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# Finding consensus: a pilot survey in news literacy education

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the findings of a pilot study of news literacy programs in the United States in which respondents were surveyed about the concepts, pedagogy, and assessments used. It presents an ongoing lack of consensus in the field about not only what constitutes news literacy but also how news literacy is implemented in secondary and higher education classrooms. The research is framed within the context of contemporary scholarship on best educational practices and ongoing efforts to assess both news and media literacy education. The pilot survey, funded by the McCormick Foundation and the Poynter Institute, was administered to a small sample of news literacy educators across multiple grade levels. Respondents reflected on the structure and intent of their news literacy programming and were asked to consider the role of their programming as it relates to greater departmental or institutional goals. The study finds that while educators are using a mix of best practices in assessment, such as student portfolios, a lack of consensus still exists regarding other critical elements of news literacy education and implementation, including learning objectives, main concepts, and pedagogy. The researchers suggest scholars in the field must do more to articulate the role of news literacy education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and provide clear direction on how to implement news literacy education in the classroom.

## Introduction

**News literacy is an expanding field in the United States, thanks in part to new educational standards at the primary and secondary levels that focus on informational and non-fiction texts. Sometimes placed under the umbrella of concomitant literacies such as digital and media literacy, news literacy is finding a foothold among educators and practitioners who seek to bridge news media's producer-consumer dichotomy.**

In doing so, news literacy has been variously described as "the acquisition of 21st-cen-

tury, critical-thinking skills for analysing and judging the reliability of news and information, differentiating among facts, opinions and assertions in the media we consume, create and distribute” (ASNE’s Youth Journalism Initiative, n.d.); “the ability to use critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports from all media: print, TV, radio or the web” (Centerfornewsliteracy.org 2015); and “the ability to use critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports and information sources” (Why News Matters 2015).

Most recently, educators, journalism practitioners, and researchers have explored news literacy as means of reinvigorating education with current, timely, historical documents, including news reports. Because of news literacy’s emphasis on critical thinking and analysis, its study requires students to synthesize those educational fundamentals and link them to real world events and skills, all while aligning with increasingly stringent state and local standards. In the wake of a September 2014 News Literacy Summit held in Chicago, a white paper compiling the summit conclusions and recommendations held that “The Common Core and ‘21st Century skills’ movements create an opening for news literacy advocates to join with others and embed these concepts and abilities into the curriculum across disciplines” (Wallace 2015). The Common Core State Standards is a U.S.-based educational initiative that outlines learning goals and standards for each grade in math and English and language arts. While not a government-mandated initiative, as of summer 2015, forty-three states had adopted Common Core standards (Ujifusa 2015). The standards, particularly for English and language arts, emphasize informational and non-fiction texts. However, the standards do not explicitly mention news or media literacy learning objectives. Rather, the standards state that:

“just as media and technology are integrated in school and life in the twenty-first century, skills related to media use (both critical analysis and production of media) are integrated throughout the standards” (“Key Points ELA” 2015).

While this new educational standards framework has provided an opening for news literacy education in primary and secondary school classrooms, there is, as yet, no tie between these standards and post-secondary news literacy education objectives.

Recognizing this gap, founding partners at the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and the Poynter Institute encouraged and supported researchers to engage in studies that would better map the field of news literacy—how, where, and to what extent it is being taught. The summit in particular sought to identify what is known about the field, its unknowns, and next steps for all stakeholders. This paper is the result of that approach—a preliminary, limited-scope survey aimed at taking first steps in identifying how and why news literacy is currently being taught. The argument for this tactic is simple: We cannot begin to fully understand news literacy, the direction of the field, or its implications, unless we first understand how those teaching it conceptualize and execute what they do. Therefore, this paper seeks to capture a snapshot of the on-the-ground challenges educators face and successes they’ve achieved.

The sixty respondents who completed this news literacy pilot survey span the United States and represent a diverse array of teaching and learning programs: from classrooms and professional training programs, and from storied institutions to those that are just beginning to incorporate news literacy into their curriculum. Their responses offer a glimpse into the complex reality educators face, and could offer a blueprint for strategists and advocates working to broaden the reach of news literacy. What’s more, this survey stands as a directive that without more consensus inside the classroom on what news literacy means and how to teach it, the field could continue to remain fragmented, and measuring successful initiatives will be difficult at best without a comparative baseline.

## Mapping progress in a young field

“News literacy—a field pioneered by journalists rather than theorists or psychometricians—is still a young discipline that needs time to accumulate a body of evidence for its efficacy.” (Beyerstein 2014)

To begin, it is vital to distinguish between areas of study that are widely conflated, including media education and media literacy, journalism education, and news literacy, the latter being the focus of this study. In describing early media and media literacy education in the United States, Kubey (1998) identifies roots in both cultural studies and inoculation approaches. Media education, he found, was most often a means of educating against media, as if to stem an infection or cure a disease. While European media education moved beyond such recursive approaches to adopt a cultural approach, Kubey found many American school systems stymied, in part due to a failure to communicate the value in media education beyond simply curtailing media’s excessive use among young adults (1998). In considering the historical foundations of media literacy, RobbGrieco, a media literacy historian, articulated a similar divide in approaches that emphasized either protectionism or empowerment but rarely both (2014). He summarized a well-accepted definition of media literacy education—“the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms” (RobbGrieco 2014, 5)—and visualized a model of “Media Literacy’s Big Tent” that places news literacy squarely under the flag of “empowerment,” where media is used “to participate more fully in our democracy, economy and cultures” (2014, 5). As such, this study accepts news literacy as an approach centred within media literacy, a particular area of study aimed at examining those news media products, processes, and institutions that impact citizens via their participation in democracy.

Additionally, this empowerment function of news literacy helps marry it to the craft of journalism, an industry that, at its core, seeks to keep tabs on democratic institutions and systems of power and voice. In this way, journalism is often the object of news literacy practice. Journalism’s relationship to news literacy, however, is more complex than simply being one side of the producer/consumer coin. Hobbs, Donnelly, Friesem and Moen (2013), for instance, found students’ positive attitudes about news and journalism served as predictors for intent to participate in civic engagement. Because news literacy often asks students to critically consider the messages and accuracy of news information, the study of news literacy principles often includes the study of journalism production. Indeed, core professional ideologies of a journalist—objectivity, impartiality, accuracy—are among the same metrics the news literacy consumer uses to evaluate products (Clark 2013). Normative expectations of “good” journalism versus “bad” journalism, paired with concepts such as media effects and cultivation theories, create a sometimes circular and reactive news literacy process in which delineating between cynical and critical dispositions becomes a legitimate concern for educators (Mihailidis 2008). Additional nuances among media literacy and media education, journalism, and news literacy are too numerous to articulate here, but understanding the links and shared approaches is critical to placing news literacy education within—and aside—these established constructs.

While news literacy is indeed a still emerging area of study and practice, its relatively fast growth through educational institutions indicates that schools and professionals are responding to a well-established need for young adults to sort fact from fiction. As Craft, Maksl, and Ashley (2013) stated in their executive research summary on a study aimed at measuring news media literacy, “better understanding of what makes news reliable and credible is a first step toward a citizenry that is better equipped to make smarter decisions and engage in democratic society” (p. 2). Even recent changes in k-12 education standards are reflecting an increased emphasis on fact-finding and critical thinking that allows

students to recognize bias and opinion in original texts. In fact, the Common Core State Standards Initiative developed anchor standards for English and language arts that require students to draw conclusions from texts, determine central ideas, analyse how word choices shape meaning and tone, and integrate and evaluate content from diverse media formats (Corestandards.org 2015). These skills all speak directly to a need for news literacy, as they mandate the same critical, fact-finding mission students undertake when analysing journalism or even fiction texts (Craft, Maksl, and Ashley 2013).

The intent behind news literacy curriculum and programming is clear and generally well-received among those in the field. The intersection of civics, critical thinking, and emerging media present a compelling interest for educators and policymakers who seek to engage youth and create active, intentional citizens in a democracy. However, there remains significant incongruity concerning the best ways to teach news literacy, including disagreement over which learning objectives are most important and whether any news literacy curriculum must also ask students to engage in news media or other media content creation (Jolly 2014).

The 2014 News Literacy Summit was envisioned precisely to answer some of these questions, to build a cohesive framework in which the field can continue to grow, and to develop shared goals among all stakeholders—including journalists, researchers, academicians, and educators. As such, one group of summit participants—representative of these fields—was tasked specifically with answering: “How do you teach news literacy? What are best practices?” After some debate and deliberation, the group developed a set of recommendations for news literacy education:

- News literacy education must be student-centred by “teaching the concepts of news literacy from the perspectives of individual students.”
- News literacy programs should “address and engage journalistic ideals and ethics, the impact of hyper-partisan politics on how news is perceived, and the changing nature of journalism.”
- The news literacy field should embrace “the creation of a teacher learning program that allows outstanding educators to serve as exemplars at the lesson, curricular, and classroom level.” This recommendation also includes a caveat to support those teachers who are often overlooked because they do not fall into this cohort of exemplar teachers.
- The field needs the creation of an open-source clearing house of news literacy teaching resources. (Wallace 2014)

These recommendations highlight the need for greater understanding of what, exactly, is happening in news literacy classrooms or programs. Put more succinctly, the News Literacy Summit report on conclusions and recommendations frames the status of the field in two short sentences: “A precise definition of news literacy remains elusive. We have yet to agree on what to measure and how so that we know news literacy has been accomplished” (Wallace 2014, 17).

The survey findings presented here contextualize this gap in understanding and demonstrate an urgent need for more research and development on two fronts in order to better understand the news literacy field: First, we must know what is happening inside news literacy classrooms. Second, there is a need to develop consensus among those in the field on what matters most in news literacy pedagogy, including teaching methods and learning outcomes. For these purposes, consensus here does not mean unequivocal agreement among scholars, duplication of teaching efforts or even replication of curriculum in the classroom. Instead, this study presents the idea of consensus as a need for a baseline of normative learning objectives, pedagogy and assessment methods that practitioners can

share to promote news literacy and enhance educational outcomes.

## Methods

For this study, we set out to conduct a pilot survey to explore how news literacy is currently being taught across myriad institutions. Pilot surveys are routinely used in the field of social sciences to help researchers hone the survey instrument and determine the proper course of action for a major research project. The study, funded jointly by the McCormick Foundation and the Poynter Institute with logistical support offered by the American Society of News Editors and the Journalism Education Association, was designed to provide context illuminating the current state of news literacy education. Staff members at ASNE and the primary researchers developed the survey instrument with input from the McCormick Foundation and Poynter Institute. Aside from demographic questions, the survey asked 22 questions across four areas: news literacy program background and makeup; concepts, approaches and assessments used in the program; audience and population reached; and the future of the program in question. Questions asked respondents to describe their commonly used teaching techniques, identify main learning objectives, and describe challenges and successes to their program. The survey was designed to answer the central research question:

RQ1: How do you teach news literacy in your classroom?

Secondary research questions included:

RQ2: Which news literacy learning objectives are most important in your program?

RQ3: How do you assess news literacy learning outcomes?

RQ4: Which teaching methods do you most routinely use in your news literacy program?

These questions reflect a desire to better understand the “best practices” used in news literacy pedagogy. They also reflect contemporary understandings of the tools used to measure educational success. For example, respondents who might report news literacy program learning objectives, teaching methods, and assessments consistent with today’s pedagogical research would exemplify and reinforce the relevance of news literacy in the classroom. On the other hand, respondents who might report learning objectives, methods, or assessments that are inconsistent with both the standards of news literacy and educational research would suggest a need for increased attention to teacher professional development and a more unified message from the news literacy field. While the sample is purposely limited, the data presented here illustrate what some researchers and educators in the field have been seeing anecdotally.

Researchers sent a survey link, explanation, and invitation to a purposive sample of roughly 111 individuals who were pre-identified as associated with news literacy education. In addition, the survey link was sent out via listserv email to approximately 1,200 members of the Journalism Education Association and the American Society of News Editors. Because of the nature of listserv membership and email distribution lists, it is not possible to track the total population who chose not to respond to the survey or who simply never saw it in their inbox, a notable limitation of the survey. Because this survey was meant to act only as a pilot study before launching a large-scale research project, the wide distribution and comparatively low response rate—sixty responses—was a necessary but acceptable limitation of the survey design and implementation. With additional manpower and funding, a higher response rate would have yielded more generalizable results.

Survey data was collected over the period of four months, with occasional follow-up emails to remind potential participants to respond. Data was collected directly via Google

forms and uploaded into a spreadsheet. Open-ended responses were coded to collapse myriad data into meaningful categories for comparison and evaluation. For example, survey respondents were asked to list the top five news literacy concepts addressed in their educational program, and the multitude of responses were coded into categories representing a specific learning concept such as bias, credibility, or writing/editing skills.

## Results

Responses from sixty individuals were analysed and, when necessary, coded into more accessible and consolidated categories for comparison's sake. The majority of the respondents (42) taught high school students. Of the remainder, fourteen taught college-level students, two taught students younger than ninth grade, and two did not indicate the level of their students. The majority of respondents identified as teachers or teachers with additional duties, followed by professors (six full professors, three associate professors, one assistant professor). Four respondents were full-time advisers of high school media programs. Two respondents were librarians, and one respondent each represented other areas, including: retired teachers, instructors, chairs, writers in residence, senior lecturers, directors, and CTE educator. Respondents provided insight into their news literacy programs according to five assessment areas: program size and scope, content, concepts, pedagogy, and perceptions of the role of news literacy in the greater educational framework of their host institution.

### Program Size and Scope

Many survey respondents indicated institutional affiliation that evinced significant news literacy experience. The median length of time a survey respondent's institution has taught news literacy was eight years, whereas the mean was nearly fourteen years. Ten respondents did not offer specific information, and one program had yet to begin. In general, the respondents' institutional affiliation suggested a solid foundational relationship with the news literacy field. Respondents' news literacy programs varied greatly in size. Accounting for differences in program length among the varied program types—courses, workshops, or curricular units/lessons—the majority of programs (35) reached fewer than 50 students over the duration of their program. Eleven programs reached between 50 and 99 students. Eight reached between 100 and 149 students; three reached between 150 and 199 students, and three reached more than 200 students over the duration of each program (class, workshop, or discrete curricular unit/lesson).

The mean instructional hours dedicated to news during the implementation of each program was 46.2 hours, with a median of 32 hours. Many of the programs (22 of 60 respondents) featured news literacy as a component within a related course, whereas 18 programs represented semester-long standalone courses. Seven programs represented yearlong courses, and one respondent each reported programs of these durations: a month long course, a half hour per day during homeroom, and a four-year initiative.

### Content

The majority of the programs as self-described by survey respondents incorporated news literacy concepts into the curriculum and assessments; more than half included some kind of media production. When asked to select the descriptions that best characterized their

news literacy program, 42 respondents indicated their news literacy program included classroom experiences that are incorporated into the curriculum and assessed. Just over half of the programs were classroom experiences that include media production, and ten respondents described programs characterized as after school experiences that include media production. Seven respondents reported programs that were classroom experiences but that are not assessed. Outlier responses included a program described as a classroom experience that did not include media production; a program described as having no specific requirements; an afterschool program without media production; and a webinar/web-based program.

### News literacy concepts

Respondents indicated the five most important news literacy concepts explored in their program. The concepts, while varied among all respondents based on their unique course and program frame, were coded into categories that represented the following conceptual themes: Bias (39), Credibility (32), Information verification and accuracy (17), Ethics (14), Press freedoms (12), Writing and editing skills (11), Sourcing (8), What is news (7) News values and newsworthiness (6), Balancing opposing viewpoints (6), Reporting and interviewing skills (5), Media trends and history (5), Understanding how media operates (5), and Critical thinking (5). Of these responses, the five concepts respondents identified as most challenging for students to master were: bias; credibility; skills associated with writing, editing, or publishing; skills associated with reporting and interviewing; and context.

### Pedagogical approach and assessing learning

Respondents reported enlisting an array of pedagogical approaches to teach news literacy. Fifty-seven teachers reported using lectures to facilitate information, and nearly as many, 55, reported having their students work in groups. Roughly a third of the teachers reported inviting guest lecturers to address the class, and forty-four teachers reported they require students to develop a personal portfolio or project. Three reported relying on online modules or live video sessions (such as Skype) with practicing journalists.

Educators reported using a mix of summative and formative assessments to evaluate student learning. While a majority of those who responded also reported using student portfolios as assessment devices, less than half of the respondents reported using tests as a main method of assessment.

## The role of news literacy

In an open response question, teachers were asked to describe how news literacy fit the larger goals of their departments and institutions and, if they taught at the secondary level, how they aligned news literacy content with state standards. The responses fell across identifiable themes of citizenship, critical thinking, and journalism and media education. These perceptions articulate and reflect the nuanced relationship between news literacy, media literacy and media education, and journalism, as discussed earlier. The following excerpts demonstrate the range of open-ended responses.

### Citizenship

"We are a journalism and communications school. So we turn our journalists and other communications professionals. Now, with news literacy, we are also focusing on the public—citizens, consumers, residents—to educate people to know the difference between news and other forms of communication. This fits our larger goals by strengthening the

relationship among the public, democracy and journalism. We open the course only to non-journalism majors and we recruit students from across campus."

"It fits by helping to produce students who can understand and decipher news, glean nuances of bias and make informed decisions about their world, thus producing better prepared citizens for our country."

"The goal of the course is to educate non-journalism majors about how the news media work, and how to become smarter news consumers and engaged citizens."

### Critical thinking

"There are no state news literacy standards. Overall, the news literacy course I developed and teach adheres to the university's critical thinking guidelines and thus qualifies as a critical thinking course in the general education program."

"The mark of a well-educated person and well-informed citizen is the ability to critically navigate the changing information landscape, where the enormous volume of available information makes it difficult to evaluate and assess that information, where the lines between fact and fiction are increasingly blurred, and where the distribution and flow of information is not always equitable. At the same time, these changing technologies have given ordinary citizens greater control over information. Developing critical thinking skills when dealing with 21st century literacies, along with an historic understanding of traditional literacies that have shaped news and information, is a major goal for [our institution]."

### Journalism and media education

"We offer a course that fulfills a general social science core requirement for the university. This fits our goal of providing an introduction to media education to as many students as possible on our campus. We also use news literacy principles in our beginning reporting/writing course to help students identify and appreciate the components of solid reporting."

"This is a major component of [our] journalism program."

"It is part of media literacy education, which has a history at our institution."

"Students are being asked increasingly to respond to and understand nonfiction writing (Common Core). While these standards are often seen as add-ons in the traditional English classroom, they are a fundamental part of the Journalism program."

### Discussion: Finding consensus in news literacy education

To begin, the news literacy concepts teachers described as most important to their program are simultaneously reflective of and at odds with contemporary news literacy education. Most news literacy conceptual frameworks prioritize helping students learn to identify bias in sources, to pinpoint credible information, and to sort fact from fiction in news media reports. The majority of teacher respondents indeed reported these goals as primary, upholding the traditional news literacy perspective that news literacy skills should focus on consumer- or demand-oriented issues. However, the noticeable inclusion of journalist- or supply-oriented issues, such as ethics, press freedoms, writing, editing, and news values reflects the current schism in the news literacy field. As an illustration of this dilemma, many news literacy practitioners and even some from outside the field take issue with confounding journalism education and news literacy. Media literacy and civic engagement scholar Renee Hobbs explained this view in an article for Nieman Reports:

"Some educators and news practitioners think of teaching news literacy as a journalism class for non-journalists. Essentially, they dump the content of an introductory course in journalism... News literacy needs to be thought about as teaching a different set of skills—more focused on those who consume news and not those who produce it, though they are interconnected in many ways." (Hobbs 2011)

The inclusion of journalistic and production-focused learning goals also reflects the greater lack of consensus among news literacy practitioners about what, exactly, is news literacy. Because much of the scholarly work in the field (including this one) are funded by a handful of organizations, the field is somewhat pigeon-holed into the conceptual and learning outcomes most interesting to those specific grant-making institutions. Even the McCormick and Knight Foundations, two of the largest journalism-related funders, have made motions to expand the relatively nascent idea of news literacy so that it begins to align and intersect more with other fields, including information, digital, and media literacy.

Without consensus on what is news literacy and its conceptual framework, including holistic and unified learning objectives, educators are likely to continue to mix methods, so to speak, by teaching about journalism in those settings in which it is most natural—journalism or other media courses. Instead of rejecting this combination, we encourage funders and researchers to think beyond an institutional definition of news literacy and to instead focus on specific, student-centred learning objectives that embody the heart of a news literate disposition. Based on this study, this researcher would argue for learning objectives that target news media systems knowledge at various levels, instead of learning objectives that tend to articulate vague skill sets which often require educators to parse meanings in ways that over-generalize the news literacy approach. For example, a learning objective that states, "students will learn to identify bias in news media content" emphasizes the consumer-producer divide and provides little direction to the educator facilitating learning. Instead, a learning objective that emphasizes the analytical skill of detecting bias via specific news media structures (both institutional and within content or presentation) provides a more specific focus for both the student and teacher. This kind of learning objective might read: "students will identify steps in the news-making process that create opportunities for factual or context manipulation." In doing so, the focus can and should shift from debates over nomenclature to more significant conversations about empowering students to both understand and use all kinds of media in the most engaging, democratic ways.

### Using best practices in the news literacy classroom

Remarkably, the number of respondents who reported using primarily lecture-style teaching to engage students runs contrary to what we know about pedagogy and learning styles for students. In a field that focuses specifically on the unique capacity of individual students to guide and engage with their media use, the reliance on lectures represents a disconnect and calls for better teacher preparation for news literacy educators. How can we make strides in news literacy education if we do not teach in the most engaging, effective ways?

Although a great deal of research has been conducted on the efficacy of diverse pedagogical techniques and styles, many of the studies are narrowly tailored to fit a specific subject. However, a handful of widely accepted, generalizable best practices for the modern classroom have emerged. These techniques and strategies can be easily applied to news literacy instruction, and further research should be conducted to see how they might best convey news literacy frameworks. For example, Pashler et al. (2007) describe seven use-

ful education-enhancing techniques to have in one's pedagogical toolbox: "Spacing learning over time," "Interleaving worked example solutions and problem solving exercises," "Combining graphics with verbal descriptions," "Connecting and integrating abstract and concrete representations of concepts," "Using quizzes to promote learning," "Helping students allocate study time efficiently" and "Helping students build explanations by asking and answering deep questions." The authors argue that to space out the learning process, teachers should revisit fundamental content during class, structure and assign homework for periodic practice of essential material, and administer cumulative exams and finals (Pashler et al. 2007). That many respondents indicated using lectures as a primary pedagogical approach—as opposed to the multi-method framework described here—suggests a need for more foundational guidance in news literacy pedagogy. In short, we know very little about not only how news literacy is being taught but also whether those practices align with contemporary findings on successful student engagement.

However, that a majority of respondents reported using group work and discussion throughout their news literacy programs represents some consensus in the field regarding best practices for student learning. At the very least, using these methods reflects an educational desire to use methods that engage students and redirect the learning experience back onto the individual. While researchers have found full class, small group, and online discussions to be equally effective (or ineffective) at achieving conceptual understanding, small group discussions have been found to be superior at raising new questions and stimulating student interest (Hamann et al. 2012).

Scholars have already documented just how messy and seemingly non-linear media-related literacies can be to teach in certain settings. Moor, Donnelly, and Hobbs (2014) describe some of the challenges of integrating media and information literacy at Mark Day School through a yearlong professional development program: "In the process, we discovered the faculty's existing understandings of media and information literacy and pushed them further within their own contexts. This process of discovery and flexibility required several key shifts from standard top-down professional development models and through a process Hobbs and Moore have called messy engagement... Rather than focusing on a product to be completed after a predetermined and linear course of learning and synthesis, messy engagement is exploratory and iterative." If teaching teachers about news and media literacy requires such exploratory pedagogy, one can only imagine that teaching students might necessitate similar or perhaps even more flexible and experimental methods.

## Assessing learning

Deploying efficacious pedagogical strategies isn't enough; educators must effectively assess student learning, and assessing news literacy can be a challenge. However, there are lessons to be learned from existing research on news, media, and information literacy education. These existing models for understanding news and media literacy, as well as the art of learning, should be considered when assessing learning in any news literacy program.

That the majority of respondents reported using a mix of both summative and formative assessments, including portfolios, suggests educators understand the very real need to engage in news literacy education in ways that are student-centred and self-reflective. Still, whether these tools are actually the most effective means of assessing learning remains a larger question of the field, one researchers are attempting to answer from a multitude of perspectives without yet landing on a clear answer. For example, Craft, Maksl, and Ashley (2013) have successfully developed a scale for assessing news media literacy that uses a media knowledge index to anticipate news literacy outcomes. Such a scale presents a valu-

able tool for assessing concrete baselines and outcomes because the authors found that "a separate media system knowledge index also was a significant predictor of knowledge about topics in the news, which suggests the need for a broader framework." Additionally, a team at California State University sought to assess the level of information literacy in its students (Dunn 2002). To do so, they took a multipronged approach to assessing information literacy skills by administering questionnaires, conducting multi-method qualitative studies observing how students search for info, and other methods including longitudinal studies and faculty surveys. They found that information literacy is an imprecise concept that challenges those seeking to measure it. The more nebulous literacies (media, news, information) present specific challenges to educators and researchers, but consistent and intentional assessment of student learning is integral to understanding the impact of the field.

To better assess student learning, and therefore to better understand the impact of news literacy education writ large, researchers must be able to analyse how learning objectives, pedagogical methods, and assessments are used in concert to effect specific media attitudes, dispositions, and knowledge systems. This kind of research will only be possible when both educators and scholars agree on the nature of news literacy education, its conceptual foundations, and specific learning outcomes. Simply put, to test the field, scholars must first know the field, and the myriad and developing approaches to assessing news literacy education suggest that there are still enough discrepancies to make meaningful research difficult.

## The role of news literacy in 21st century education

The wide variety of responses to the question "How does news literacy fit the larger goals of your department/institution?" demonstrate perhaps the quintessential limitation and benefit of news literacy: In today's educational field, it is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. On one hand, respondents saw a need to cultivate news literacy skills in not only their journalism students but also in students across curricular areas. On the other hand, much of the current news literacy instruction happening in classrooms is tied directly to existing journalism programs. This begs the question, where does news literacy fit? And perhaps more importantly, does it even matter? For those seeking to understand and grow the field, the answer to the first question matters greatly because it enables scholars, educators, practitioners, and policymakers to be more targeted in their actions. With limited resources in education today, a one-size-fits-all approach to news literacy education may do little to impact students and is likely an insufficient tool for 21st century education, which demands healthy consumer scepticism and critical knowledge of media systems.

## Conclusion

### Beyond consensus

In 2011, scholar Faith Rogow suggested a path forward for the next decade of media literacy education, much of which is applicable to the field of news literacy as well. Rogow predicates her recommendations on two important realizations: First, those in the field must continue to talk about media literacy in terms of educational practices and what is happening in the classroom. Second, the language used to describe the field matters. Rogow argues that "[m]edia literacy advocates would have a better chance of appealing to educators if we were less insular in the way we describe our work" (16). Rogow's assertions,

though articulated years prior and in regards to the “big tent” of media literacy, speak to the findings of this pilot study: To continue to frame news literacy education in a compelling way for educators and policy makers, we must first understand exactly how it is operating in the classroom and to what effect. This level of awareness is not meant to derive consensus in the form of regimenting the field. Rather, awareness and shared positioning of educational outcomes and methodology will provide a better foundation on which news literacy educators may stand. In doing so, we must, as Rogow contends, reimagine the dialogue we use to articulate our goals and the place of news literacy in education today. More specifically, this new dialogue must include clear direction from the field on best practices in news literacy education, including a focus on promoting the predominant learning objectives, concepts, pedagogy, and assessments.

Furthermore, the findings presented here, while representing a notably limited sample of news literacy education programs, supports a shift in how we, as scholars, continue to conceptualize our field. Instead of putting down roots, of staking claim or carving out a particular niche for news literacy, we must look beyond silos of journalism and media education to integrate news literacy values across all curricular areas, subjects, and grade levels. In short, we must learn to reframe our approach to news literacy education, not by asking “How can we develop news literacy programming and curriculum here?” but instead by asking “How do existing curriculum and content areas lend themselves to teaching the most important news literacy skills? And how do we teach those skills according to proven and efficient methods? ” When any teachable moment—from journalism to science to math—becomes a teachable news literacy moment, we may finally start to see gains in our field like never before. In those moments, consensus in news literacy education creates a stable, tested, and reliable platform from which we can then take risks with dynamic and creative approaches in our classrooms.

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