



# Literacy

Global Perspectives  
for the Newsroom  
and the Classroom

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# Introduction - News Literacy in the Dawn of a Hypermedia Age

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MEDIA LITERACY, a concept born almost a century ago, has in recent decades come to the forefront of educational arenas dedicated to exploring the role of information in our lives. While many different definitions of media literacy exist for different disciplines, contexts, and uses, a common set of core assumptions include “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993). Since, definitions of media literacy have grown to include production, and incorporated digital technologies and semiotics into their purview (Gaines, 2010; Of-comm, 2005; Potter, 2004; Silverblatt, 2001). While scholars have used the term media literacy to explore a wide range of different media functions—advertising, violence, pre-K learning, stereotypes, gender, and so on—few in the field have developed news as the focus of their scholarship.

News literacy, conceived under the umbrella of media literacy education, offers a new path towards addressing the possibilities and pitfalls that are created by the intersections where journalism, citizenship, and technology meet. It is an educational movement distinguished by the potential to re-energize a public increasingly distrustful of news media (Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 2009) and renew a demand for diverse, independent, credible, and deep civic information. News literacy acknowledges that in changing news environments, students of all ages need to learn about news not only through established practices and venues, but also as content pertains to new modes of voice, expression and perspective on a global scale.

Recent statistics show that around the world people are spending more time with mobile media technologies and social media platforms, and for more democratic purposes than ever before. Upwards of 700 billion minutes per month are now spent on Facebook worldwide, 88 billion Google searches per month are conducted globally, and twitter users are growing by the mil-

lions. As a result, more news outlets are exploring how these inherently collaborative and user-driven spaces are influencing their ability to report and disseminate news, and how best to serve a more active, expressive, and mobile public that is increasingly sharing information in integrated spaces of hyper-media activity.

*News Literacy: Global Perspectives for the Newsroom and the Classroom* is conceived to help prepare future media practitioners (and citizens) to embrace new media environments that can simultaneously empower both their craft and the civic voice. This means teaching not only about the various ways new technologies are used and to what end, but also how these tools can enable better reporting, more dialog with readers, and a more nuanced understanding of how information is processed through new media platforms. Such an approach addresses the increasing disconnect between new technologies, journalism, and civic participation that is increasingly apparent in communities across the globe.

This book gathers leading scholars, educators, and media makers from around the world to explore various new approaches to thinking about, examining, and evaluating news literacy and civic engagement around the following fundamental questions:

- What are the most pressing issues in news, media, and culture in a converged, digital and global media age?
- What are the best educational practices to help future media practitioners and citizens understand, engage and express information across borders, across cultures, and across divides?

The ideas, theories, and pedagogies that explore these questions employ somewhat diverse definitions of media literacy, news literacy, and related terms to help frame the context of their arguments. Historically, media literacy has been seen as a fluid term, applicable across disciplines, specialties, and pedagogies. It has incorporated health, advertising, politics, news, technology, gender, ethnicity, religion, and so on, under its umbrella of critical thinking and analysis of media and information. For this text, the idea of news literacy 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.

In certain chapters, for example, contributors will take time to develop their understanding of media literacy, news literacy, globalization, and of contemporary journalism, to help orient the reader to the ideas that they discuss, while in others the terms media literacy and news literacy are used interchangeably. Instead of attempting to draw fine lines that seem more limiting than elaborative, this book allows for definitional rigor and fluency to emerge in the pages of the book, and not be defined as something that limits the diverse and wide ranging ideas that follow. Resultantly, the diversity of definitions, ideas, and dispositions in this book will be utilized with a combination of theory, practice and pedagogy to help shape learning outcomes for understanding news, democracy, and civic voices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **The Changing News Landscape**

Eleven years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the world has witnessed a sea change in the news industry. Traditional models for newspapers have eroded to their core, foreign bureaus have disappeared at alarmingly fast speeds, and journalists find their resources diminished and their ability to investigate a story at odds with the immediacy of the Internet. Television news, meanwhile, has become fertile ground for polarizing banter, editorial glamour, and self-serving sound bites. On the Internet, news outlets have found few sustainable models for news production and dissemination as they struggle to compete with a vast world of civic entrepreneurs. As communication industries across the board continue to deregulate, the news world has become a survival of the fittest, where ratings, markets, and profits trump content, depth, and diversity.

At the same time, new media technologies have provided an arena for information flow that is more collaborative, immediate, and more open than ever before. The result has been an information revolution in which mobile tools, social media platforms, and collaborative online spaces have changed basic habits of information production, dissemination, and reception. These collaborative networks have fundamentally shifted how individuals understand participation, expression, sharing, and community. Convergence of all media into one platform has also created integrated

landscapes for citizens around the world (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006, 2009; Shirky, 2010). The result is an increasingly monitorial citizenry (Schudson, 1999)—surveying the vast expanse of information in short headlines and through links aggregated by content providers and curated by friends, only stopping to read more when motivated to do so. No longer are individuals so much seeking information than wading through the vast amounts of content—in print, video, and audio—that have become an integral part of their everyday media landscape. Twitter and Facebook are fast replacing newspapers and the television as primary means for information gathering and sharing. Physical community forums have been replaced by online spaces for dialog, discourse and collaboration.

This new media landscape has not changed the civic and democratic structures upon which our communities rest, but it has changed the way in which we participate. Writes media scholar Clay Shirky in *Cognitive Surplus* (2010): “The logic of digital media, on the other hand, allows the people formerly known as the audience to create value for one another every day” (52). The ability for citizens to share information and cultivate an active voice is now at the forefront of communities large and small. The result has been a more vibrant and diverse information landscape, but one with equal challenges for the continued survival and relevance of journalists in 21<sup>st</sup> century democracies.

Recent examples of technologies vast influence on news reinforce a new reality for journalism industries that are struggling to sustain their existence and integrity in a complex, fast-paced and borderless information environment. In 2008, US Senator Barack Obama leveraged social media to disseminate information, converse with journalists, and provide news updates for his constituents and supporters. This media strategy far surpassed any traditional press coverage in terms of reach and volume, cultivating a celebrity status rarely seen before in the political spectrum (Harfoush, 2009). In 2009, just after the elections in Tehran, Iran, concluded, protesters took to the streets to voice their displeasure with a dispute outcome. When traditional media were forbidden from telling these stories, young students took to Twitter to tell the world of the unrest and happenings in the aftermath of the riots (Gladwell, 2010). While the salience of these activities have been debated, they no doubt signal a clear expansion in the scope and scale of information sharing and civic voice in the face of oppression. In 2010, the non-profit news organization

Wikileaks, led by Australian dissident Julian Assange, published hundreds of thousands of documents, many of which were classified, detailing the United State's diplomatic strategies and foreign relations with allies and enemies around the world. These documents circulated globally in less than a day, viewed by millions. The Wikileaks phenomenon has forced public agencies and the public to reconsider the boundaries of secrecy, privacy and expression in a digital age.

More recently in China, the case of Noble Prize recipient and dissident Liu Xiaobo received little attention in Chinese mainstream media outlets, but social media enabled much domestic dialog, protest, and resistance against what is normally a very controlled and suppressed civic media spectrum. After calls for his immediate release from prison, foreign and Chinese social media sites began extensive dialog and protest in support of Xiaobo. While the Chinese Government resisted calls for his release, they could not silence the anonymous protesters, or the global reach of their voices.

Now in 2011, the world is witnessing what many are calling the largest civic uprising largely enabled by social media platforms and mobile technologies. The Arab Spring, instigated on December 19, 2010, when jobless graduate Mohamed Bouazizi, whose fruit cart was seized by authorities, set himself on fire in the Tunisia city Sidi Bouzid. This act touched off protests in the relatively peaceful Tunisia that eventually spread throughout the entire region. Citizens, who rarely had the ability or capacity to organize, now had a slew of tools to confront Autocratic regimes, outside the bounds of traditional mass media. These tools—Facebook, Twitter, Ushahidi, and the like—were mostly conceived as leisurely social outlets for connecting with friends and sharing personal information. The Arab Spring, and those events before and after, have signified a distinct tipping point for the use of such tools as participatory instigators and viable news outlets for journalists and audiences.

All of these examples are predicated on more citizens turning towards online spaces for news before traditional forms of content delivery (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2010). And not only are they turning to these spaces to receive news, they are turning to these spaces to share, express, collaborate, and *act* around news, creating a new dynamic for the relationship between news, technology, and democracy: the implications of which are vast for global citizenries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.