

# Exploring News Literacy: Preparing future journalists – and citizens – for engagement in global digital culture

## Special Issue of *Journalism Education*: Editor's Introduction

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In September of 2014 in Chicago, the Poynter Institute in partnership with the McCormick Foundation, brought together more than 100 participants for a News Literacy Summit, where researchers, educators, practitioners and funders gathered to set the course of practice, pedagogy and research in news literacy.

The summit highlighted some cutting edge work being done in classrooms, in communities and in universities. Central to these conversations were best practices for teaching future journalists—and citizens—about critical engagement in the news landscape in contemporary digital culture. Scholars at this gathering presented findings from research exploring where news literacy exists, how it's taught and evaluated, and how new technologies are impacting the ecosystem for news.

The summit was rich in exploration, dialog and in critical reflection. Many voices had the chance to engage in direct dialog about best approaches to teaching, learning, and investigating news and information in today's digital landscape. Of course, along with the gathering of diverse voices came a seemingly needed but longstanding conversation about the continued contesting of terminologies, definitions, approaches, stakeholders and outcomes. Differences emerged at the mere notion of what we should call "news literacy," who should be responsible for defining what belongs and does not belong in that umbrella, how traditional news and journalistic structures approach news literacy, and how far back work in this area has been happening.<sup>1</sup> It is not the premise of this introduction, or special issue, to tackle these debates directly, but to acknowledge that such tensions can be inherently beneficial to an emerging space of study and practice. Specifically in the ability to frame dialog around the new knowledge sets that explore how best to equip a populace with the skills and dispositions to be more involved in the news making and reception processes on local, national and global scales. The two figures below (see Figure One & Figure Two) present unique if not distinct portraits of how news literacy can effectively leverage similar discourses in the literacies for growth and expansion of impact. In *News Literacy: Global Approaches to the Newsroom and the Classroom* (2012), I set about to broaden the discussion of how we understand news and global society in an emerging digital media landscape. In that book, composed largely when "connective" technologies were just emerging,

<sup>1</sup> The debate is framed generally between those that see the beginning of the news literacy movement 10 years ago with the first large grant and creation of a *Center for News Literacy* at Stony Brook University in New York, while others see the trajectory of news literacy for decades and beyond, with research into the myriad of ways that news has been taught in and outside of the classroom, but under various titles, such as journalism education, media literacy, screen education, and so on.

## Figure One: Concentric circles of News Literacy. *Graphic by Peter Levine*

Source: <https://engagementamelab.wordpress.com/2014/09/28/seeking-coherence-reflections-on-the-national-news-literacy-summit/>

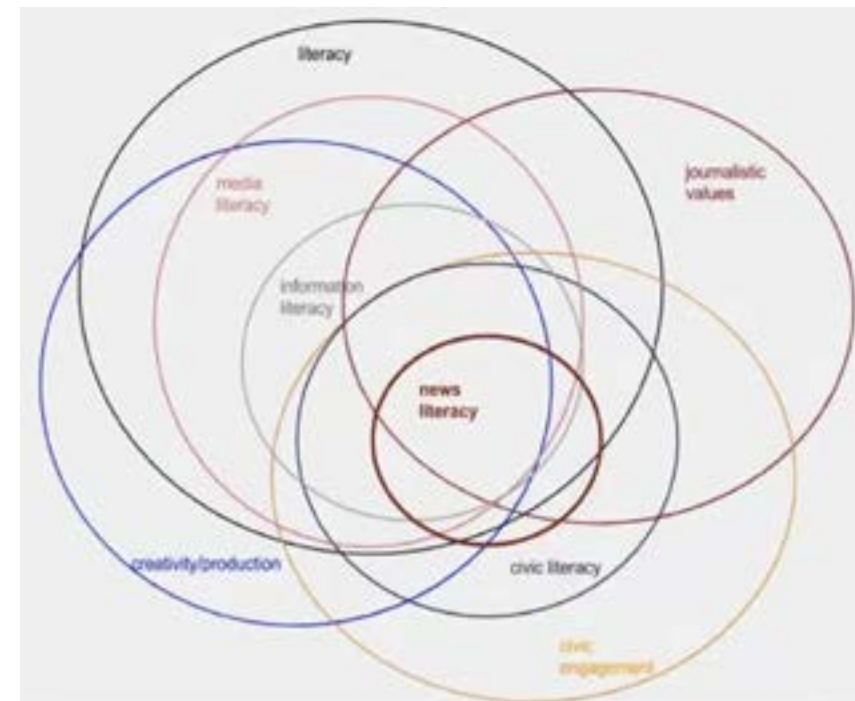
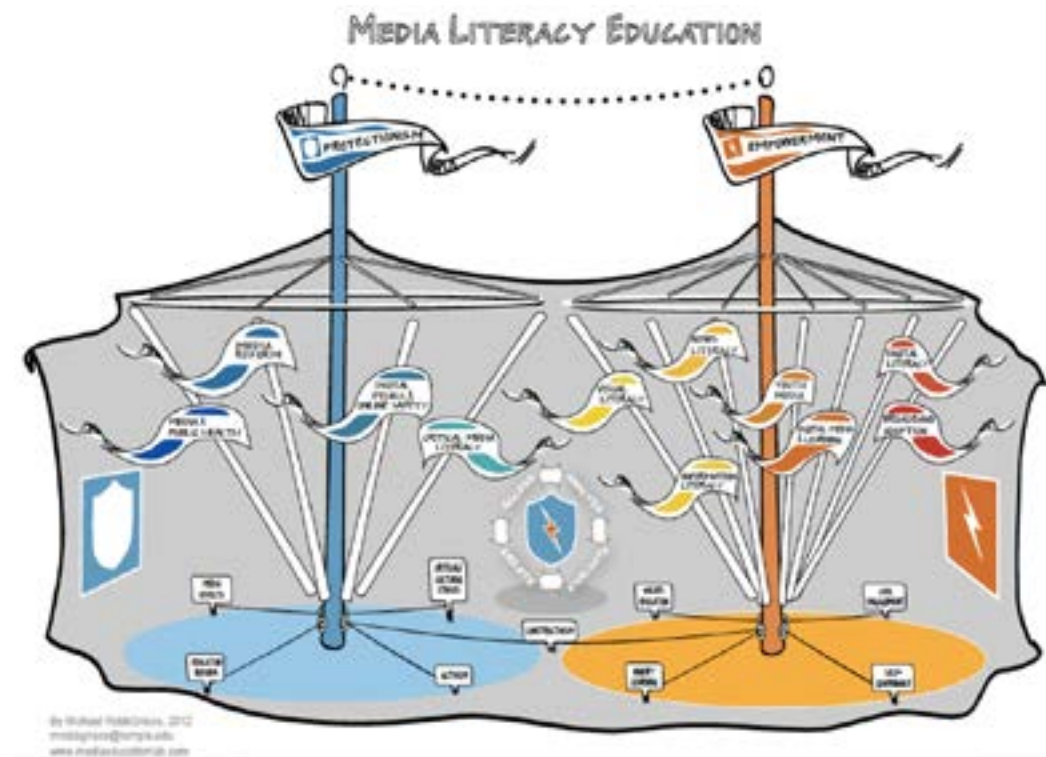


Figure Two: Media Literacy's Big Tent by Michael Robb Grieco & Renee Hobbs. Source: <https://mediaedlab.com/2013/07/28/media-literacy-s-big-tent-at-namle-2013/>



I outlined my thinking of news literacy as:

“...is seen as a subset of media literacy: the core concepts developed in the media literacy movement as applied directly to news. News, in this sense, adopts a traditional formulation of civic information about current affairs, and community issues relevant to awareness, engagement, and participation in local democratic processes. The result is a focus on how comprehension, evaluation, analysis, and production of news can help enable better teaching and learning strategies for more empowered, tolerant, aware, and active participants in 21<sup>st</sup> century civic democracy.” (Mihailidis, 2011, 4).

This special issue of *Journalism Education* builds on the key frameworks explored at the 2014 news literacy summit, and the work done before that, with the specific goal of expanding and diversifying meaningful conversations about news literacy teaching, research and practice. This includes news literacy’s relationship to journalists and the journalism industry, but also to the myriad of ways that technologies, practices, and designs are redefining news and information in global digital culture. At the same time, the collection of essays and articles here are meant to highlight the collective value of the diverse and rigorous work being done in the space of news literacy today. I’ve listed a few guiding principles for this special issue:

*Participation Matters* – Theories of participation in contemporary digital culture (Jenkins, 2006), and specifically participation in the news process (Gil de Zúñiga et al, 2012) are no longer questioned as central to discussions about news and information habits today. The proliferation of connective technologies and reliance on social networks for news consumption has led to a new reality for thinking about critical evaluation, assessment and inquiry around news. In the context of participation being a default behavior in digital culture, research featured in this issue explores the role of civic participation in news as much as the critical reception of news.

*Appropriation Matters* – Beyond the act of participation in general, news literacy explorations in this issue think about the ways in which citizens appropriate news and information. Appropriation, in this sense, alludes to a personalization, a remixing or retelling of news and information, and the sense of agency that accompanies these acts. Lawrence Lessig (2010) has detailed the role of remix in promoting the *democratization of innovation, creativity and creation*, and *freedom* to have access and share culture. This necessarily incorporates the role of the news curation by citizens in their personal online spaces (Mihailidis 2016), and how that monitoring, sifting, selecting and re-appropriating impacts news flow in general.

*Storytelling Matters* – Perhaps above all, embedded in the articles of this issue is the core function of storytelling. Many of the research pieces here acknowledge the changing nature of journalistic inquiry, information gathering and dissemination. As news becomes embedded in the daily information and communication habits of citizens, storytellers, or journalists, as authors argue, need to become multimodal storytellers, engaging their work at multiple touch points in the digital ecosystem. The continued growth of organizations like Buzzfeed, Vice, and Huffington Post for news content, and Instagram, Facebook, Whatsapp, and Reddit for news dialog and appropriation, affirms the need for consideration of how storytelling mechanisms reinforce news literacy education and practice.

This journal issue is separated into four sections. *Invited essays*, written from the academic, organizational, development, and professional perspectives, provide unique perspectives into key issues in news literacy through distinct questions that are guiding each author’s work in this space. In the *critical perspectives* section, the essays provide “big picture” inquiries into framing debates in news literacy, offering deep explorations into the historical, contextual and cultural issues that are defining key academic debates in news literacy today. From exploring evaluation studies into youth production of news and

learning about news in secondary and higher education, to surveys and pilot study that offer field assessments of curricular, philanthropic and capacity-building, the *research section* provides rich inquiries into what is happening in the classroom and beyond. Lastly, the *looking forward* section offers provocative insights into what opportunities and constraints exist for news literacy research, teaching and practice going forward. They leave us with some critical questions to consider, about the direction of news literacy research, pedagogy and practice.

News literacy is a growing space. Just in the last decade we’ve witnessed a burgeoning movement responding to a rapidly changing landscape for news and its role in contemporary civic life. I believe the growth of news literacy mirrors the growing uncertainty about the ways in which news will be disseminated, received, and supported, both structurally and process-wise. And in my opinion that uncertainty, while alarming in the short term, offers opportunities for a reinvention of the future. This special issue is an attempt to help support the new technologies, practices and designs that will facilitate a future of vibrant, inclusive and critical news literacy practice and research.

## References

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