Journalism Studies

ISSN: 1461-670X (Print) 1469-9699 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjos20

What Journalists Say News Literacy Is

Patrick R. Johnson

To cite this article: Patrick R. Johnson (15 Dec 2025): What Journalists Say News Literacy Is, Journalism Studies, DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2025.2600428

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2025.2600428

Published online: 15 Dec 2025.

JOURNALISM STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2025.2600428

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

What Journalists Say News Literacy Is

Patrick R. Johnson

Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Diederich College of Communication, Marquette University, Milwaukee, USA

ABSTRACT

This article examines how journalists define news literacy, a concept typically framed as an audience skill set. I analyze 204 open-ended responses from U.S. journalists using discourse analysis grounded in metajournalistic discourse and organized with the 5Cs of context, creation, content, circulation, and consumption. Four patterns recur: defending professional boundaries, reasserting epistemic authority, constructing civic identity, and performing epistemic maintenance. These uses position news literacy as professional meaning-making as much as pedagogy, enacted through boundary work across participants, practices, and professionalism. The analysis also surfaces silences about access, affect, platform power, and journalism's own complicity. Building on these findings, I propose an extension to prevailing definitions. News literacy should retain audience competencies while adding a practice-facing component for journalists: deliberate reflection on method and constraint (creation and context), clear communication of sourcing, evidence, and genre distinctions (content), attention to how stories travel and become visible (circulation), and cultivation of habits that sustain care for truth under strain (consumption). This reframing treats news literacy as a relational and ethical framework that links what publics are asked to do with what journalists do and show, offering a more reflexive, inclusive, and structurally aware model of practice.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 9 June 2025
Accepted 25 November 2025

KEYWORDS
News literacy; journalism practice; metajournalistic discourse; media education; civic engagement; professional norms

News literacy is forged in practice before it is taught, etched in verification, sustained by care, and secured by boundaries that steady the work. Taken this way, news literacy is first a professional practice, then a public lesson. While news literacy is typically framed as a civic skill set for audiences navigating misinformation and digital overload (Mihailidis and Viotty 2017), this paper challenges that assumption by shifting attention inward, toward how journalists themselves define and deploy the concept. It argues that journalists are not merely educators of literacy but active participants in its meaning-making, shaping definitions of news literacy that reflect their own professional anxieties, normative commitments, and institutional boundaries. These definitions do not appear in isolation. They are shaped by what Carlson (2016) calls metajournalistic discourse: language through which journalists define, defend, and contest the profession's authority, ethics, and civic role. In this context, this paper will view journalists' discussions

CONTACT Patrick R. Johnson patrick.johnson@marquette.edu, patrickraymondjohnson@gmail.com

about news literacy as boundary work. Rather than assume professional status guarantees literate practice, this paper examines how journalists articulate news literacy as a set of values, skills, and concerns that are deeply intertwined with their own self-understanding.

Using self-defined understandings of news literacy from a national survey of U.S. journalists, I analyze how these definitions align with the five domains of news literacy identified by Tully et al. (2022): context, creation, content, circulation, and consumption. Reading the 5Cs as sites of metajournalistic discourse allows us to see news literacy not only as an audience pedagogy but also as a description of journalists' own reflective practices. This shift grounds the concept in the lived experience of newswork and prepares the way for a revised, practice-facing definition that is useful for journalism studies scholarship and for newsrooms. This paper advances three claims. First, prevailing definitions of news literacy are incomplete because they treat it as an audience-facing term and overlook how journalists themselves define and enact it. Second, by centering on journalists' own language, I utilize Tully et al.'s 5Cs framework as an analytical scaffold and extend it to capture the metajournalistic work that journalists undertake when defining news literacy. Third, I propose a revised, practice-oriented definition that translates the 5Cs into newsroom behaviors and decision points, so that news literacy is not only what audiences learn but also what journalists do. This reconceptualization preserves the strengths of the Tully et al. (2022) definition while shifting the emphasis from outcomes for audiences to routines, norms, and judgments within newsrooms. The result is a bridge between scholarship and practice that clarifies how journalists understand credibility, bias, sourcing, transparency, and distribution in everyday work. It also offers a framework news organizations can adopt to evaluate and strengthen newsroom habits that foster more news-literate reporting and editing.

Literature Review

Over the past two decades, news literacy has emerged as a prominent focus of scholarly and pedagogical efforts aimed at strengthening civic engagement, combating misinformation, and enhancing trust in journalism. Though it emerges from the broader tradition of media literacy, news literacy is often treated as a more narrowly defined subset concerned with the production, consumption, and evaluation of public affairs content (Ashley, Maksl, and Craft 2017; Mihailidis and Thevenin 2013). Across the literature, news literacy is frequently framed as a skill set designed to help audiences distinguish credible journalism from propaganda, opinion, or disinformation (Hobbs et al. 2013; Mihailidis and Viotty 2017). These frameworks are typically audience-facing, emphasizing what people do with news (Vraga, Bode, and Tully 2022; Vraga and Tully 2021).

News literacy's conceptual development owes much to adjacent literacies, including media, information, digital, and civic literacies. Scholars such as Hobbs (1998) and Mihailidis et al. (2021) argue that media literacy, broadly conceived, enables critical thinking and civic empowerment, offering individuals tools to question power, assess sources, and create media with awareness of its social impact. The interdisciplinary nature of media literacy—bridging education, communication, and information science—has generated productive but sometimes fractured definitions, with media researchers emphasizing media effects and textual analysis, and education scholars focusing on pedagogy and classroom implementation (Mihailidis et al. 2021). Scholars such as Aufderheide (1992),

Hobbs (1998), and Mihailidis et al. (2021) argue that media literacy should shift from passive consumption to active participation and critical consciousness. These traditions have shaped how news literacy has been conceptualized, even as it narrows its focus to journalistic norms, practices, and information flows.

What distinguishes news literacy from its broader counterparts is its historical tendency to align closely with journalism's institutional logic. Definitions often carry implicit or explicit assumptions about journalistic authority and professionalism. For years, educational materials and scholarship alike have told audiences that being news literate means acting like a journalist—to verify, fact-check, and value objectivity (Malik, Cortesi, and Gasser 2013; Morris and Yeoman 2021). This "news appreciation" model positions journalism as the standard to emulate, a stance that reinforces the profession's normative values without interrogating their social, ideological, or historical construction. More recent approaches challenge this alignment, proposing instead an "ecosystem" model that examines how literacy practices unfold across the full lifecycle of news from production to circulation to interpretation (Tully et al. 2022). This project adopts the latter view while also interrogating the former: not only how literacy should function in democratic life, but how journalists define, defend, and internalize it.

Efforts to conceptualize news literacy have produced a variety of frameworks; one of the most comprehensive and recent is the five-domain model, known as the 5Cs: context, creation, content, circulation, and consumption (Tully et al. 2022). This model integrates key competencies related to news systems, journalistic practices, and interpretive awareness, and has been used in empirical testing to evaluate interventions across educational settings and national populations (Maksl et al. 2024). The 5Cs reflect a shift from individual cognitive tasks toward multidimensional literacies that span technological systems, institutional logics, and platform-specific contexts. They also begin to acknowledge that social and emotional dynamics, including trust, frustration, and attention, shape the experience of engaging with news. Still, the framework is primarily conceptualized as a measure of audience literacy, referring to what news consumers need to know, recognize, or do to be informed, skeptical, and civic-minded (Vraga et al. 2021). What this audience-centered literature tends to overlook is the assumption built into most news literacy frameworks: that journalists, by their professional training and institutional roles, are already news literate. Rarely are the literacy capacities of journalists themselves interrogated (Jaakkola 2022). Nor is there sufficient attention to how journalists define news literacy when asked directly. This absence constitutes more than a methodological oversight. It reveals a conceptual gap in the way literacy is framed in journalism studies: as a property of audiences rather than a terrain for professional reflection and analysis. If news literacy is to be treated not only as a pedagogical tool but as a framework with implications for journalistic practice, it must also account for how journalists understand and perform literacy from within.

This paper responds to that gap by shifting the analytic frame from cognitive skill to discursive practice. It builds on literature that understands journalism as a site of ongoing symbolic labor, where norms, values, and roles are continuously negotiated (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Vos and Thomas 2018). In particular, it draws on the concept of metajournalistic discourse—language through which journalism defines, defends, and rearticulates its own boundaries, both to itself and to the public (Carlson 2016; Carlson and Lewis 2015). Originally coined to describe how media actors justify the

authority of journalism in times of uncertainty, the term has since been used to analyze how news organizations, professional commentators, and critics construct journalism's identity. Metajournalistic discourse becomes especially visible in moments of disruption, when legacy norms are questioned, new actors enter the field, or structural changes force reflexivity. In this view, journalism's epistemic authority is not merely enforced through practice or policy but sustained through language.

Carlson (2016) argues that metajournalistic discourse is central to the ongoing negotiation of journalism's epistemic authority, particularly when journalists face public scrutiny or professional instability. Within this framework, language is not merely descriptive; it is constitutive. Journalists' discussions about what journalism is, who it serves, and how it should behave function as a form of boundary work (Vos and Thomas 2018), positioning the speaker within a field of contested norms and values. I use metajournalistic discourse as an analytic lens on what journalists say about their work, not as a claim about what concepts they consciously deploy. In other words, the object of analysis is the discourse itself: how definitions perform boundary work, authorize standards, and position publics, regardless of whether practitioners name these moves in scholarly terms. By applying this lens to how journalists define news literacy, we can see these definitions not just as reflections of audience needs, but as symbolic interventions in the field's identity work. They reveal how journalists locate themselves relative to their publics, their institutions, and the broader discursive terrain of journalism's legitimacy. As a result, I ask: *How do journalists define news literacy? What role does this definition play in evolving journalism practice?*

Method

This study draws on a discourse analysis of self-defined definitions of news literacy offered by U.S. journalists in a national survey. The survey asked collaborators to define "news literacy" in an open-ended prompt: "What is news literacy? (please provide your definition of news literacy in this space)."

Between January and March 2023, journalists were recruited for a nationwide survey using a Cision list of 1,485 names and email addresses. By the end of the six weeks, 298 journalists responded, yielding a 20% response rate. After data cleaning for duplicate IP addresses and incomplete surveys, a total of 238 journalists completed the study; however, 34 responses to the open-ended item analyzed for this paper were left blank. The final dataset comprises 204 self-defined responses. On average, the responses are 15.9 words long; the shortest being two words, the longest being 85 words. While it is difficult to make an accurate assumption as to whether the demographic breakdown of the journalists would be considered representative, given the lack of national representative survey data (Scire 2022), the data is a mix of nearly all professional and personal identity types a journalist could identify with in the survey (Appendix).

In treating these responses as more than attitudinal data or knowledge claims, the study uses metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016; Carlson and Lewis 2015). This framework positions journalists' talk about journalism as boundary work: discursive labor through which they define what journalism is, what it ought to be, and how others should understand it. As Carlson and Lewis articulate, metajournalistic discourse operates across three interrelated functions: normative (what journalism ought to be), cognitive (what journalism is), and sociocultural (what journalism means to the public). These

dimensions frame journalists' talk as deeply reflexive and ideologically structured, particularly in moments of professional instability. This reflexive talk is not only functional; it is boundary-making. To deepen the analysis, I also draw from Carlson and Lewis's boundary work matrix (2015, 10), which outlines three forms of discursive boundary labor: expansion, in which non-traditional actors or practices are incorporated into journalism; expulsion, in which deviant actors or values are pushed out; and protection of autonomy, in which journalism defends its independence from external threats, including management, publics, or commercial interests. Viewed through this lens, journalists' definitions of news literacy are not neutral[1]; they are performative acts through which the profession includes, excludes, or shields itself in response to shifting epistemic and institutional pressures. This approach does not presume conceptual fluency among practitioners; it reads their own definitions as sites where professional meaning, authority claims, and boundary lines are actively made and remade.

The project follows a multi-layered approach (Gioia et al., 2012) and is illustrated in Figure 1. The first-order analysis applied the metajournalistic framework to the 204 definitions in two stages. First, I coded each definition according to its discursive function (normative, cognitive, and/or sociocultural) based on how the collaborator articulated the

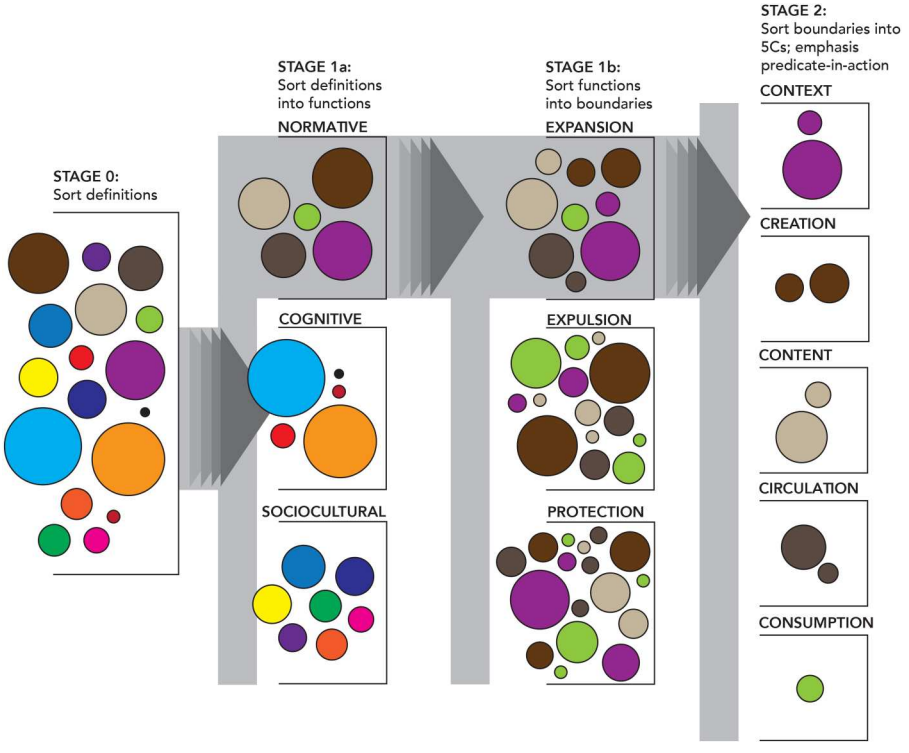

Figure 1. Depicts the multi-layer coding process that first sorted news literacy definitions into metajournalistic functions (normative, cognitive, and sociocultural), then grouped the functions into boundary work groups (expansion, expulsion, and protection). Finally, the boundary category was sorted into 5C domains of news literacy based on the predicate-in-action function of the definition's sentence structure. For example (follow the purple dot), a definition could be sorted into a normative function and then categorized as an expansion boundary within that function. That definition then moves from the expansion boundary as a definition within the news literacy domain of context.

Table 1. Predicate-in-action coding.

5C	Emphasis	Example definition	Action purpose
Context	If the action is to situate news within institutions, economics, or civic life …	"Read with an understanding of how production and revenue models shape coverage"	The action is seeing structural conditions
Creation	If the action is to see or understand how reporting is done …	"Understand how reporters and editors collect, vet, and verify information"	The action is recognizing workflow routines.
Content	If the action is to sort or judge a text	"Distinguish news from analysis from opinion."	The action is genre sorting.
Circulation	If the action is to track where information starts, who handles it along the way, and how it reaches and audience …	"Know where information comes from and how it is distributed."	The action is following routing and intermediaries.
Consumption	If the action is to adopt habits of use …	"Adopt a news diet that includes sources you may not agree with."	The action is forming routines.

purpose, structure, or meaning of journalism. Then, each instance was analyzed for signs of boundary work in the form of expansion, expulsion, or protection of autonomy. For example, some collaborators expanded the definition of news literacy to include understanding journalism's systemic pressures (expansion of professionalism); others defined news literacy by excluding tabloid or partisan forms (expulsion of deviant practices); and many used their definitions to assert journalism's authority against external misunderstanding (protection of autonomy over professionalism and practice).

Then, I coded the sorted definitions according to how the language reflects the 5Cs. Because many definitions referenced more than one domain, I used a transparent but straightforward decision rule to assign a primary 5C before noting any secondary code. Secondary codes were added only if a definition gave meaningful attention to a second domain. The primary 5C was assigned by a predicate-of-action rule, where I prioritized the clause that instructs the reader on what to do or recognize. In practical terms, I looked for the primary verb phrase that carries the action of the sentence and coded the domain that best matches the action. This kept coding anchored in practice rather than in adjacent descriptors. Examples of this coding strategy are included in Table 1.

Based on the organization of these quotes within these metajournalistic and then 5C structures, thematic categories could then be named and defined. After coding, I grouped items based on the same predicate-of-action (5C), the same metajournalistic function, and the same boundary move. I compared each group against its closest neighbors, kept edge cases in view, and noted counterexamples so overlap did not get flattened. Items that drew guardrails around who and what counts became defending professional boundaries. Items that requested deference to verified processes and standards were reasserting journalistic authority. Items that cast news literacy as a public obligation and a routine of civic life became a civic identity project. Items that narrated strain, meaning-making, and repair inside the craft became epistemic maintenance. Those are explained in the next section.

Findings

The findings are organized around four recurring ways collaborators defined news literacy: defending professional boundaries, reasserting journalistic authority, constructing

civic identity, and performing epistemic maintenance. Across these themes, journalists use news literacy as a symbolic resource to name institutional values, respond to perceived threats, and position journalism's place in a shifting information ecosystem. Within each section, I explain definitions in two layers. First, I identify the metajournalistic function a definition performs: whether it advances a normative claim about what journalism should be, a cognitive claim about what journalism is, or a sociocultural claim about how journalism is perceived. Second, I locate the type of boundary work it enacts (expansion, expulsion, or protection of autonomy) and the dimension on which it operates (participants, practices, or professionalism) while noting the primary 5C a theme activates. Taken together, these four sections show the journalists' definitions are not merely pedagogical; they are metajournalistic discourse that stands in for broader struggles over legitimacy, authority, and trust. In naming who counts, which practices matter, and why journalism still deserves deference, journalists use news literacy to reclaim epistemic ground and reassert the profession's continued relevance, one definition at a time.

News Literacy as a Defense of Professional Boundaries

Journalists frequently used news literacy as a discursive tool to defend the integrity of journalism against perceived external threats. In this theme, definitions were less concerned with audience skills and more focused on reasserting internal norms, policing who counts as a journalist, and reinforcing the legitimacy of professional practice. These definitions tended to operate on the normative level of metajournalistic discourse, articulating what journalism ought to be, and often enacted boundary work through expulsion or protection of autonomy. In other words, journalists leaned on news literacy talk to hold a line, naming what belongs inside journalism and what should remain outside. This is not only a defensive posture; it is also an attempt to stabilize meaning under uncertainty by fixing the category of journalism in the minds of their imaginary audience.

Creation was especially prominent in this theme. Journalists framed news literacy as requiring an understanding of professional production norms, especially verification, ethical sourcing, and editorial judgment. These references frequently worked to expel "non-journalistic" actors or practices, such as influencers, partisan outlets, or content farms, from the category of legitimate news. For instance, one collaborator wrote: "News literacy means understanding the difference between journalism and content made to manipulate emotions or reinforce political beliefs." The work this sentence does is boundary drawing: it asks readers to distinguish, and by distinguishing, to exclude. The action is to distinguish, which keeps the primary work at the level of content, while the metajournalistic function is cognitive because it asserts what journalism is. This definition draws a clear boundary between journalism and other media forms, establishing a professional standard based on motive and method. This move is expulsion: manipulative content is marked as outside the professional domain, and the criteria for exclusion are motives and methods rather than topic or format. Other journalists emphasized the protection of autonomy by underscoring the institutional pressures that threaten journalistic practice. In these cases, definitions pointed to newsroom cuts, management interference, or external editorial pressure as threats that news literacy should help audiences recognize. As one journalist put it: "True news literacy means

being aware of how economic and political forces shape what makes it into the news." Here, news literacy is doing protective work by making constraints legible. The claim serves a sociocultural purpose by explaining how journalism is perceived when external forces are strong. It suggests that the boundary move, rather than becoming a protection of autonomy, is more about judging output with those constraints in view. This is a strategic move: it pre-emptively defends editorial judgments by relocating part of the accountability to the surrounding system. These translate everyday moves into news-literate exclusion criteria and then situate those criteria within real institutional limits. These criteria teach audiences that who qualifies as a journalist and what qualifies as journalism are determined by practice and context, not just by labels.

Also folded into this theme were definitions that subtly defended who has the right to speak as a journalist. While not always explicit, some definitions worked to differentiate professional journalists from non-professionals or citizen contributors—an act of boundary protection over participants through context. These responses rarely invoked exclusionary language directly, but they framed literacy in terms of being able to identify "real journalists" or "trained professionals," implicitly limiting journalistic legitimacy to certain credentials or affiliations. The appeal here is normative more than descriptive: news literacy is cast as recognition professionalism as a civic virtue, not merely recognition of information. In practice, this shifts the burden of proof from the text to the journalist, which is a classic way boundary work operates on the participant dimension.

In addition to creation, the content domain played a prominent role in these boundary-defining definitions. Collaborators used news literacy to draw epistemic distinctions between journalism and other forms of information, particularly partisan media, advocacy outlets, and entertainment content. These responses often linked news literacy to the ability to recognize fairness, balance, and bias, positioning professional journalism as the gold standard of truth-telling. One collaborator wrote: "News literacy is about being able to tell the difference between opinion and reporting, between fact and spin." The action is sorting with consequences. To sort is to assign authority, and to assign authority is to mark some practices as out of bounds. The function remains cognitive because it defines what journalism is supposed to be at the level of texts. The context domain also appeared in ways that reinforced boundary lines, particularly about professionalism and legitimacy. Definitions that invoke broader structural factors, such as legal protections, press freedom, or institutional trust, often do so to reinforce the idea that journalism operates within a distinct ethical and civic framework. These definitions framed journalism not just as a method but as a social institution deserving of protection. One collaborator explained: "News literacy means understanding how the press works within a democracy, and why it matters that reporters are trained and held accountable." This is a clear case of normative boundary work, positioning journalism as a unique democratic actor whose legitimacy is rooted in professionalization and accountability.

Across these examples, collaborators mobilized news literacy as a way to shield journalism from encroachment, whether by partisan media, misinformation, or undifferentiated digital content. These definitions often relied on normative language, asserting what journalism should be, while simultaneously enacting boundary strategies across all three dimensions identified by Carlson and Lewis (2015): participants, practices, and professionalism. Journalists defended the value of trained professionals, affirmed traditional practices like sourcing and verification, and rejected alternative forms of media content

that challenged their epistemic authority. Even brief definitions served to reestablish clear lines around journalistic identity at a time when those lines feel increasingly unstable. This theme is distinct from the authority-reassertion theme that follows: here, news literacy polices the perimeter and secures autonomy; there, news literacy justifies deference by narrating processes as a warrant for trust. What remains largely unspoken in this defensive register are questions of inward critique and access. Definitions rarely ask where standards came from, whose knowledge they have historically centered, or how uneven access to news shapes a person's ability to meet these expectations. Those silences are taken up in the discussion.

News Literacy as a Reassertion of Journalistic Authority

A second discursive pattern evident in journalists' definitions was the use of news literacy to reassert journalism's epistemic authority. In these responses, journalists positioned news literacy not just as a defensive boundary but as a means of reaffirming the profession's central role in producing truth, clarifying facts, and guiding public understanding. These definitions were less about protecting against external threats and more about elevating the status of journalism itself. As such, they typically performed a cognitive function, explaining what journalism *is* and why it remains essential, and enacted boundary work by expanding professionalism or protecting epistemic legitimacy. In this framing, news literacy is not only an action by audiences but also a call to defer to a standards-based practice that earns trust through method.

The content domain dominated this cluster, particularly in definitions that framed journalism as a superior or singular mode of knowledge production. Collaborators frequently emphasized objectivity, balance, evidence, and accuracy as markers of trustworthy reporting, contrasting these with other, lesser forms of content. One journalist wrote: "News literacy is the ability to determine the credibility of news and to recognize standards of fact-based journalism to know what to trust, share and act on." The predicate action here is determine and recognize, which keeps the primary code in Content; analytically, the sentence performs cognitive work by naming standards as the warrant for trust, and it enacts boundary expansion by inviting deference to professionalism rather than simple source familiarity. Another collaborator wrote: "The ability to identify news reporting that is high-quality, objective and analytical, and to identify reporting that is not." This is again Content, but the payoff is epistemic, since quality is anchored in the profession's criteria rather than personal preference. Some collaborators framed this authority in institutional or historical terms, drawing on journalism's legacy role in democracy as a reason for its elevated status. In these cases, the context domain emerged, often with normative overtones but grounded in cognitive assertions. One collaborator described news literacy as: "Following reliable, established news outlets that adhere to professional standards of reporting the truth with fairness, balance and facts." Here, the definition performs boundary work by expanding public recognition of journalism's expertise while implicitly excluding informal or amateur news practices. Crucially, the appeal rests on standards as a public good, not on brand loyalty, which signals protection of epistemic legitimacy rather than simple gatekeeping.

Other collaborators emphasized the process of journalism, especially editorial judgment and verification, as justification for journalism's privileged epistemic role. These definitions, rooted in the creation domain, presented journalism as a craft worthy of

trust because of how news is made. One definition read: "Understanding how the news is made, how reporters and editors collect, vet, verify and communicate information." Here the action is to understand how reporting gets done, which puts the primary code in Creation. The point is not transparency for its own sake. It is to secure deference. By inviting readers into verification, sourcing, and editorial judgment, these definitions turn process into a warrant for trust and extend professionalism outward. Another collaborator puts it simply: "Knowing how news works, from fact-gathering to presentation and everything in between." Process knowledge is framed as the route to justified trust, a way to keep reported work from being treated as equivalent to influencer updates or opinion threads. A third definition adds a reflexive note: "Understanding the basics of journalism and its limitations, such as that a story might have incomplete information and how to judge whether a source is reputable." The admission of limits does not loosen authority. It recasts authority as competent and accountable, since the judgment asked of readers rests on professional criteria.

News Literacy as a Civic Identity Project

A third pattern that emerged across collaborator definitions involved framing news literacy as a moral or civic obligation—a marker of democratic participation and an ethical relationship between citizens and the press. In these definitions, journalists positioned news literacy not simply as a set of skills or attitudes, but as a reflection of one's identity as a member of a democratic public. These responses tended to perform a normative metajournalistic function, asserting what journalism and its audiences *ought* to be. The boundary work here frequently operated through expansion, broadening who is responsible for journalism's success. However, moments of expulsion also appeared when collaborators described the public as neglectful or resistant to their civic duties. News literacy is defined as a way of showing up in public life, not just a way of processing texts.

The most common discursive domain in this theme was context, especially when collaborators situated journalism within a larger democratic ecosystem. These definitions often describe news literacy as a necessary precondition for civic life, something that undergirds informed participation, voting, public discourse, and institutional trust. One collaborator wrote: "News literacy means understanding how journalism functions so that people can participate meaningfully in democracy." Another defined it more broadly as "a way of being a good citizen in a time when information is everywhere and accountability is scarce." Rather than naming civics abstractly, respondents tie news literacy to consequence and salience, for example: "The capacity to understand the news, their significance and their impact on society." Others connect civic responsibility to everyday habits, asking readers to diversify what they see and hear: "One should adapt a 'news diet', selecting from several sources of information and including voices with whom you may not agree." News literacy reads as a civic value rather than a checklist of skills. It expands responsibility from newsrooms to the public, casting news literacy not merely as a skill but as a civic value essential to the health of democracy and the well-being of society. These definitions perform normative expansion, articulating a vision of citizenship in which journalism and the public are mutually dependent.

The consumption domain appeared frequently in these definitions, particularly in ways that called for critical thinking, responsibility, and sustained attention. Collaborators

described news literacy as an ethic of engagement: a way for individuals to discipline themselves against distraction, misinformation, and ideological manipulation. One journalist explained: "News literacy is knowing how to think critically about what you read and why it matters to be informed, even when it's uncomfortable." Another emphasized that "people need to want to know the truth and be willing to face it when it doesn't confirm their biases." Several definitions ask for active work, not passive intake: "News literacy is the ability to read and consume news actively and through a critical lens, it's also an ability to evaluate the source of the news you consume." Others specify routines that signal care for common facts: "Knowing credible news sources and seeking more than one source on news." These definitions put the burden on habits that can be practiced and recognized, which is where the civic identity claim takes on everyday form. Journalists' definitions reflect a deep-seated concern not only about public misinformation but about public *willfulness*. While still couched in civic terms, these definitions imply that audiences bear responsibility for their vulnerability to manipulation, thus combining sociocultural function with a subtle form of boundary work over practices.

Some journalists took a more hopeful or inclusive tone, envisioning news literacy as a space for shared civic effort between journalists and audiences. In these cases, creation and consumption often appeared together, framing news literacy as a reciprocal contract rather than a one-way transmission. Here, reciprocity is framed through provenance and judgment: "Not just the ability to understand the news itself, but where it came from, why it's important, and whether or not it should be trusted." And through deliberate triangulation: "The ability to use a variety of sources to gather high-quality information and the discernment and critical thinking skills to make sense of it." These definitions expand the circle of accountability without dissolving journalistic norms. They invite the public into journalism's epistemic culture as co-stewards. At the same time, this civic vision was not without ambivalence. A few respondents implied that disengagement undermines the pact of shared facts, though most emphasized invitation over exclusion. These statements carry moral weight. While not overtly exclusionary, they cast doubt on the public's capacity or willingness to uphold journalism's civic function, thus performing sociocultural boundary work against behaviors that undermine epistemic reciprocity.

Unlike circulation-focused claims that center on platform routing, civic-identity definitions stay with dispositions and routines. They ask people to widen their inputs, verify unfamiliar claims, and connect stories to everyday life. This theme highlights how journalists perceive news literacy as more than just knowledge or technique; it is a discursive claim about belonging, obligation, and care. By tying news literacy to democratic participation, collaborators positioned journalism not only as a civic institution but as a shared ethical enterprise. These definitions reflect a desire to reestablish journalism's social contract and to reassert the possibility of an engaged, informed, and responsible public. In doing so, they perform metajournalistic work that is as aspirational as it is critical, imagining news literacy not as a checklist but as a civic stance.

News Literacy as Epistemic Maintenance

Journalists also used news literacy as a way to describe the ongoing, often invisible work of maintaining professional coherence, moral clarity, and epistemic stability within journalism. These definitions did not emphasize external threats, civic values, or boundary

policing as directly as the other themes. Instead, they revealed how journalists use the language of news literacy to make sense of their own exhaustion, disorientation, and continued commitment to truth-telling amid crisis. This theme reflects the affective dimension of metajournalistic discourse and operates primarily on the sociocultural and cognitive levels, where journalists reflect on what journalism means to them and what it costs. In that sense, literacy talk functions as a quiet practice of repair, a way to hold the craft together when external recognition is thin.

The domain of consumption was central to this cluster, especially in definitions that described public disengagement, hostility, or confusion as emotionally and professionally destabilizing. Collaborators often spoke of news literacy as something that *should* exist but doesn't, casting the public's failure to engage as not only frustrating but also a source of burnout. One wrote: "News literacy is the thing I wish more people had. It would make our jobs less soul-crushing." Another offered: "It's hard to keep going when people don't care whether what they're reading is true." These are not merely complaints; they are moments of epistemic reckoning. News literacy, in these definitions, becomes a symbolic site where journalists offload affect, express fatigue, and reassert a sense of mission despite the psychological toll. The action implied here is persistence in care. To read these lines is to hear professionals trying to keep faith with the work, even when that faith is not returned. In several definitions, this strain was tied directly to the circulation domain, particularly to algorithmic distortion and platform-driven misrecognition. Collaborators expressed frustration that good reporting is buried, misinterpreted, or rendered irrelevant by the logics of virality. One journalist explained: "News literacy is an understanding of the way news organizations and news aggregators function, aimed at better recognizing the filters and biases through which content is produced and presented." These definitions reveal how journalists see news literacy not only as a pedagogical need but as a structural failure and an inability of the information environment to support epistemic care. News literacy names the gap between labor and visibility, between what is carefully made and what the system allows to be met. Autonomy is protected not by drawing tighter borders, but by shoring up meaning through explanation, which keeps the work intelligible to those who do it. The protection runs deeper than institutional independence; it safeguards journalism's sense-making footing in an environment that rarely rewards truth.

The creation domain also appeared here, but in more introspective ways. Collaborators discussed the ethics, habits, and emotional labor involved in producing news in an environment where truth is devalued and trust is scarce. One wrote: "Understanding how the news gathering process works, what the limitations of the media are, and how individual reporters and editors' opinions can bias them." Another described news literacy as "a way to restore some meaning to this work." These definitions resist collapse into cynicism, but they reflect a journalism under pressure, trying to remain grounded in ethical production even as its authority frays. The affective load here is not performative; it is weary. These journalists use news literacy discourse to hold on to their sense of purpose, even when its impact feels distant or uncertain. Process talk is less a bid for deference than a reminder to the self: the work is worth doing because of how it is done. A few journalists explicitly articulated this maintenance function in philosophical terms, suggesting that news literacy serves as a kind of epistemic scaffolding for a profession in transition. One wrote: "News literacy is a way to hold the line. To remind ourselves

and others why this still matters." Another explained: "It's the thread that connects our work to the public. Without it, the whole thing unravels." These definitions are more than symbolic gestures. They reveal the discursive and emotional labor involved in sustaining journalism's meaning internally, among practitioners, in the absence of reliable external affirmation. The boundary work here is restorative: not drawing people out or pulling more people in, but shoring up the conditions under which the work can still feel intelligible.

This final theme highlights a dimension often overlooked in news literacy discourse: its use as a self-soothing, sense-making, and emotionally generative practice within journalism itself. While most definitions focus outward, toward publics, platforms, or institutions, these responses turn inward. They demonstrate that journalists do not simply define news literacy for others; they use it to maintain their epistemic integrity. In doing so, they perform boundary work that is not defensive or exclusionary, but restorative. News literacy here becomes a fragile but vital discursive space where journalists can name their strain, reaffirm their ethics, and maintain a tenuous hold on professional meaning amid disinformation, disinterest, and doubt.

Discussion

Journalists are rarely asked to define news literacy in their own words. Yet, as this study shows, when given the opportunity, they offer more than descriptions of audience skills or media competencies. Their definitions are reflective and sometimes defensive, revealing what it means to practice journalism in a time of skepticism, information disorder, and institutional strain. News literacy, in their telling, is not just a concept for the public. It is also a way to explain and defend the work of journalism itself. Rather than providing a fixed or universal definition, journalists draw from personal experience, professional norms, and broader cultural tensions. Their language conveys values such as transparency, verification, and civic responsibility, but also expresses frustration, fatigue, and a sense of being misunderstood. In this sense, news literacy becomes a site of identity work. Journalists use it to position themselves within a shifting media environment and to make sense of the expectations placed upon them. These moves align with Carlson's (2016) conceptualization of metajournalistic discourse, which refers to the rhetorical and symbolic practices through which journalism defines and defends its professional role in moments of disruption. This discussion interprets those definitions through that framework.

What News Literacy Is

When journalists talk about news literacy, they are not offering a checklist of skills or a fixed body of knowledge. Instead, they are engaging in a layered discursive act by mapping a professional terrain under pressure, defending its boundaries, and reasserting its relevance. Their language reveals that news literacy is less about reading headlines critically and more about navigating an unstable information system while upholding journalism's core commitments. Through their definitions, journalists employ the discourse of literacy to reflect on what journalism is, what it ought to be, and why it remains relevant. At its core, news literacy is invoked as a form of boundary work. Many definitions operate

to preserve the distinction between legitimate journalism and deviant actors, practices, or epistemologies. This defense of professional boundaries—seen in definitions that emphasize verification, trained judgment, and ethical rigor—mirrors Carlson and Lewis's (2015) description of journalistic boundary work as a mechanism for expelling non-journalistic forms while reinforcing internal norms. News literacy, in this context, is not neutral; it is a tool for safeguarding the conditions of journalistic legitimacy.

Yet journalists do more than defend; they also reassert authority. Across definitions, journalists position news literacy as a cognitive framework that differentiates journalism from "spin," "bias," or "opinion." Their words suggest a continued investment in journalism's epistemic claim to truth. This is not authority assumed; it is authority that must be reestablished. Journalists use news literacy to articulate how their labor, training, and institutional values elevate their work above other forms of content. This echoes the cognitive dimension of metajournalistic discourse: definitions become a way for journalists to explain and justify journalism's distinctiveness in an environment where its epistemic authority can no longer be taken for granted. Crucially, many definitions also frame news literacy as a civic identity project. Journalists describe literacy as something audiences must cultivate not only to be informed, but also to be engaged and responsible members of a democratic society. In doing so, they position journalism as more than an institution; it becomes an ethical infrastructure that supports participatory citizenship. This normative discourse expands the boundaries of journalism outward, asking the public to co-own the responsibility of meaning-making. Journalists here are not simply describing news use. They are imagining a civic culture in which journalistic values are shared and sustained.

But not all definitions are forward-facing or aspirational. A significant number reveal an affective undertow—language shaped by disillusionment, exhaustion, and uncertainty. These definitions point to what might be called the epistemic maintenance function of news literacy. They demonstrate how journalists utilize the discourse of literacy to maintain professional meaning in the face of eroding trust, platform distortion, and audience apathy. As Carlson (2016) suggests, metajournalistic discourse intensifies in times of disruption. For many collaborators, defining news literacy was not just an outward-facing task—it was a form of internal repair. These functions suggest that journalists see news literacy as more than a set of critical competencies. It is a reflexive, symbolic performance, a way to articulate journalism's civic role, defend its practices, and re-center its authority. Literacy becomes relational. It connects awareness, evaluation, and responsibility within an information ecosystem marked by instability. And it positions both the journalist and the public as agents within that system, navigating power, perception, and purpose.

Although I focus on news literacy based on the question journalists were asked, the findings sit within a broader world of adjacent literacies that often overlap and travel under different names: media literacy (critical reading of texts and power), information literacy (credible retrieval and evaluation), digital literacy (platformed practices and skills), civic literacy (participation and public reasoning), and platform/algorithmic literacy (how visibility is shaped) (Mihailidis et al., 2021). Rather than adjudicate labels, I treat these as family resemblances. The contribution here is to show how journalists themselves sort this terrain through metajournalistic talk. "Defending professional boundaries" aligns with media-literacy concerns about genre and power; "reasserting authority" draws on information-literacy warrants for trust; "civic identity" leans into civic-literacy dispositions

and routines; and "epistemic maintenance" foregrounds the affective and infrastructural awareness often captured in digital and platform literacies. In this way, the analysis clarifies how literacies braid together in practice and why the term "news literacy" routinely bears work that exceeds its usual audience-only scope.

What News Literacy Isn't

While journalists articulate news literacy as a multidimensional and ethically engaged practice, from discerning bias to understanding production systems, their definitions are just as notable for what they do not include. These silences are not accidental. They reflect the implicit boundaries of journalistic discourse, what Carlson and Lewis (2015) might call a form of selectivity, in which certain professional narratives are elevated while others are excluded. What journalists present as institutional investments, epistemic habits, and affective strain shape a coherent vision of literate engagement.

Perhaps the most visible silence concerns access. Across definitions, there is a recurring assumption that news literacy is achievable, if not inevitable, as long as individuals are sufficiently motivated. But rarely do collaborators address the material, educational, or technological inequities that shape who can become news literate in the first place. The figure of the news-literate consumer is often imagined as someone with time, resources, and a baseline of civic fluency. In this, journalists replicate a boundary of professionalism that presumes rational agency while ignoring structural precarity. The very systemic forces that journalists ask audiences to recognize—economic pressures, political influence, platform distortion—are curiously absent when it comes to the conditions of audience participation. This absence also extends to the role of emotion. Many journalists define news literacy in terms of analytical distance: discernment, judgment, and skepticism. The ideal reader is envisioned as a detached evaluator, capable of distinguishing fact from feeling, objectivity from emotion. But this framing privileges journalism's traditional epistemology while erasing the deeply emotional ways in which people engage with information. As a result, literacy becomes aspirationally rational, excluding those who respond to news through fear, outrage, or empathy. The emotional labor of newswork, central to the theme of epistemic maintenance, is thus externalized. Journalists acknowledge their own fatigue and anxiety, but those same affective dynamics are not extended to the public.

Journalists' definitions rarely consider community or collective practices of engagement. While individual responsibility is emphasized through source-checking, fact-verifying, or interpreting bias, there is little attention to how literacy might be practiced in communal, activist, or informal spaces. News literacy is treated as a personal discipline, not a social or cultural formation. This replicates the professional individualism that journalism often valorizes: the lone reporter, the discerning reader. It marginalizes alternative knowledge systems and overlooks how marginalized communities have long developed their own media literacies in response to exclusion and misrepresentation. Even in domains like circulation, where journalists are most attuned to systemic forces, the role of platforms is only minimally acknowledged. Collaborators often mention "algorithms" or "social media," but their definitions stop short of interrogating the political economy of digital infrastructure. The absence of sustained critique of platform logics, corporate curation, or algorithmic opacity reflects a lingering belief in the primacy of newsroom

authority, even as platform power reshapes how the public finds and engages with news. This silence reveals a contradiction: while journalists express concern about misinformation and public confusion, they often understate the role of technological gatekeepers in manufacturing that confusion.

Perhaps most striking is the lack of reflexivity about journalism itself. While definitions frequently call on the public to be critical of content, few invite the same critique of journalistic norms. Journalists invoke trust, professionalism, and fact-based reporting as the foundations of literacy, yet rarely engage with the profession's own historical exclusions, epistemic blind spots, or ideological complicity. This is a form of metajournalistic defense, a reassertion of authority that displaces accountability outward. By focusing on "bad actors" and audience shortcomings, journalists skirt the need to interrogate their own role in the informational crisis they seek to address. These silences are not merely absences; they are part of the work that metajournalistic discourse performs. They shape the contours of legitimate knowledge, define who counts as a competent news user, and delineate which institutions are subject to critique. What emerges is a model of news literacy that is rhetorically expansive but ideologically constrained. It celebrates democratic engagement while assuming a relatively narrow subject position. It encourages critique while deflecting inward reflection. It highlights systemic influences on journalism while underplaying the systems that limit public access and participation.

In this way, journalists' definitions of news literacy mark not only what the public should know, but what journalism is willing to examine, and what it would prefer to leave unspoken. These findings show that news literacy is not merely a set of audience competencies. It is a symbolic site of professional meaning-making that does metajournalistic work: defending boundaries, reasserting epistemic authority, constructing civic imaginaries, and absorbing the emotional costs of working amid uncertainty and mistrust. News literacy is not neutral or static; it is invoked strategically, sometimes aspirational and sometimes defensive, to hold the craft together and justify its relevance. It names what journalism hopes the public will understand and what journalism needs to believe about itself.

In light of this, I keep the audience-facing definition of news literacy (Tully et al. 2022) intact and propose adding a practice-facing, ethical component grounded in my findings. In addition to what publics should know and do, news literacy includes what journalists do with it: deliberate reflection on method and constraint (Creation and Context), clear communication of sourcing, evidence, and genre distinctions (Content), attention to how stories travel and are surfaced (Circulation), and cultivation of habits that sustain care for truth under strain (Consumption). Read this way, audience competencies and professional practice belong to a single ecology: what publics are asked to do as news-literate consumers, journalists also do and show as news-literate producers; therefore:

> News literacy is a shared framework that includes both audience competencies and a practice component. For audiences, it remains the ability to interpret, evaluate, and act on news across context, creation, content, circulation, and consumption remains. For practitioners, it also describes a professional practice: explaining key decisions, acknowledging limits and trade-offs, and inviting publics into the routines and standards that warrant trust, while making visible how production, structural conditions, and platform dynamics shape what is seen and understood.

This addition challenges models that center only on passive consumption or technical skills. Instead, it emphasizes relational accountability between producers and publics, between values and practices, and between journalism's ideals and its institutional realities. Tully et al. (2022) offer one of the field's most comprehensive frameworks for defining and measuring news literacy. Their model maps key competencies that help audiences interpret, evaluate, and act upon news and should remain foundational for educators, researchers, and intervention designers. My analysis builds on that framework by extending its use to journalists, reading the five domains not only as audience competencies but also as sites of metajournalistic practice. In doing so, this reframing makes two conceptual moves:

(1) It recognizes journalists as meaning-makers of news literacy, not just as instructors of public knowledge; and
(2) It treats news literacy as a reflexive practice within journalism, where definitions serve professional, emotional, and ideological functions beyond pedagogy alone.

Table 2 visualizes this development.

Limitations and Future Research

Although demographic and professional data about the journalists who contributed to the definitions were available, this analysis did not disaggregate findings by variables such as newsroom size, geographic region, media platform, years of experience, or positional identity (e.g., editor, reporter, columnist). This decision aimed to reveal shared discursive patterns across definitions rather than explain the variation between them. Because the data are U.S.-based, the discourses I describe should be read as context-dependent; in systems where journalism is organized and funded differently, boundary work and authority claims may take other forms. Future research could expand this work by examining how definitions of news literacy vary among professional cohorts, institutional contexts, or identity categories. A comparative approach could shed light on how factors such as race, gender, political orientation, or institutional type influence journalists' expectations of the public and their definitions of journalistic responsibility. While this study centers on journalists' voices, it serves as a necessary corrective to prior work that privileges educational or policy-driven definitions; however, it does not triangulate these perspectives with those of other actors in the media ecosystem. Future research may explore how journalists' conceptualizations align with or differ from those of educators, students, civic organizations, or news audiences themselves. This comparative discursive mapping could reveal epistemological fault lines and clarify where interventions in news literacy education are most needed.

The study analyzes how journalists define news literacy, but not how they operationalize these beliefs in practice. As journalism scholars have long argued (Ryfe 2012), the ideals articulated by professionals often diverge from the routines, constraints, and economic pressures that govern their day-to-day work. Ethnographic studies, content analyses, or interviews could explore how these definitions are enacted or compromised within newsroom cultures, editorial decisions, and public engagement strategies. This would help assess the performative dimension of news literacy discourse: what gets translated

Table 2. News literacy definition adapted.

Term	Tully et al. (2022) definition	Metajournalistic reframing	Journalist quote	Example in journalistic practice
Context	The social, legal, and economic environment in which news is produced.	How journalists define their profession in relation to shifting sociopolitical, technological, and epistemic environments.	"An understanding of the economic/ business landscape that shapes particular sources of news."	Internal ethics audits; newsroom mission statements that highlight democratic or community-centered values.
Creation	The process by which journalists and other actors conceive, report, and produce news.	How journalists narrate their own processes as credible, transparent, and guided by institutional norms and professional ethics.	"An understanding of how the news is created. The ability to tell what news outlets/ articles are creditable. An understanding of the structure of how editor's choose to run stories and the basic ethics that reporters should follow."	Annotated reporting; editor's notes; transparency explainers; use of Trust Kits or source transparency tools.
Content	The qualitative characteristics of a news story that distinguish it from other types of content.	How journalists describe what counts as real news, credible information, or factual storytelling—often in contrast to opinion, entertainment, or propaganda.	"Being able to discern misinformation from fact-based news and being able to discern credible sources from ones that push a particular political viewpoint or are designed specifically to sway opinion on an issue or spread misinformation and conspiracy theories."	Training reporters on source attribution and headline clarity; visual cues to distinguish news, opinion, and analysis.
Circulation	The process through which news is distributed and spread among potential audiences.	How journalists reflect on the limits of their control over news flow—particularly the roles played by platforms, algorithms, and social media virality.	"Knowing where your news content is coming from and how to check what you are consuming is accurate."	Social media training; engagement teams analyzing platform metrics; collaborations with platforms to flag misinformation.
Consumption	The personal and social factors that shape how individuals access, interpret, and act on news.	How journalists talk about public engagement, skepticism, and trust as reflections of broader civic strain—and how this contributes to emotional, ethical, or professional stress.	"Is the ability to understand and consume news with the background of the different variables/ biases at play. The ability to analyze and understand news with a critical eye."	Trauma-informed reporting protocols; journalist safety and wellness initiatives; newsroom mental health programs.

into practice, what is lost, and why. Additionally, this study foregrounds what journalists include in their definitions of literacy but does not empirically track the impacts of those definitions on public understanding or behavior. Future work could translate the themes identified here, such as bias detection, source triangulation, and ethical discernment, into behavioral indicators for study across contexts. Scholars such as Vraga et al. (2021) have called for this kind of operationalization, and the present findings provide a robust discursive foundation from which to develop survey items, experimental designs, and media literacy assessments.

While this research identifies key silences around affect, structural inequality, platform power, and journalism's own complicity, it does not fully account for the institutional conditions that make those silences durable. Further inquiry might adopt historical, organizational, or critical ethnographic methods to explore how journalistic norms, educational traditions, and professional incentives shape the boundaries of what can be said about literacy from within the field. These silences are not accidental; they are produced and can be disrupted. Taken together, these limitations point not to a deficit in the current study but to the ongoing and necessary work of reimagining news literacy as a critical, relational, and reflexive practice. Future research can and should build on this study to explore not just how news literacy is defined, but how it is negotiated, enacted, and transformed.

Conclusion

If journalists define news literacy as a way for the public to understand, trust, and support journalism, then an equally important question must be asked: How might journalism become literate about itself? This analysis reveals not only what journalists expect of their audiences but also what journalism must confront internally, including contradictions, exclusions, and unacknowledged aspects. Extending the definition of news literacy to include a practice component makes the practice of news literacy work explicit. News literacy, then, is not only what the public knows and does, but also journalists work with in everyday decisions: explaining key choices, acknowledging limits and trade-offs, and inviting people into the standards that warrant trust.

To enact this practice, journalism must move beyond performative transparency and adopt a structural approach to reflexivity. This involves narrating the mechanisms of editorial judgment, making visible how decisions are made, which voices are prioritized, and how institutional routines shape the production of meaning. It also requires turning critical attention inward to the profession's historic and ongoing complicity in marginalization, narrative erasure, and the privileging of certain epistemologies over others. As Carlson (2016) argues, metajournalistic discourse intensifies in moments of disruption; the instinct is to defend. Defense alone does not restore trust. Reflexivity does.

A practice component of news literacy softens the rigid separation between producer and public. Rather than treating audiences as flawed processors of information, journalists can recognize them as interpretive agents shaped by unequal access, emotional investment, and alternative ways of knowing. The implication is collaborative: expand professional boundaries to include community-informed reporting and dialogic engagement that goes beyond didactic correction. News Literacy, like trust, cannot be demanded. It is cultivated through shared labor and reciprocal accountability. Platform literacy belongs inside this practice. Many collaborators lamented algorithmic distortion, yet few definitions fully engaged how infrastructures mediate visibility, legitimacy, and meaning. A practice-oriented definition of news literacy would not only understand how content circulates, it would also report on it, reflect on it, and incorporate that awareness into the very stories it tells. This includes explaining how engagement is manufactured, how attention is monetized, and how opaque platform logics constrain editorial judgment. It also requires acknowledging that traditional notions of "reach" or "impact" are no longer neutral metrics; they are platformed artifacts, shaped by systems journalists

do not control but must learn to navigate. Finally, journalism must make room for affect. While journalists' definitions often framed news literacy as rational analysis, the findings of this study reveal something deeper: fatigue, disillusionment, and unresolved emotional strain. These affective signals should not be pathologized or ignored. They should be understood as part of journalism's current epistemic condition. A practice-centered definition does not reject emotion but integrates it, recognizing that storytelling grounded in empathy, care, and narrative depth is not at odds with rigor; it is essential to it.

If news literacy is to be more than a disciplinary script for audiences, it must also become a professional ethic—a self-reflexive practice of transparency, responsiveness, and ethical transformation. It must become a news literate journalism, reflective and literate of itself (author, in press). Journalists cannot simply ask the public to trust them. They must continually demonstrate why trust is warranted, how it has been broken, and what it will take to build something more just, more open, and more worthy of shared belief.

Note

1. Practitioners need not use academic labels for their language to perform metajournalistic work. The analysis focuses on function (what the definition does) rather than declared intent or theoretical awareness. To address concerns about vagueness, I treat "news literacy" as an emic category: collaborators supplied their own wording, and I analyzed what their language does. The predicate-of-action rule anchors coding in observable verbs (e.g., distinguish, understand how, follow, verify) and maps each definition to a metajournalistic function, boundary move, and primary 5C domain.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Patrick R. Johnson:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Patrick R. Johnson http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1246-3080

References

Ashley, S., A. Maksl, and S. Craft. 2017. "News Media Literacy and Political Engagement: What's the Connection?" *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 9 (1): 79–98. https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2017-9-1-6.

Aufderheide, P. 1992. *Media literacy. A report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy* (Conference Report ED 365 294; Communications and Society, p. 43). Aspen Institute. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED365294.pdf.

Carlson, M. 2016. "Metajournalistic Discourse and the Meanings of Journalism: Definitional Control, Boundary Work, and Legitimation." *Communication Theory* 26 (4): 349–368. https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12088.

Carlson, M., and S. C. Lewis, eds. 2015. *Boundaries of Journalism: Professionalism, Practices and Participation*. London: Routledge.

Gioia, D. A., K. G. Corley, and A. L. Hamilton. 2012. "Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology." *Organizational Research Methods* 16 (1): 15–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428112452151.

Hanitzsch, T., and T. P. Vos. 2017. "Journalistic Roles and the Struggle Over Institutional Identity: The Discursive Constitution of Journalism." *Communication Theory* 27 (2): 115–135. https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12112.

Hobbs, R. 1998. "The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement." *Journal of Communication* 48 (1): 16–32. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1998.tb02734.x.

Hobbs, R., K. Donnelly, J. Friesem, and M. Moen. 2013. "Learning to Engage: How Positive Attitudes About the News, Media Literacy, and Video Production Contribute to Adolescent Civic Engagement." *Educational Media International* 50 (4): 231–246. https://doi.org/10.1080/09523987.2013.862364.

Jaakkola, M. 2022. "Journalists as Media Educators: Journalistic Media Education as Inclusive Boundary Work." *Journalism Practice* 16 (6): 1265–1285. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1844040.

Maksl, A., P. J. Boedeker, E. K. Vraga, S. Craft, M. Tully, and S. Ashley. 2024. "Developing and Validating a 15-Item True/False Measure of News Literacy Knowledge." *Communication Research* 0 (0). https://doi.org/10.1177/00936502241284406.

Malik, M., S. Cortesi, and U. Gasser. 2013. "The Challenges of Defining 'News Literacy'." *SSRN Electronic Journal* 20. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2342313.

Mihailidis, P., S. Ramasubramanian, M. Tully, B. Foster, E. Riewestahl, P. Johnson, and S. Angove. 2021. "Do Media Literacies Approach Equity and Justice?" *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 13 (2): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2021-13-2-1.

Mihailidis, P., and B. Thevenin. 2013. "Media Literacy as a Core Competency for Engaged Citizenship in Participatory Democracy." *American Behavioral Scientist* 57 (11): 1611–1622. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213489015.

Mihailidis, P., and S. Viotty. 2017. "Spreadable Spectacle in Digital Culture: Civic Expression, Fake News, and the Role of Media Literacies in "Post-Fact" Society." *American Behavioral Scientist* 61 (4): 441–454. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217701217.

Morris, K., and F. Yeoman. 2021. "Teaching Future Journalists the News: The Role of Journalism Educators in the News Literacy Movement." *Journalism Practice* 17 (7): 1573–1590. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1992599.

Ryfe, D. 2012. *Can Journalism Survive? An Inside Look at American Newsrooms*. Cambridge: Polity.

Scire, S. 2022, April 12. ""Crushing Resistance": Yet Again, Newsrooms Aren't Showing Up to the Industry's Largest Diversity Survey." *NiemanLab*. https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/04/crushing-resistance-Yet-again-newsrooms-arent-showing-up-to-the-industrys-largest-diversity-survey/.

Tully, M., A. Maksl, S. Ashley, E. K. Vraga, and S. Craft. 2022. "Defining and Conceptualizing News Literacy." *Journalism* 23 (8): 1589–1606. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849211005888.

Vos, T. P., and R. J. Thomas. 2018. "The Discursive Construction of Journalistic Authority in a Post-Truth Age." *Journalism Studies* 19 (13): 2001–2010. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2018.1492879.

Vraga, E. K., L. Bode, and M. Tully. 2022. "Creating News Literacy Messages to Enhance Expert Corrections of Misinformation on Twitter." *Communication Research* 49 (2): 245–267. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650219898094.

Vraga, E. K., and M. Tully. 2021. "News Literacy, Social Media Behaviors, and Skepticism Toward Information on Social Media." *Information, Communication & Society* 24 (2): 150–166. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1637445.

Vraga, E. K., M. Tully, A. Maksl, S. Craft, and S. Ashley. 2021. "Theorizing News Literacy Behaviors." *Communication Theory* 31 (1): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa005.

Appendix

Recode	Category	(*n*)
	Full survey	238
	Age	
1	Baby Boomer Generation (1946-64)	55
2	Generation X (1965-79)	60
3	Millennial Generation (1980-94)	73
4	Generation Z (1995-2012)	34
999	No response	16
	Leadership v. non-Leadership	
999	No response	1
	Non-Leadership	165
1	Designer/ Creative/ Visual	1
1	Photographer	1
1	Reporter	143
1	Writer	14
1	Videographer	2
1	Other (self-identified)	4
	Leadership	72
2	Department Head	7
2	Desk Head or Assignment Editor	2
2	Director	6
2	Editor-in-Chief/ Executive Editor	9
2	Managing Editor	14
2	Producer	11
2	Senior Editor	16
2	Other (self-identified)	7
	Employment Type	
1	Full-time	212
2	Part-time	8
3	Freelance	18
	Circulatory Reach	
1	Transnational	39
2	National	48
3	Regional	63
4	Local	88
	Geographic Location	
1	Midwest Region / East North Central Division: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin	22
2	Midwest Region / West North Central Division: Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota	15
3	Northeast Region / Middle Atlantic Division: New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania	22
4	Northeast Region / New England Division: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont	13
5	South Region / East South-Central Division: Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee	11
6	South Region / South Atlantic Division: Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia	32
7	South Region / West South-Central Division: Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas	8
8	West Region / Mountain Division: Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming	7
9	West Region / Pacific Division: Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington	12
10	National	47
11	Transnational	20
777	Don't know	1
999	No response	28
	Organization Ownership Structure	
1	Purely Private	148
2	Purely Public	50
3	Purely State	3
4	Mixed Ownership (Mixed ownership but mostly private, Mixed ownership but mostly public, Mixed ownership but mostly state-owned)	13
5	Student Media	1

(*Continued*)

Continued.

Recode	Category	(*n*)
777	Don't know	21
	Media Type (participants could select more than one option)	
1	Internet Native	36
2	Magazine	18
3	News Agency	23
4	Newspaper	100
5	Radio	33
6	Television	46
7	Other	9
9	More than one employer	15
	Reporting Focus	
1	Work on a Beat	111
2	Work on Various Topics	127
	Gender Identity[a]	
1	Male	125
2	Female	96
3	Non-Binary	2
4	Prefer to self-describe	1
999	No response	14
	Sexual Orientation	
1	Heterosexual	180
999	No response	14
	LGBTQ	44
2	Asexual	2
2	Bisexual	19
2	Gay	7
2	Lesbian	2
2	Pansexual	3
2	Prefer to Self-Describe	2
2	Queer	7
	Racial / Ethnic Identity	
1	White or Caucasian	188
999	No response	4
	BIPOC	36
2	Asian or Pacific Islander	6
2	Black or African American	8
2	Hispanic or Latino	7
2	Multiracial or Biracial	12
2	Native American or Alaskan Native	1
2	Prefer to Self-Describe[b]	2
	Education[c]	
999	No response	17
1	Journalism or Communication Degree	154
2	Degree is in a field other than Journalism or Communication	67
1	Journalism Degree	113
1	Communication Degree	23
1	Both Journalism and Communication Degrees	18
	Degree Level	211
1	Undertook some university studies, but no degree	10
2	College/Bachelor's degree or equivalent	136
3	Master's degree or equivalent	67
4	Doctorate or terminal degree	8
	Extracurricular Professionalization	
2	Participation in Both	116
1	Participation in One	67
0	Participation in Neither	37
	Student Media	
1	Student media	163
0	No student media	56
777	Don't know	1
999	No response	18

(*Continued*)

Continued.

Recode	Category	(*n*)
	Internship	
1	Internship	135
2	No internship	85
999	No response	18
	Political Affiliation	
777	Don't know	16
999	No response	18
	Republican	26
1	Independent-leaning Republican	13
1	Republican	6
1	Strong Republican	7
2	Independent	55
	Democrat	123
3	Independent-leaning Democrat	52
3	Democrat	45
3	Strong Democrat	26
	Political Ideology	
777	Don't know	10
999	No response	19
	Conservative	24
1	Strongly Conservative	5
2	Conservative	7
3	Somewhat Conservative	12
4	Moderate	48
	Liberal	137
5	Somewhat Liberal	37
6	Liberal	57
7	Strongly Liberal	43
	Annual Income	
1	$10,000–$19,999	1
2	$20,000–$29,999	6
3	$30,000–$39,999	30
4	$40,000–$49,999	28
5	$50,000–$59,999	26
6	$60,000–$69,999	20
7	$70,000–$79,999	21
8	$80,000–$89,999	19
9	$90,000–$99,999	16
10	$100,000 –$149,999	31
11	More than $150,000	18
777	Don't know	4
999	No response	18
	Religious Affiliation	
1	Buddhist	4
1	Jewish	14
2	No religious affiliation	110
1	Other[d]	5
777	Don't know	4
999	No response	18
1	Christian	83
1	Orthodox	5
1	Protestant / Lutheran	49
1	Catholic	29

[a]Transgender Male and Transgender Female were both options; what is included in this chart are only the options selected by the participating journalists.
[b]The two journalists described themselves as Lebanese and Middle Eastern/North African.
[c]High school diploma/GED and Associate's degree were both options for journalists to select; no journalist in this group of participants selected either option.
[d]Other responses included Quaker, Atheist, Agnostic (2), and Maronite.