



THE PRESS AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

HOW JOURNALISM HAS
FAILED THE PUBLIC
AND HOW IT CAN
REVIVE DEMOCRACY

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Chapter 11

News Literacy Is Essential to Democracy

Patrick R. Johnson

New York Times publisher A. G. Sulzberger (2023) penned a blistering defense of independent journalism in *Columbia Journalism Review*, arguing its necessity to sustain American journalistic values. Sulzberger's defense rested on the commonly held assumption of journalism's connection to democracy and the need for a well-informed society. He goes on in the essay to argue:

Independent journalism has a natural and welcome affinity for the classic tenets of liberal democracy—the rule of law, honest governance, equal rights, free expression—as well as universal principles of human dignity, freedom, and opportunity. That's why journalists tend naturally toward stories that shine a light on injustice, especially as they pertain to the most vulnerable among us. But independent journalism also rests on the bedrock conviction that those seeking to change the world must first understand it—that a fully informed society not only makes better decisions but operates with more trust, more empathy, and greater care.

Sulzberger believes that "the healthiest democracies" have a strong press and that a strong press "binds society by providing the connective tissue of a common fact base that can be discussed and debated and by exposing people to a wider range of experiences and perspectives." Sulzberger is not alone in his assumption. Scholars and journalists throughout history also linked journalism to democracy, with a shared belief that the former is essential to the latter.

"Is news essential to democracy?" While, historically, the answer is yes, I argue in this chapter that it is not essential *alone*. News literacy—the "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” (Tully et al. 2022)—is the fundamental need to democracy. News literacy aids a participatory democracy, where audiences are provided an avenue to understand the role of media in civic engagement and influencing policy. Tully and Vraga (2018a, 2018b) argue that news literacy efforts can promote democratic outcomes like willingness to converse with people who disagree with you.

For news to be seen as essential to democracy, we must recognize the importance of being news literate and discuss how journalists are also literate in the news they produce—news literate journalism (Johnson 2024). News literacy represents a chance for journalists to reflect on their practice and for audiences to be skilled and knowledgeable when knowing what news to consume and what misinformation and disinformation to avoid. This chapter reflects upon news literacy’s importance in addressing news avoidance and mis- and disinformation, and therefore, the ability to champion a better democracy—a more equitable and inclusive one at that. News literacy is the solutions-focused approach to helping journalists address their audiences’ need to know how to read the news and combat misinformation and disinformation. I will explain this in two ways.

First, I share how news literacy solves democratic backsliding with an analysis focusing on Trusting News’ Trust Kits. Trusting News, a nonprofit organization, seeks to restore trust in the news through the training of journalists. They produce materials that challenge the news industry to be more critical of themselves and their practice. This self-awareness is a form of news literacy where journalists become news literate of themselves and the world around them. Trusting News aims to earn consumer trust through “Trust Kits,” step-by-step guides designed for journalists. These kits break down trust-building strategies into actionable steps, encouraging transparency and fostering strong community relations. Trusting News targets internal and external audiences, sharing resources through newsletters, social media, and a Slack network of more than 600 participating newsrooms. The kits also offer journalists a pedagogical roadmap, which I call “news literate journalism.” This approach enables journalists to be self-aware and express news literacy to their audiences, thus rebuilding trust and credibility. For example, Trust Kits include specific objectives that guide journalists on how to better engage with their audience through comments, enhancing organizational resilience and compassion in newsrooms.

I will then explain how news literacy is a solutions-focused approach emphasizing audiences. I analyze educational materials from the News Literacy Project. The materials provide a roadmap to enhancing audiences’ news literacy and improving their civic engagement. The News Literacy Project’s Checkology program targets the public, especially educators and students, to increase news literacy. Checkology offers a variety of lessons

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democracy, we must recognize the cuss how journalists are also literate : journalism (Johnson 2024). News sts to reflect on their practice and geable when knowing what news to disinformation to avoid. This chap- ance in addressing news avoidance ore, the ability to champion a better ive one at that. News literacy is the journalists address their audiences' combat misinformation and disinfor-

es democratic backsliding with an ist Kits. Trusting News, a nonprofit e news through the training of jour- lenge the news industry to be more . This self-awareness is a form of news literate of themselves and the ns to earn consumer trust through ed for journalists. These kits break able steps, encouraging transparency s. Trusting News targets internal and ough newsletters, social media, and a ating newsrooms. The kits also offer h I call "news literate journalism." elf-aware and express news literacy and credibility. For example, Trust e journalists on how to better engage enhancing organizational resilience

cy is a solutions-focused approach cational materials from the News a roadmap to enhancing audiences' c engagement. The News Literacy he public, especially educators and ckology offers a variety of lessons

covering news, algorithms, First Amendment, journalism standards, and combating misinformation. It involves users in interactive activities that mimic journalistic work, thus breaking down barriers between journalists and the public. Lessons like "InfoZones," "Misinformation," and "Conspiratorial Thinking" directly address issues related to democratic backsliding by empowering users to discern and critique misinformation, which is corrosive to democratic institutions. Both organizations address democratic backsliding in a complementary fashion: Trusting News focuses on elevating journalistic standards and community relations to rebuild public trust, while the News Literacy Project educates the public to be discerning consumers of news. These initiatives contribute to the resilience of democratic institutions by fostering a well-informed and engaged citizenry.

A SOLUTION TO DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING: NEWS LITERACY, A NECESSITY TO DEMOCRACY

In this chapter, I utilize the Tully et al. (2022) definition of news literacy: "*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" (1593). Tully and colleagues break this definition into five domains, the five Cs. The domains are outlined in table 11.1.

Each "C" represents a key component of news literacy. The five-domain definition by Tully et al. (2022) is a news consumption approach to studying news literacy. News consumption, which is how audiences engage with news through reading, listening, or watching, is vital for staying informed and participating in a democracy. The relationship between news consumption and news literacy is reciprocal; while greater news literacy may lead to increased news consumption, consuming news can also enhance reflection and news

Table 11.1. News literacy domains (conceptual definitions from Tully et al. 2022)

Term	Definition
Context	The social, legal and economic environment in which news is produced
Creation	The process in which journalists and other actors engage in conceiv- ing, reporting, and creating news
Content	The qualitative characteristics of a news story or piece of news that distinguishes it from other types of media content
Circulation	The process through which news is distributed and spread among potential audiences
Consumption	The personal factors that contribute to news exposure, attention and evaluation and recognition of the effects of such consumption

literacy through experiential learning and learning-by-doing (Tamboer et al. 2023). The approach to studying news literacy emphasizes how audiences take in news and identifies an ecosystem in which consumption occurs (Tully et al. 2022). Thinking of news literacy from the perspective of news consumption, we can more appropriately consider how it impacts journalists and audiences. For example, creation can be seen from a journalist explaining the process of creating a story or an audience member sharing how they understood how the journalist produced the story. Consumption, for example, helps to understand how news affects audiences and how audiences understand that impact. Framing news literacy from a consumption perspective also allows one to think more critically about its relevance to democracy. It positions news literacy as part of a news ecosystem that includes journalists, audiences, and the democracies they participate in and serve.

Scholars and educators agree that news literacy can contribute to developing an informed citizenry and fostering democratic participation, although these relationships are not straightforward (Ashley, Maks, and Craft 2017; Mihailidis and Thevenin 2013). Considering the nuanced relationship between news literacy, informed citizens, and democracy, educational efforts must be similarly complex and adaptable to changing social, political, and media environments (Mihailidis and Viotty 2017). News literacy prioritizes democracy in its definitions, educational practices, and desired outcomes. It focuses on traditional understandings of democratic and civic participation, like signing a petition or voting (Ashley, Maks, and Craft 2017; Tully and Vraga 2018a, 2018b). For example, Ashley and his colleagues (2017) found that higher levels of news literacy are linked to more current events knowledge and stronger feelings of political efficacy toward democratic participation. Although this work helps articulate the connection between news literacy and democracy, it does not challenge how we define or understand democracy. It centers on individual-level outcomes and does little to address the lack of equity and justice that should be central to notions of democracy.

While much news and media literacy scholarship focuses on individual development, some scholars promote change at the community and policy levels (Mihailidis et al. 2021). Ramasubramanian and Darzabi (2020) pointed out that media literacy and democracy should be approached from a place of community and be intentionally anti-oppression: "Simply encouraging the creation of online communities and participation is not sufficient. Collaboration and community-building should be tied clearly with a critical emancipatory approach incorporating social justice and anti-oppression pedagogy" (279). The scholars believe we cannot see news or media literacy as an individual practice and process only. For news literacy to be a democratizing behavior, we must study the systems and communities impacted by having more news- and media-literate people. Ramasubramanian and Darzabi's

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and learning-by-doing (Tamboer et al. 2017). News literacy emphasizes how audiences learn in which consumption occurs (Tully 2017). From the perspective of news consumers, consider how it impacts journalists and how they are seen from a journalist explaining the process of member sharing how they understand news literacy. Consumption, for example, helps explain how audiences understand that news literacy from a consumption perspective also allows for relevance to democracy. It positions news literacy as a practice that includes journalists, audiences, and serves the public. News literacy can contribute to developing democratic participation, although news literacy is not a magic wand (Ashley, Maksl, and Craft 2017; considering the nuanced relationship between news literacy, and democracy, educational efforts are possible to changing social, political, and economic outcomes (Tully 2017). News literacy prioritizes news literacy practices, and desired outcomes. News literacy is a part of democratic and civic participation (Ashley, Maksl, and Craft 2017; Tully 2017). News literacy, Ashley and his colleagues (2017) argue, are linked to more current events and news literacy. Political efficacy toward democratic participation is the connection between news literacy and how we define or understand democratic outcomes and does little to address news literacy. News literacy should be central to notions of democracy. News literacy scholarship focuses on individual change at the community and policy level (Ramasubramanian and Darzabi (2020) pointed out that news literacy should be approached from a place of anti-oppression: "Simply encourages participation is not sufficient. News literacy should be tied clearly with a critical social justice and anti-oppression pedagogy. News literacy cannot see news or media literacy as an end in itself or news literacy to be a democratizing force in communities impacted by having news literacy. Ramasubramanian and Darzabi's

beliefs reflect that news literacy is part of a media ecosystem, the same ecosystem Tully and colleagues' (2022) definition of news literacy operates within. Relatedly, Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) argued that media literacy must be "intentionally civic" and push research and practice to move beyond traditional understandings of democratic participation. Nevertheless, scholarship has not often addressed how organizations leverage news literacy knowledge and skills to strengthen democracy. Johnson (2024) interviewed 28 news and media literacy practitioners to understand how they see media literacy reflecting the democratic needs and outcomes outlined by Mihailidis et al. (2021). They found that it wasn't the media that served as a necessity to democracy; instead, it was media literacy. By addressing inequitable access, integrating and utilizing collaboration within and among communities and classrooms, leveraging change agents in community spaces, and making space for young people, media literacy helps build an equitable, democratic system. However, the scholars focused broadly on media literacy, not news literacy knowledge and skills as a subfield and opportunity for solutions-oriented problem-solving. This chapter builds upon their research by exploring how two journalism-centered organizations, one industry-focused and the other education-focused, have positioned news literacy at the center of democracy building, identifying it as a response to news avoidance and mis- and disinformation challenges.

THE PROBLEMS OF NEWS AVOIDANCE
AND MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

The news industry is staring down a Cerberusian problem. Cerberus, the three-headed dog guarding the Underworld's gates, is understood in Greek mythology as a barrier to the dead's ability to leave the Underworld. I see the multi-headed hound as a contemporary symbol of the barrier blocking the news industry from shedding light on problems of democracy. Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis (2021) share that journalism is facing several problems, which in turn is causing an institutional crisis. The first problem is audiences' decline in trust in the news. The decline in journalistic trust has been fueled recently by "journalism is the enemy of the people" rhetoric, often spewed by former president Donald Trump and other authoritarian politicians worldwide. The other two heads are concerned with news avoidance and mis- and disinformation. This section scrutinizes how other scholars have understood news avoidance and mis- and disinformation as problems of news consumption, which links these beliefs to growing questions of democratic outcomes, principles, and products. Ultimately, this section is a primer to understanding

how news itself, given these problems, is not a democratic imperative. Both news avoidance and concerns surrounding mis- and disinformation are reasons why news, *per se*, is not essential to democracy. Instead, news *literacy* is a democratic necessity.

News Avoidance

As a concept, news avoidance grew in prominence as trust in journalism declined. It has become crucial that the Reuters Institute hosted a preconference at the 2023 International Communication Association's annual conference to bring scholars from journalism and political communication together to attempt to find common ground to address it. In her opening keynote, Kjerstin Thorson (2023) shared that news avoidance is a vast field but asked the participants to consider what news avoidance is addressing critically. This chapter builds off Thorson's final premise: that news avoidance reflects a lack of trust in news and represents democratic backsliding. This chapter also acknowledges a familiar critique: News avoidance lacks "conceptual clarity . . . tied to the inconsistent conceptualizations and operationalizations of avoidance" (Villi et al. 2022, 150).

Despite the need for conceptual clarity, news avoidance is commonly defined as audiences who regularly consume little news (Edgerly 2017) or avoid the news (Skovsgaard and Anderson 2020). Villi et al. (2022) identified two "drivers" of avoidance: cognitive and emotional. Both represent an intentionality to step away from experiencing the news, with cognitive being "the exposure to extensive coverage of certain topics, and stemmed from a subsequent sense of news inundation, overload, or fatigue" (154) and emotional being "a form of self-preservation in an attempt to prevent, or at least curtail, the negative sentiments associated with news" (156). More specifically, news avoidance has been likened to anxiety and fear related to audiences perceiving that they only read negativity—such as death and crime—in their news. The avoidance led to barriers associated with political engagement (Toff and Nielsen 2022). Skovsgaard and Anderson (2020) believe this intentionality to be harmful to democracy, thus reducing understanding of and participation in civic life.

News avoidance is also a product of context and situation (Edgerly 2017; Skovsgaard and Anderson 2020; Villi et al. 2022; Palmer et al. 2023). Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen (2023) learned that "consistent news avoidance often results from the interaction between people's active choices and the structures that shape their circumstances and preferences over time" (14). How they (2023) defined news avoidance requires scholars to think differently about how news avoidance is categorized. For example, current understandings of news consumption practices related to news avoidance could include how

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prominence as trust in journalism. The Reuters Institute hosted a preconference of the Association's annual conference and political communication together to address it. In her opening keynote, the speaker's avoidance is a vast field but asked for news avoidance is addressing critically. This chapter's message: that news avoidance reflects a democratic backsliding. This chapter also discusses how news avoidance lacks "conceptual clarifications and operationalizations of

news literacy, news avoidance is commonly understood as little news (Edgerly 2017) or news avoidance (Villi et al. 2022) identified as emotional. Both represent an intention to avoid the news, with cognitive being "the avoidance of news topics, and stemmed from a sub-conscious, or fatigue" (154) and emotional being "the attempt to prevent, or at least curtail, news" (156). More specifically, news avoidance and fear related to audiences perceiving news as death and crime—in their news. News avoidance with political engagement (Toff and Villi 2020) believe this intentionality to understand news and participation

in the context and situation (Edgerly 2017; Villi et al. 2022; Palmer et al. 2023). Palmer, et al. "consistent news avoidance often reflects people's active choices and the structures of news preferences over time" (14). How they can encourage scholars to think differently about news avoidance, for example, current understandings of news avoidance could include how

active or passive someone is. According to Kirsten Eddy (2023), 51 percent of Americans surveyed in the most recent Reuters Digital News Report are "Passive News Consumers"—they read the news, but they do not actively participate in the news. The lack of participation means they do not engage with the news, share it, comment on it, or converse about it, thus avoiding a normative purpose of journalism's need to promote civic engagement of audiences. Alternatively, as Thomas (2022) put it, we are experiencing the death of the "journalist provides information, and the audience member consumes it" model of journalism. Eddy concluded her Nieman Lab report with this call to action:

It may be time for publishers, journalists, and researchers to rethink what news engagement and participation mean in a more online but less openly participatory news environment. That includes reflecting on the audiences left behind when these spaces are overtaken by toxicity or partisanship—often the same people who have long been underserved or misrepresented by the news media.

News and media literacy interventions and practices are absent from news avoidance literature; thus, this chapter puts them into the conversation by introducing the evolving field of news avoidance and then through a case study of how one organization uses news literacy to address the problem. Edgerly (2022) believes that while there is not one solution to solving news avoidance, there are ways to "convert news avoiders into more regular consumers of news" by "increasing the value of news, while reducing the cognitive costs of navigating today's news environment. These efforts are more likely to succeed when journalists, educators, and audiences come together to do the hard work of rethinking how to create value news, teaching skills and knowledge to navigate the modern news landscape and developing new media consumption habits" (1841). This chapter argues that promoting more news knowledge through education could mean that news literacy could combat news avoidance and bring audiences back to the news. News literacy can activate passive news consumers while pushing journalists to be more critical of their practices and impact on those traditionally marginalized or oppressed. News literacy is also a solution to the toxicity of mis- and disinformation commonly emerging from social media, thus why it is equally as important to address another contributor to democratic backsliding: mis- and disinformation.

Mis- and Disinformation

Misinformation and disinformation are part of a long and painful history that emerges from hurtful and distrustful messaging while also causing audience hurt and distrust in the news; they are also closely tied to concepts like

propaganda and conspiratorial thinking. Misinformation can pertain to various subjects, including science, politics, health, and current events, and can circulate through various channels like social media, traditional media, or word of mouth. The unintentional nature of misinformation distinguishes it from disinformation, but its impact can be equally harmful, leading to misunderstanding, mistrust, and poor decision-making. Disinformation is deliberately creating and disseminating false or misleading information to deceive or manipulate public opinion (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2017). It is often used to achieve specific objectives, such as influencing political outcomes, undermining institutions, or sowing discord, and can be spread through various media, including newspapers, social media platforms, and television.

Gwiazdzinski et al. (2023) found that “waves of misinformation are responsible for diminishing social trust in public health agencies, sowing social discord, encouraging and strengthening xenophobic, homophobic, and nationalistic stances, and undermining popular confidence in the benevolence of democratic institutions” (2). Misinformation and disinformation impede democracy and directly threaten journalism’s mission (Bauer and Nadler 2023; Farkas 2023). According to a 2023 report by the Knight Foundation, 50 percent of respondents felt the news media intentionally misleads them or purposely spreads misinformation. Addressing misinformation and disinformation head-on will help to create more distinct barriers between journalism and non-journalistic actors, who often cause confusion and spread misinformation and disinformation in digital spaces (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2017; Farkas 2023). This impact of mis- and disinformation on public and private life has led many scholars to attempt to understand if news literacy interventions can help mitigate audiences’ interactions with misinformation and disinformation and thus improve their ability to read and understand the news critically.

News literacy scholars believe there is a sense of urgency for audiences to handle mis- and disinformation better. News literacy can also be leveraged to mitigate misinformation and disinformation, understand news engagement, and navigate bias. Vraga, Bode, and Tully (2022) found that organizations can correct misinformation with a single tweet response but that consuming those news-literate messages is difficult on social media because audiences are inundated with information and may not have the skills to curate their feeds or hide bad actors’ posts.

News literacy is also linked to increased skepticism expressed by adults and how adults share content online (Vraga et al. 2021). News literacy fosters critical thinking skills, enabling adults to evaluate online information, including potential misinformation or biased content. Increased skepticism can lead to more responsible sharing behavior, as adults may become more cautious before disseminating information that has not been verified. The increased

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Misinformation can pertain to various topics, health, and current events, and can be found on social media, traditional media, or other sources. The type of misinformation distinguishes it from other types of misinformation, leading to misinformation-making. Disinformation is deliberate or misleading information to deceive (Lim, and Ling 2017). It is often used to influence political outcomes, under- and can be spread through various media platforms, and television. That “waves of misinformation are evident in public health agencies, sowing increasing xenophobic, homophobic, and popular confidence in the benevolence of information and disinformation impede journalism’s mission (Bauer and Nadler 2023 report by the Knight Foundation, that media intentionally misleads them. Addressing misinformation and disinformation: more distinct barriers between journalism and often cause confusion and spread in digital spaces (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). Disinformation on public and social media attempt to understand if news literacy can help audiences’ interactions with misinformation and their ability to read and understand the

is a sense of urgency for audiences to learn news literacy can also be leveraged to increase audience engagement, understanding, and news engagement. Tully (2022) found that organizations receive a positive tweet response but that consuming news on social media because audiences may not have the skills to curate their

Increased skepticism expressed by adults (Lewin et al. 2021). News literacy fosters the ability to evaluate online information, including content. Increased skepticism can lead to increased skepticism as adults may become more cautious if the information has not been verified. The increased

skepticism contributes to a healthier information ecosystem by reducing the spread of misinformation, which is especially crucial in social media, where false information can proliferate quickly.

CONNECTING TO INDUSTRY AND
EDUCATION: THE CASES OF TRUSTING NEWS
AND THE NEWS LITERACY PROJECT

While trust in public institutions continues to decline and audience connections to the press face similar backsliding (Newman et al. 2023; Knight Foundation 2023), two organizations are utilizing news literacy to rebuild audience connections and understanding of the news. Trusting News, an organization that seeks to “train and empower journalists to take responsibility for demonstrating credibility and actively earning trust through transparency and engagement” (Trusting News 2023), is helping journalists to become more literate about the decisions they are making with, for, and about audiences. The News Literacy Project (NLP), a nonpartisan education nonprofit “creating better informed, more engaged and more empowered individuals” (News Literacy Project 2023), is working to help people of all ages build news literacy skills and knowledge into their daily lives. Both organizations rely on education—in classrooms and through training and workshops—to provide journalists and their audiences with the integral knowledge of news literacy. Alternatively, as NLP writes in their mission statement, to “advance the practice of news literacy throughout American society, creating better informed, more engaged and more empowered individuals—and ultimately a stronger democracy.”

Trusting News

While not explicitly defining itself as a news literacy organization, Trusting News leverages the five Cs of news literacy (Tully et al. 2022) through its combination of research, organizational training, and public materials. This analysis focuses on Trusting News’ Trust Kits. According to the organization’s website, Trust Kits “offer step-by-step guides for journalists ready to demonstrate credibility and actively earn trust.” In particular,

these kits have everything you need to start explaining the parts of journalism we know news consumers are most curious (and most uninformed) about. Each Trust Kit breaks down big trust-building strategies into actionable steps so you can start being more transparent with your audience and be seen as a credible news source.

The desire to “demonstrate credibility and actively earn trust” is rooted in Trusting News’ mission of helping journalists earn news consumers’ trust. Trusting News designed these Trust Kits to create stronger trust-building relationships between newsrooms and their communities.

Five categories of trust building serve as a training ground for newsrooms: “Engagement,” “Ethics & Fairness,” “How News Works,” “Coverage Topics,” and “Newsroom Culture.” Each category includes between two and six different kits. Each Trust Kit follows a similar format, allowing users to recognize familiar elements and utilize them quickly. The Trust Kits reflect a standard instructional organization in educational spaces: the lesson plan. As a result, in conjunction with the use of the language “step-by-step guide,” the kits can be understood as an educational resource. The impetus is to help journalists train literacy behaviors like an English teacher helping students understand allegory or history teachers helping students recognize common elements of government systems.

Each Trust Kit opens with a summary and goal. The summaries share why the Trust Kit is important and why newsrooms (and educators!) should use it. The goals reflect the five core components of news literacy as outlined by Tully et al. (2022). For example, in the category “Coverage topics,” the goal of the Trust Kit, “Labeling opinion content,” is for “newsrooms to be clear internally about whether each individual piece of content features the journalist’s own opinions or experiences. And if it does, we want the author and their intent to be crystal clear to the audience, on any platform or environment in which they are exposed to it.” For this Trust Kit, the news literacy component of “Content” applies. Trusting News is helping journalists to share with their audiences what makes “characteristics of a news story or piece of news that distinguishes it from other types of media content” (Tully et al. 2022). This Trust Kit is also an example of the news literacy category of “Consumption” because much of what Trusting News is trying to teach newsrooms here is how audiences consume the opinion content journalists produce and, therefore, the effects it may have on their knowledge of the institution as a whole or the newsroom itself—including, especially to Trusting News’ mission, the effects on trust. Trusting News is building an educational infrastructure centered on news literacy by working with newsrooms to explain their news-making processes.¹

From goals, Trust Kits include objectives, or what will be accomplished by the time a journalist completes the kit. Objectives are standard educational tools meant to show what one will learn as an outcome of a course or lesson. In the case of the Trust Kits, the objectives not only express what journalists will have accomplished but also explain what kind of changes newsrooms or journalists could be seeing in their practice. Using objectives again represents an attachment to educational strategies commonly associated with curriculum

and actively earn trust” is rooted in journalists earn news consumers’ trust. Its goal is to create stronger trust-building communities.

Trusting News serves as a training ground for newsrooms. The Trust Kits, “How News Works,” “Coverage Topics,” and “Consumption” are all in the same category, allowing users to explore them quickly. The Trust Kits reflect educational spaces: the lesson plan, the step-by-step guide, the final resource. The impetus is to help an English teacher helping students helping students recognize common goals.

The summaries share why newsrooms (and educators!) should use news literacy as outlined by the category “Coverage topics,” the goal is for “newsrooms to be clear,” and the piece of content features the journalist’s role. “If it does, we want the author and their role, on any platform or environment in the Trust Kit, the news literacy component helping journalists to share with their audience a news story or piece of news that is reliable content” (Tully et al. 2022). This news literacy category of “Consumption” is trying to teach newsrooms here is to present journalists produce and, therefore, knowledge of the institution as a whole, especially to Trusting News’ mission, building an educational infrastructure with newsrooms to explain their values, or what will be accomplished by the Trusting News.

Objectives are standard educational as an outcome of a course or lesson. Objectives not only express what journalists want to accomplish, but also what kind of changes newsrooms or newsrooms want to see. Using objectives again represents commonly associated with curriculum

and instruction. By providing journalists and newsrooms with a pedagogical roadmap, Trusting News offers a metacognitive news literacy practice, which I describe as “news literate journalism” (Johnson 2024). I define news literate journalism as a *metacognitive model rooted in prioritizing a process-oriented approach to journalism that emphasizes news-literate behaviors—assessing credibility, studying current, relationship building, and understanding audiences—and values—service, engagement, and transparency—in practice.*

This opportunity for journalists to be news literate in their knowledge, skills, and behaviors while expressing that literacy to and with their audiences elevates journalism practice. According to Trusting News, this elevated practice (or news literate journalism) is how journalists rebuild trust with their audiences. For example, in the category “Engagement,” the objectives of the Trust Kit, “Engaging through comments,” share that journalists will not only understand how the audience responds with comments but also will learn how to improve the efficiency of engaging with the audience and explain how to craft statements to audiences to build engagement in comments sections. By encouraging journalists to understand “Circulation” mechanisms and how to explain them to audiences, thus building the “Circulation” news literacy knowledge of audiences, Trusting News is building organizational resilience and compassion in the newsrooms. Increasing this capacity will increase trust.

The Trust Kits then assist journalists through critical thinking, explanation, revision, and reflection. For example, in the category “Ethics & Fairness,” an activity of the Trust Kit, “Reporter mission statements,” includes identifying the differences between bios and mission statements. Trusting News acknowledges that newsrooms “probably already have staff bios for each journalist on your team,” but in this Trust Kit they encourage a shift to mission statements from the traditional bios. Trusting News is pushing newsrooms to reflect on their current content critically. They do this by presenting bulleted lists comparing bios to mission statements, like, “Will change but not frequently” and “Can include personal details about the journalist’s life,” for staff bios versus “Will change with coverage goals” and “Include details about reporting beat and coverage goals,” for mission statements. While arguably subtle, the critical thinking to change from one, likely decades-old practice to another can take time and emotional energy. The critical thinking involved also requires deep revision, as shifting from one model to another is not simply a one-off activity. Instead, this Trust Kit leads to organizational revision and change because according to Trusting News: “Reporter mission statements show users what an individual journalist’s goals are and what they are trying to accomplish. The statement also helps show how a reporter’s mission aligns with the community’s mission.” Writing this statement may look like an updated journalist bio on the organization’s website, and the bio

reflects explicitly on the newsroom's mission. The practice component is a common next step in Trusting News' Trust Kits.

Journalists emphasizing metacognition is further amplified through their use of the three news literate values (service, engagement, and transparency) in their journalism practice (Johnson 2024). For example, in the category "How News Works," practices in the Trust Kit, "Explain your sourcing," include a series of guiding questions for journalists to think critically about how they identify, work with, incorporate, and respond to sources. Trusting News uses an interface of collapsible blue boxes to help users focus on one guiding question at a time, such as "How do you decide which experts to interview?" Within the box, Trusting News members write a series of prompts helping journalists to interrogate their sourcing practices. The prompts also help journalists to explain what they do, such as, "See if you can work into your story a mention that you talked to people around the festival for an hour, and here's a collection of what you heard." The transparency (a value of news literate journalism) enacted by the journalists through explanation aids the journalists in (a) being conscientious of their process and therefore literate of their behaviors, and (b) educating audiences on the knowledge and skills journalists have and practice, which in turn increases audience news literacy (Johnson 2024). Many of these prompts encourage journalists to revise their processes and practices. In this case, revision means shifting from traditional methods to more news-literate or trust-building ones, emphasizing engagement and relationships. It becomes a goal of news-literate journalists to try and go beyond sources they traditionally rely on to seek out more community members and a more inclusive list of sources. For example, journalists are asked to establish what needs to change and why in the "Getting buy-in for trust work" Trust Kit in the "Newsroom Culture" category. This category emphasizes the "Content" component of news literacy: "The social, legal and economic environment in which news is produced." In this Trust Kit, journalists explore the role of their newsroom culture in their practices. A revision of newsroom culture is rooted in Trusting News' belief that "when we talk about building trust, we're proposing a new way to do journalism. And anytime you ask journalists to change habits and routines, it involves reprioritizing, which means changing values and culture." And this type of revision takes reflection and a lot of time. Trusting News shares that to make this revision sustainable, journalists and newsrooms must recognize that it takes constant reflection. The process "does take time, effort and commitment. Some of this trust work can actually save time in the long run. Once you're on the record with your goals, policies and values, linking to them is a lot faster than writing them out from scratch."

What Trusting News does is help journalists and newsrooms to be more conscientious of the behaviors they have engaged in that possibly have

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caused audiences to grow distrustful. By critically thinking about, explaining, revising, and reflecting upon these behaviors, what Trusting News is doing with its Trust Kits is a journalist-focused approach to news literacy. Trusting News believes that trust- and relationship-building practices have the power to bring audiences back to the news. The Trusting News team fosters relationships between journalists and their audiences. With relationship- and trust-building at the philosophical core of the organization, the news literacy practices, or the news literate journalism (Johnson 2024), being done in the Trust Kits is an essential component and behavior to that relationship.

The News Literacy Project

The News Literacy Project is working to help audiences become more news literate by providing educational resources to people of all ages. These resources are built on three foundational values: “news literacy is an essential life skill,” “facts matter,” and “a free press is a cornerstone of democracy.” NLP’s Checkology program includes both free and registered options. The free option is limited and allows people to peruse potential lessons they could encounter if they register for the Checkology program. NLP offers previews of the lessons using both video and text-based information. Registering for the program includes options “for education,” “independent learners,” and “for the public.” The first two options are for teachers and students. Levels of learning differentiate the programming within that option. According to NLP, the “for the public” option means users are “not a teacher, student or part of a school, but still want to be news-literate.” The opportunity to serve traditional areas of education and the public shows how NLP does not want to be seen as an education-only-serving organization. Instead, like Trusting News, NLP is attempting to make a more systemic change by addressing education formally and the education of the public post-formal schooling. Moreover, according to the program’s mission, much of the focus is that “Checkology empowers learners to identify credible information and understand the importance of a free press.” Specifically, NLP believes that Checkology helps to make audiences news literate and that news literacy is a solution to “rumors, viral hoaxes, conspiracy theories and disinformation. This relentless stream of misinformation confuses and divides us, and can make us feel powerless.”²²
Within the Checkology interface, users are presented with many lessons to empower news-literate behaviors. Additionally, several additional resources are available for educators—including pre-formed parent and guardian letters for students’ use of the program. Professional journalists also agreed to participate in in-person or virtual visits. The journalists span from local to international newsrooms, which offers tremendous opportunities for teachers to share with their students. The lessons included in Checkology include

introductions to news, algorithms, and the First Amendment; practical lessons on standards of journalism practice, editing, and branding; and ways to understand bias, harm, misinformation, and other forms of conspiratorial thinking. NLP also created exercises to enhance student learning. The robust learning opportunities provided by NLP reflect a communal urgency; news literacy is the solution to democratic backsliding resulting from mis- and disinformation, and news literacy is necessary for equitable and inclusive democracies to continue and flourish.

As will be seen in this section, the Checkology program offers a robust framework for combating the democratic backsliding that often occurs due to the spread of mis- and disinformation. It achieves this by focusing on multiple dimensions of news literacy, offering crucial context on the role of journalism in a democratic society, and helping audiences to appreciate its essential nature. NLP's interactive lessons put users in the shoes of a journalist, instilling empathy and a nuanced understanding of the journalistic process. The program particularly shines in addressing mis- and disinformation. These lessons help audiences discern between credible news and false information, understand how information is circulated, and reflect on the personal impact of consuming such information. Lessons like "InfoZones," "Misinformation," and "Conspiratorial Thinking" are directly aimed at tackling the problem. They arm users with the skills to differentiate between various types of information and understand how these can be detrimental to democratic processes. Furthermore, the program focuses on algorithms and how they can perpetuate false information, offering a holistic approach to news literacy. Checkology is not just about identifying credible sources; it is also about understanding the human and technological systemic elements contributing to spreading false information. The interactive nature of the program, coupled with its focus on critical thinking, helps internalize these vital skills. This comprehensive approach makes Checkology a formidable tool for defending the principles of equitable and inclusive democracies. By making audiences more news-literate, the program has the potential to create a citizenry better equipped to engage in democratic processes, thereby countering the forces that threaten democratic stability.

The NLP Checkology programming can easily be categorized using the Tully et al. (2022) typology. Audiences learn the legal, social, and economic environments (Context) in lessons like "The First Amendment," "Press Freedoms Around the World," and "Democracy's Watchdog." In the "Democracy's Watchdog" lesson, users are introduced to the lesson by journalist Wesley Lowery, who shares that an essential part of his job is "to question authority." This leads to hearing about how being a watchdog is linked to investigative reporting and then the role of journalism to democracy. This lesson reaffirms the value of news to democracy, again linking the

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field’s essentialism to democracy’s ultimate success. Nevertheless, the lesson
is “Context” within a more extensive news-literate system. The essentialism
of news is a component of news literacy, ingrained through an interactive
history of “Notable Investigative Journalism Cases Throughout History.”
These cases, which include the likes of Nellie Bly and Ida B. Wells changing
impoverished systems to reporters taking down the likes of Larry Nassar and
Harvey Weinstein, represent a historical context for audiences to be literate
about the value of news. However, they are just one component of that his-
tory. Throughout 24 segments—including several videos and interactives—
users learn that a free and independent press is “vital to a democracy,” as
Lowery shares in one of the videos. Part of this learning includes explaining
the legal parameters journalists must abide by, such as needing to report and
verify facts to avoid issues such as defamation. Users are also given several
opportunities to speak back to the knowledge they are learning, pushing
them to reflect and explain what’s been shared in the videos or text. This
includes quiz-like questions and fill-in-the-blank responses. By integrating
lessons with critical thinking exercises, the NLP program allows audiences
to reaffirm and internalize what they have learned. Through their Checkology
program, NLP is curating news literate journalism content; they are attempt-
ing to explain the processes of journalism in a way that helps audiences build
a more foundational understanding of the knowledge, skills, and behaviors
associated with news literacy.

The Checkology lessons also include opportunities for users to understand
“Creation” as a component of news literacy, such as in the lesson “Practicing
Quality Journalism,” which helps users to “learn the standards of quality jour-
nalism by playing the role of reporter in a game-like simulation of a breaking
news event.” In this lesson, NLP puts the user into the shoes of a journalist
to understand what it feels like to be a journalist and engage with the kind
of work a journalist does daily. It is meant to build a sense of empathy. In
the Checkology lesson, users are asked to do the same in the simulation by
performing several exercises to produce a quality journalistic product. The
experience includes knowing how to participate on a reporting team—including
working with an editor and a fellow reporter using traditional resources—
such as a reporter’s notebook, and how to rely on values and standards
journalism is defined by and built upon—including values like balance, fair-
ness, and verification. As the story progresses, users are prompted to respond
to similar critical thinking exercises that a journalist would, such as indicating
how newsworthy a story might be. Using a combination of interface design,
such as sliders and short-answer questions, users genuinely exercise news
literate journalism practices to bridge the gap between what a journalist does
and what audiences think journalists do (Johnson 2024). The Checkology
lesson also provides different definitions journalists commonly use. In doing

this, NLP breaks down the jargon-focused barriers between journalists and audience members. By explaining the language of journalists, such as what a lede is or how a journalist interviews a subject, audiences can learn how to navigate future interactions with journalists and their content. This simulation also allows audiences to gain more access to the traditional boundaries journalists consistently uphold to maintain their authority (Carlson 2017).

Checkology's ability to serve as a solution to mis- and disinformation emerges most often in lessons that can fall within the Tully et al. (2022) typology as "Content," "Circulation," and "Consumption." It is essential to recognize that lessons that could be labeled as "Context" and "Creation" also matter to this solution. Those first two components are necessary for audiences to understand how news works, which can help audiences decipher who are journalists and who are bad actors. However, thinking about how mis- and disinformation are created and disseminated firmly requires the knowledge and skills associated with the latter three components of the typology. "Content" lessons help audiences to differentiate between news and mis- and disinformation. "Circulation" lessons help audiences recognize how news organizations share their content versus how mis- and disinformation and conspiratorial thinking are shared and spread among audiences. Furthermore, "Consumption" lessons help audiences consider the personal effects of mis- and disinformation on their daily lives and how they interact with quality news content—for example, learning how misinformation can impact family relationships or how disinformation campaigns can affect how audience members interact with others on social media or even their friends. These consumption practices also require thinking about how algorithms enhance one's exposure to mis- and disinformation and how algorithms elevate conspiratorial thinking to the attention of audience members. The bulk of Checkology's lessons fit into these three categories, and those lessons embody the mission of NLP and the Checkology project the most.

When users participate in one of these lessons, they participate in similar activities identified previously: videos, activities, practices, assessments, and interactions. However, the lessons' content is more indicative of the Tully et al. (2022) news literacy component. Lessons that would fit these components include "Introduction to Algorithms," "Branded Content," "InfoZones," "Misinformation," "Conspiratorial Thinking," "Making Sense of Data," "Evaluating Science-Based Claims," and "Harm & Distrust." Based on the content of these lessons, the three most relevant to being a direct solution to mis- and disinformation are "InfoZones," "Misinformation," and "Conspiratorial Thinking." In these lessons, users are introduced to the various layers of information and how one can be drawn into believing lies and fictional ideas. "InfoZones" offers users a primer in the different genres of journalism, such as news, opinion, and entertainment, while also introducing

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users to ideas like "propaganda." "Misinformation" is a lesson that builds on this knowledge to help users "learn to understand different types of misinformation and the ways misinformation can damage democracy" (News Literacy Project). Much of this lesson aligns with the ever-growing body of research on mis- and disinformation across media studies, journalism, communication, political science, and sociology—to name a few. "Misinformation" also emphasizes a need for audiences to contend with more than traditional journalistic texts, such as social media posts and memes. By asking audiences to recognize that journalism is part of a greater media ecosystem, NLP is attempting to help its audiences become more literate on how bad actors can infiltrate and degrade that ecosystem using principles, practices, and values of misinformation. Compared to other lessons, "Conspiratorial Thinking" relies substantially on the urgency of news literacy to combat lies and falsehoods. There is also a grounding in how conspiratorial thinking is rooted in cognitive science. By including this information, NLP provides audiences with a richer understanding beyond simply what they may encounter in their personal lives or on social media.

CONCLUSIONS: REFRAMING THE CONVERSATION TO ESTABLISH A HEALTHIER DEMOCRACY

In the age of information, where news is accessible with just a tap on a screen, the role of a news-literate citizenry in sustaining a participatory democracy cannot be overstated. However, trust in news media has eroded over time, and the skepticism poses significant challenges to the democratic process. To protect democracy, audiences and journalists must have the agency to live and act within a democracy, which comes with the knowledge and skills necessary for democracy's existence: news literacy. News literacy can rejuvenate participatory democracy and potentially restore this lost trust, which both *Trusting News* and the News Literacy Project are trying to do with their programming. In turn, through news literate practices and behaviors the organizations are seeking to make a healthier democracy.

Trusting News and the News Literacy Project are vital cogs in the machinery that can restore trust in journalism and, by extension, revitalize participatory democracy. *Trusting News* does this by elevating the practice of journalism to meet the standards that the public rightfully demands. NLP achieves this by upskilling the public, ensuring they have the literacy tools to discern quality journalism from the chaff of misinformation. Together, they answer to a public that has grown skeptical, equipping both sides—the producers and consumers of news—with the skills, understanding, and ethics to engage meaningfully with each other. This mutual elevation of standards

is nothing less than a reinvigoration of the democratic dialogue, essential for a healthy democracy. Trusting News targets journalists, equipping them with Trust Kits, including lesson plans on ethics, news mechanics, and community engagement. The goal is not just to make journalism more credible but to make it relatable and understandable, thereby reducing news avoidance, a symptom of public distrust. Trusting News's Trust Kits act as way to provide newsrooms with a way to enhance audiences' participation in democracy. NLP, on the other hand, focuses on the audience. Their platform, Checkology, is rooted in the belief that news literacy is vital, facts are crucial, and a free press is essential for democracy. Unlike Trusting News, NLP works outside the journalism industry, empowering the public to be discerning news consumers. It offers a curriculum covering news algorithms, bias, and misinformation, providing interactive activities and assessments. NLP does not just inform; it empowers people to scrutinize news critically, offering tools to combat misinformation and, in turn, fostering a healthier democratic society. Although different in their approach, both organizations are united in their mission to mend the fractured relationship between the public and the news media. They also work to support participatory democracy and educate their audiences on how to engage critically and be more civically responsible.

When citizens are educated about policy stances and the track records of political candidates through credible news sources, they can make thoughtful and well-informed decisions at the ballot box (Ashley, Maksel, and Craft 2017). However, the increasing mistrust in media hampers this, often leading people to rely on partisan sources or hearsay, thus compromising the integrity of their vote. News literacy programs like Trusting News and the News Literacy Project can provide the tools to sift through the information glut and discern credible from unreliable news, thus reinforcing the voting process. This leads us to the importance of public discourse. Democracies are built in public squares, community meetings, family dinners, and the news—where open discussions occur. Knowledgeable citizens can contribute constructively to these conversations. They can share validated information, critique flawed arguments, and present nuanced perspectives. The ability to comprehend the news enriches these discussions but is compromised when audiences do not trust what they read or hear. News literacy teaches how to understand news and question it, offering a possible route to rebuild trust by making citizens feel more empowered and less manipulated by media entities.

Moreover, civic participation goes beyond just voting. Whether engaging in a local school board meeting or participating in a global movement for climate change, news literacy initiatives like Trusting News's Trust Kits and NLP's Checkology program can help people understand the complexity and interconnectedness of the issues. When citizens are news-literate, they feel more empowered to act because they understand the landscape, have vetted

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the information, and believe in the cause. However, this empowerment is often lacking when audiences feel the news is untrustworthy. Educating people on evaluating news sources can be an antidote to the cynicism that keeps them from participating wholeheartedly in civic life. This becomes even more essential when we consider the rise of digital platforms. Algorithms and personalized feeds can expose us to a distorted view of reality, often amplifying our existing beliefs. News literacy can train people to navigate these digital landscapes, becoming savvy consumers of information rather than passive recipients of manipulated content. In doing so, it can also make people resistant to the tactics used by bad actors to spread misinformation, thus safeguarding the democratic institutions we hold dear.

The ability to understand, analyze, and question the news is not a luxury; it is a necessity for the healthy functioning of a participatory democracy. While the lack of trust in media is a significant challenge, it is one that news literacy can directly address by empowering citizens, promoting accountability, and bridging divides. Far from being just a set of skills, news literacy is a catalyst that can invigorate participatory democracy, making it more resilient, inclusive, and effective. News literacy is essential to a healthy democracy. An informed citizenry is the bedrock of a democratic society. Citizens must have accurate and timely information to make informed decisions on policies, leaders, and civic issues. News literacy helps individuals discern reliable information from misinformation, crucial in an age of information overload and false narratives. News literacy also fosters critical thinking. By evaluating sources, considering diverse perspectives, and scrutinizing the accuracy of information, citizens develop the skills necessary to critically engage with complex issues. This not only aids in making informed choices at the ballot box but also promotes healthy public discourse. Additionally, spreading misinformation and disinformation undermines trust in institutions and the media. News literacy combats this by empowering individuals to recognize and challenge falsehoods. As trust is integral to the functioning of a democracy, fostering a population that can critically assess and trust credible information sources bolsters democratic resilience. News literacy strengthens democracy by ensuring an informed citizenry, promoting critical thinking, and preserving trust in democratic institutions. Without it, the very fabric of democracy is at risk.

If *The Washington Post's* slogan holds true, that "Democracy Dies in Darkness," then we must recognize that it is not the news itself that will be the beacon of light for democracy's saving. Instead, the need for news consumers and producers to be literate about the news will light the torch for democracy's sustained future. When we recognize the critical role of news literacy in our global ecosystem, we will ultimately also be able to find more equitable and inclusive ways to be a better democracy. Democracy will not

die in darkness. It instead will be lit by knowledge, skills, and behaviors news literacy affords. News is not the only essential element of this democracy; news literacy is, too.

NOTES

1. Michael Spikes, Program Director of Teach for Chicago Journalism, a program expanding scholastic journalism and news media literacy in the Chicago area at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, wrote extensively about the educational and pedagogical news media literacy work of journalists in his 2023 dissertation. Morris and Yeoman interrogate this as well in their *Journalism Practice* article "Teaching future journalists the news: The role of journalism educators in the news literacy movement."

2. <https://get.checkology.org/about/>

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