dismissed by some journalists as too ideological, too critical of journalism. For example, the idea that knowing about the commercial underpinnings and pressures of the media system might be important in in-

terpreting news rankled some of those closely aligned with the journalism industry. In addition, including psychological measures seemed too far afield. In some ways, this reflects a desire to focus on NEWS literacy more than news LITERACY. Which brings us back to Lippmann.

“We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception.”³

Lippmann, applying insights from the then-relatively new field of social psychology, described how stereotypes and blind spots work to filter and skew our interpretation of mass media messages. Remember, this is at a time when there were fewer news sources and it was far easier to make some sort of determination about any source’s credibility than it is today. So the problem Lippmann is identifying has almost nothing to do with message sources and everything to do with limits on our interpretive abilities. To me, that suggests that the focus of news literacy ought to be less on distinguishing among news sources and more on how the ways we get news—mediated by technologies, a host of institutional and organisational forces and our own psychological tools—shapes our understanding. And if we adjust our focus in that way, news literacy research and practice also need to make sure the scope is broader than professional journalism and the definitions of news more inclusive. In the end, that might mean news literacy is perhaps less distinct from media literacy than some might desire. But I think it could be better positioned to help citizens handle the challenges to democratic decision-making Lippmann identified all those years ago.

References

- 1 Lippmann, W. (1920). *Liberty and the News*. New York: The Free Press, p. 5.
- 2 Dewey, J. (1922). “Public Opinion,” *The New Republic* 30 (May 3), p. 286.
- 3 Lippmann, W. (1922/1965). *Public Opinion*. New York: The Free Press, p. 59.

Why - and how - news publishers worldwide help with news literacy

By Aralynn Abare McMane, PhD, Executive director for youth engagement and news literacy, The World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA), Paris

When 34 journalists were killed while covering a Philippine election, Raia and Ruel Landicho, publishers of two small weeklies in the region of the deadly attack, organized a day of free workshops at their Sinag printing plant to help local youth understand the role of a free press. Ruel said at the time, “We believe that in a time when press freedom is being attacked in our country... it is important to teach our youth that journalism is a noble profession.” They expected perhaps one hundred participants. One thousand attended.

Such publisher commitment to news literacy is essential, deserves to be honoured and should be copied. So it was that the Landicos’ initiative won a World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) World Young Reader Prize in 2011.

A unique strength of news literacy comes from its origins in journalism and journalists, with the natural emphasis on informed questioning of all information. That said, an understanding of how journalism works, the dangers to some of those who do it, and its purpose in encouraging democracy all need to be at the start of any news literacy (or media literacy) activity, well before the classic deconstruction of media messages.

That philosophy was reinforced for WAN-IFRA after inviting Paul Mihailidis, director of the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change and an editor of this volume, to report to WAN-IFRA in 2008 about the results of an experiment involving a University of Maryland media literacy course. He found that while the course did a good job of training students to be critical thinkers about media messages, it also left them become highly cynical about and media and about the role of journalism in a democracy (Mihailidis 2008).

That course has been repaired, but there remains a challenge elsewhere that in the name of “media literacy” quality journalism becomes demonized if we are not very, very careful. Or, the central watchdog role of news media can be ignored, which is the case in one state-of-the-art media lab in Central Europe where the only mention of this role by nongovernment news media is that the fines imposed on them contribute to facility’s operating costs.

WAN-IFRA encourages its constituency of online and print news publishers around the world to concentrate on helping local educators with some crucial, platform-agnostic elements of news literacy:

- > An understanding of the relationship between freedom of expression and freedom of the press and the importance and fragility of both.

- > A chance to come face-to-face with the work of journalism through interaction with the people who do it.

- > An opportunity to sample doing journalism, even for a few hours, to practice some reporter skills that will also serve in strengthening news participation, consumption and sharing.

This work recognizes and publicizes excellence in these areas and others by news pub-