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Creating a news literate journalism

A metacognitive model for journalism practice

By Patrick R. Johnson iD

Abstract
This article introduces News Literate Journalism, a metacognitive approach that redefines news literacy as a professional competency. Drawing on interviews with 30 journalists and grounded in news literacy and educational psychology, I argue that ethical, adaptive journalism relies on reflection, regulation and critical reasoning. These behaviors, though embedded in journalistic routines, are often overlooked. The approach presents a new framework for journalism education and practice, one that promotes transparency, fosters trust and supports democratic resilience.

N ews literacy research has primarily focused on the audience. From K–12 classrooms to adult civic engagement programs, scholars have rightly emphasized the need for publics to develop skills in evaluating sources, detecting misinformation, and interpreting news across platforms (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). Recent work by Tully and colleagues (2022) and Vraga et al. (2021) has taken this further, offering theoretical clarity and behavioral models of what news literacy can look like. However, the vast majority of this research stops at the consumer level. Rarely do we ask: What kind of literacies should journalists

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themselves be cultivating? And to what end? Journalists are often positioned as the solution to news literacy. Their work is held up as the standard that audiences must learn to navigate, trust, or resist. However, what happens when we turn that expectation inward? What does it mean for journalists themselves to be news literate, not in the sense of consuming news well, but in the sense of being reflective, deliberate and ethically attuned in how they report it? This article takes up that question.

To explore these questions, I conducted interviews with 30 working journalists from across the United States. Their reflections provide insight into how news literacy operates as more than a set of skills; it is also a moral narrative, a professional tension and, at times, an educational gap. The findings that follow are not about identifying who gets it "right" but about surfacing the ways journalists struggle with, internalize and sometimes resist the very idea of literacy in their work. The result is both theoretical and practical.

This article introduces News Literate Journalism, a concept that argues for a metacognitive approach to professional practice. Rather than treating news literacy as a set of standards to be externally taught or demonstrated, I approach it as an internal process, something enacted through reflection, awareness and adaptability in the messy, pressured context of real newsroom work. Drawing on interviews and reconstruction exercises with professional journalists, I aim to understand how journalists enact metacognitive routines in daily newswork, and how those routines can be formalized into a model that is teachable in newsrooms and journalism classrooms. The analysis identifies recurring practices and translates them into concrete recommendations for professional development and journalism education. I build that argument in this article by examining how journalists define news literacy for themselves and how these definitions shape their work. I propose a definition of News Literate Journalism that centers on metacognition, thinking about one's thinking, as a professional competency. I also argue that journalism education must account for this internal literacy if it wants to produce professionals who are not just ethical in intention but reflective in action. News Literate Journalism is not a label we give to "good" reporting; it is a process of awareness, questioning, and continual learning that makes better journalism possible.

Literature Review

News Literacy in Educational Practice

News literacy research has primarily focused on school-aged learners, with scholars promoting its integration in the classroom as a tool to foster civic engagement and critical thinking (Buckingham, 2000; Hobbs et al., 2013; Martens & Hobbs, 2015). In K–12 and undergraduate settings, media literacy has been shown to enhance students' motivation to consume and analyze news critically (Maksl et al., 2017; Vraga & Tully, 2016). Preservice teachers benefit from instructional training in news literacy to manage polarized or controversial classroom discussions (Bondy & Johnson, 2020). Similarly, journalism educators have employed learner-centered approaches and frameworks, such as the Frayer model, to explore definitions of journalism and news values (Bowe, 2019; Hosek, 2016). While interdisciplinary by nature (Alexander et al., 2008), news literacy education often emphasizes the consumption of news over its production. Teen audiences, for example, tend to encounter news incidentally and

are less intrinsically motivated to seek it out, necessitating more intentional pedagogical strategies (Blakston & Waller, 2022; Tamboer et al., 2022). Scholars have suggested that distinguishing between passive news consumption and active news literacy is vital for curriculum development (Morris & Yeoman, 2023).

Journalism schools are often viewed as professional pipelines, yet most scholarship focuses more on skills training than epistemological engagement (Adam, 2001; Mensing, 2010). Despite the synergy between journalism education and news literacy, very few studies address how journalism programs instill or reflect news-literate behaviors. Nonetheless, journalism education plays a crucial role in training students to report ethically and understand diverse communities (Fowler-Watt, 2023; Romano, 2015; Thomson et al., 2015). It can also enhance public trust when it centers on listening, care, and civic engagement (Robinson et al., 2021; Robinson & Johnson, 2024). Thus, journalism education should move beyond technical skills and embrace culturally relevant pedagogy and critical media literacy (Clark, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Doing so would position journalism as a hybrid institution, in which education and professionalization operate in tandem. Courses that incorporate algorithmic awareness, audience engagement, and global perspectives are better positioned to respond to journalism's "crisis of relevance" (Carlson et al., 2021; Powers, 2017). However, journalism education still contends with colonial epistemologies, elitism, and racial inequities (Alemán, 2014; de Beer, 2010; Taylor, 2004). Despite this, education remains a viable pathway for rethinking journalism's democratic function and its relationships to marginalized communities.

Historically, news literacy has been positioned as a consumer-centered framework. However, some scholars now argue for a producer-oriented shift that examines journalists' literacy practices (Jaakkola, 2022). This view casts journalists as educators who enact "journalistic media education" (JME) to help audiences navigate and interpret news. However, a key question remains: Are journalists themselves news literate? If journalists are to educate others, their capacity for news literacy must be examined. This study shifts the focus from audiences to journalists and proposes that news literacy should be treated as a professional competency, akin to ethics or investigative rigor. By repositioning news literacy from a consumer practice to a journalistic one, this study helps close critical gaps in journalism education, addresses the erosion of public trust, and offers a roadmap for rebuilding journalism's democratic promise. News Literate Journalism is thus both a theoretical construction and a call to action: one that demands education as journalism's enduring ethical and professional foundation.

Metacognition as a Concept: Reframing Journalism From the Inside Out

Metacognition, broadly defined as thinking about one's own thinking, offers journalism studies a necessary epistemic recalibration. Rather than focusing solely on what journalists know or do, metacognition redirects attention to how they come to know, how they reflect on those processes, and how they adjust their work accordingly. This inward turn isn't introspection for its own sake; it is a conceptual move that positions metacognition as a foundational tool for navigating complexity, evaluating ethical decisions, and sustaining cognitive resilience in the face of professional uncertainty. Drawing from its roots in educational psychology, metacognition involves both

knowledge of one's cognitive processes (Flavell, 1979) and the regulation of those processes through monitoring, planning, and evaluating (Schraw & Dennison, 1994). These dual functions enable a recursive attentiveness, a reflexive loop that is critical for journalists operating in contested information environments. Within education research, metacognition is consistently linked to self-regulated learning and long-term adaptability (Pintrich, 2002; Zimmerman, 2002), but its reach extends beyond the classroom. Cognitive science highlights the role of metacognitive strategies in enhancing memory, decision-making, and performance, particularly in high-stakes environments (Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1994; Nelson & Narens, 1994). Journalism shares this terrain. In moments of uncertainty (i.e., breaking news, editorial conflict, and ethical gray zones), it is not enough for reporters to follow procedure. They must actively reflect on their interpretive practices, question embedded assumptions, and recalibrate as needed. Metacognition makes this reflexivity visible and available for study.

This article argues that journalism cannot afford to treat metacognition as an ancillary skill or a soft virtue. Instead, it should be understood as a core professional competency, central to both the execution of journalistic labor and the cultivation of an ethical, adaptive newsroom culture. At a time when misinformation is rampant, trust in institutions is precarious, and journalistic objectivity is under scrutiny, metacognition enables journalists to critically examine their thinking before, during, and after producing news. It is a means of tracing how news works, not just what it is.

The distinction between metacognition and critical thinking also matters. Critical thinking is typically defined in terms of logical analysis, argument evaluation, and problem-solving (Ennis, 1987; Facione, 1990). Metacognition, in contrast, governs the application of those cognitive strategies; it is the regulatory system that activates, adjusts, or overrides them depending on context (Schraw et al., 2006; Veenman et al., 2006). In journalism, this means not simply verifying whether the right sources were cited or the facts were accurate, but also examining how sourcing decisions were made, what assumptions underpinned those choices, and what pressures (i.e., editorial, institutional, and algorithmic) influenced the story's trajectory. That kind of reflection demands more than skill; it requires sustained cognitive and ethical labor. When integrated into professional routines, metacognitive practices help journalists identify knowledge gaps, recognize habitual blind spots, and build resilience in the face of errors (Johnson et al., 2025). These practices also support greater transparency and accountability, not only to audiences but within the newsroom itself. As journalism education grapples with how to teach for uncertainty (Fowler-Watt, 2023), and as professional organizations struggle to reconcile normative ideals with structural constraints (Carlson et al., 2021), metacognition offers a bridge. It links the cognitive to the institutional, the personal to the systemic. And it does so by foregrounding reflection, regulation, and responsiveness as professional obligations rather than personal quirks (Johnson et al., 2025).

This conceptual grounding animates the approach of News Literate Journalism developed in this article. Rather than treating news literacy as something journalists teach others, this approach argues for literacy within the profession. This literacy emerges through metacognitive practice, which can enhance the process from the inside out. In this view, journalists not only adhere to ethics and transparency but also internalize and operationalize these values through conscious, ongoing self-assessment. This turn toward metacognition reframes journalism as an active, responsive, and deeply situated form of knowledge work, one in which the ability to think about

thinking becomes not only valuable but also vital. While dominant approaches to journalism emphasize the relationship between the journalist and the public, News Literate Journalism instead centers on the journalist's relationship with their own thinking. In this approach, metacognition is both a behavior and a value. It reflects not only what journalists do, but also how they evaluate and adjust their practices in real time. This shift is especially critical in an era defined by polarized discourse, contested facts, and algorithmic distribution.

The integration of news literacy and metacognition animates the goal of this article, which asks: How can metacognition serve as a foundational framework for redefining news literacy as a professional journalistic competency rather than an audience-oriented concept?

As demonstrated throughout the findings, metacognition enables journalists to hold space for uncertainty, interrogate institutional norms, and adjust their reporting practices in line with audience needs and professional standards. The application of metacognitive awareness becomes an ethical and epistemic commitment, strengthening the journalist's ability to respond to complexity, error, and ambiguity. Metacognition enables journalists to identify knowledge gaps, evaluate the impact of their reporting, and reflect on how their assumptions or routines may perpetuate existing biases. It also allows for more intentional learning: A reporter who revisits the limitations of a previous story can integrate that reflection into future coverage, thus expanding their literacies in context. This is not just about producing better stories; it is about fostering a profession that is more self-aware, responsive, and accountable. In a media ecosystem where trust is fractured and professional norms are under constant pressure, metacognition becomes a core strategy for ethical journalism. It supports the goals of news literacy by cultivating reflection, precision, and adaptability, not only among audiences but also within journalism itself.

Method

This study used 30 semistructured interviews to explore how journalists engage in metacognitive behaviors related to news literacy. The 30 collaborators were recruited from a prior survey of American journalists. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked whether they would be willing to participate in an interview about news literacy. Eighty-seven journalists agreed to be interviewed, representing 37% of the survey respondents. Collaborators were purposively sampled to ensure demographic, geographic, and professional diversity across newsroom roles, experience levels, beats, and ideological orientations (see Appendix for aggregate breakdown). Each participant was assigned a unique identifier for anonymization during analysis. Journalists are identified as Journalist A, Journalist B, and so on in this article. According to the IRB, specific identifiers about the journalists' workplace were removed from their survey data and interview transcripts.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom from March to May 2023 and lasted approximately 90 minutes. A semistructured protocol was used to ensure consistency while allowing journalists to elaborate on specific experiences. The protocol included both open-ended questions and two newsroom reconstructions. In the first, collaborators were asked to bring a recent story they had produced and reflect on its creation, which included decisions made, values considered, and challenges encountered. In the

second, all journalists analyzed the same *Associated Press* story about a banned horror film in Hong Kong. This dual-reconstruction approach, adapted from Reich and Barnoy (2020), helped surface cognitive processes and news literacy behaviors in both production and interpretation contexts (Johnson, 2025). The interview guide focused on several domains: How journalists defined news literacy, how they navigated competing values in practice, how their education shaped their thinking, and how they explained journalistic decisions to others. The process engaged them in thinking about the processes of their work and the systems they participate in daily, thus slowing them down to consider what it meant to think like a journalist.

The structure and content of the protocol were informed by the 5Cs of news literacy: context, creation, content, circulation, and consumption (Tully et al., 2022). Context captured the legal, economic, organizational and social conditions shaping reporters' choices. Creation focused on how stories were conceived, reported, and assembled. Content referred to the qualitative features that make something news, including sourcing and verification. Circulation traced how stories move across platforms and actors. Consumption centered on how audiences encounter, interpret, and manage news. I treated these domains as connected rather than discrete. Using the 5Cs in this way provided a consistent scaffold for observing metacognition within professional routines and for comparing how journalists reflect, justify, and adapt across each domain.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using MAXQDA. A grounded theory-informed approach guided the coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Initial readings of the transcripts led to the development of a codebook focused on metacognitive processes, including self-regulation, reflection, explanation, and audience modeling (Johnson et al., 2025). Memos and annotations were used to trace patterns and emergent themes across transcripts. The analysis was recursive and iterative, with codes refined in light of new data. News literacy served as both a conceptual and analytic framework. The study draws on the conceptualization advanced by Tully et al. (2022), which defines news literacy as encompassing five domains (the 5Cs), as well as related scholarship on metacognition, transparency, and journalism education. By foregrounding the cognitive labor of journalists, the research reframes news literacy as not only an audience competency but also a set of professional, reflective practices. This metacognitive lens allowed the project to contribute to emerging efforts to theorize journalism as a site of public pedagogy and institutional reflexivity.

Findings: News Literate Journalism as Metacognitive Practice

This section presents the findings that inform the development of a metacognitive approach to journalism practice. Drawing on interviews and reconstruction exercises with professional journalists, I examine how practitioners engage in metacognitively aware routines that collectively constitute an approach I term *News Literate Journalism* (NLJ). Rather than conceptualizing metacognition as an abstract psychological construct, NLJ frames it as a professional, pedagogical, and civic imperative. Each theme highlights a practice and contributes to theory-building around sustainable journalism

education and informed democratic participation. Grounded in the reflections and routines shared by journalists across a range of newsroom contexts, this study offers a new approach to journalism practice. The findings reveal that journalists routinely engage in metacognitive behaviors that extend beyond traditional frameworks of transparency, objectivity, or engagement. These behaviors constitute a form of cognitive labor that remains overlooked mainly in journalism literature, yet is central to ethical, responsive, and sustainable reporting.

Accordingly, NLJ is defined as a metacognitive approach to journalism in which practitioners deliberately reflect on, regulate, and communicate their decision-making processes to enhance their own understanding and foster audience learning. It involves a recursive cycle of awareness, justification, adaptation, and modeling. Journalists practicing NLJ do not merely produce stories; they interrogate how those stories are constructed, explain why particular editorial choices are made, and model their reasoning processes for peers, editors, and the public.

Journalism as Educational Praxis

Journalists repeatedly articulated their identity as public educators. Their practice was not limited to reporting facts but also extended to guiding audiences in interpreting and applying the information. This educational framing was often paired with anticipation of audience needs, a hallmark of cognitive scaffolding. When it came to economic information, the instructional posture often doubles as scrutiny of the systems that shape daily life. Journalist K, a consumer reporter, reflected, "I love explaining those things to people. . . pointing out how [the tax system] doesn't [work]," highlighting the dual task of knowledge transfer and systemic critique. Similarly, Journalist B, a transnational magazine reporter, noted, "I think a lot about what someone outside the newsroom would need to know to make sense of this," revealing forward-thinking pedagogical planning. Journalist C added, "My job is to make the complex legible, and not just legible but useful." Several journalists described this educational function as a deliberative process, rooted in their own reflective habits and ethical commitments. For instance, Journalist V, a television reporter, described feeling a duty to "teach through storytelling" and reported gauging what her audience might already know, which mirrors the instructional design principle of activating prior knowledge. Journalist P, a reporter specializing in the outdoors, underscored the importance of "building a reader's knowledge base" in his reporting on environmental issues: "I can't just throw technical terms at them and hope it sticks. I think about what they know and where I need to start the story for them to follow." In practice, he opened his story with the lead as a doorway, providing readers with plain terms and essential context before proceeding to analysis and critique, with the hope of helping them gain a deeper understanding of the environmental conflict he was about to discuss and the legal context it embodied.

This orientation toward teaching was not incidental but habitual, and it required journalists to self-monitor their own comprehension before articulating it clearly for others. This recursive loop of internal clarification and external explanation is central to metacognitive practice. Journalists like Journalist E, a science reporter, described rereading their stories to test whether "a non-journalist could follow this," echoing what Flavell (1979) identifies as monitoring comprehension as a metacognitive checkpoint. In her reconstruction, she described a repeatable workflow: read an academic article,

skim the methods and limitations, annotate each key claim in plain language, and build a short glossary that is then woven into tight, serviceable paragraphs. Naming each step as she worked helped her spot gaps, decide when to slow down or seek an expert check (including reaching out to the scientist), and ensure that translation rather than summary guided what readers would learn. Journalist E aimed to make both science and her journalism accessible. The interviews show that journalists are not only merely disseminators of facts but also instructors of public understanding. They assume responsibility for learning outcomes, suggesting that journalistic success should also be evaluated by audience comprehension and capacity. Theoretically, this repositions journalism as a form of instructional design, where the reporter serves as both knowledge broker and interpretive guide. Metacognitive awareness of audience comprehension becomes a core part of professional legitimacy, supporting a pedagogical turn in journalism studies. This finding challenges long-standing notions of journalistic detachment, replacing them with a framework of engagement that foregrounds learning as a core democratic function of the press.

Transparency as Metacognitive Performance

Transparency functioned not only as a professional value but also as a metacognitive habit, one that governed how journalists narrated their decisions to themselves, their editors, and their audiences. This was not limited to an ethical obligation but also extended to cognitive clarity. Journalists described making their decision-making processes legible to others as a means of accountability and learning. Journalist F, a news executive, shared, "You should be able to say why you did something and what steps you took. That's part of accountability." Journalist S, a regional radio reporter, described writing annotations for her editor to explain choices: "I'm not just sending copy. I'm sending reasoning. That's become part of the job." Similarly, Journalist X, a newspaper politics reporter, said, "I document all the people I call and email, even if they don't respond. I want my editor and readers to see the legwork." This aligns with externalizing cognition, a key pillar of metacognitive practice that supports both self-regulation and peer assessment. By making their methods explicit, journalists not only refined their own thinking but also created traceable rationales for others. Journalist Q, a producer specializing in social media and audience-focused content, highlighted the audience-facing benefits: "If we can show the work, people are more likely to understand and maybe even forgive us when we get it wrong." Similarly, Journalist J, a regional newspaper reporter, noted, "I explain sourcing on Twitter sometimes because I want people to see the standards I used. It's not just damage control; it's modeling what reporting is." These habits suggest that transparency serves as a dual, reflexive mechanism: internally, for self-monitoring, and externally, for building social trust.

Notably, several journalists described transparency as a ritual of self-clarification, a process that forced them to re-evaluate their judgments before publication. Journalist A, an education reporter, reflected, "If I can't explain to my reader why I did something, then maybe I didn't think it through enough." This recursive dynamic, utilizing transparency to identify errors or refine framing, demonstrates how the act of disclosure itself serves as a cognitive checkpoint. Journalist A said she often did this in her reporting on school boards, especially when explaining the flurry of 2023 DEI challenges in her state, usually in an effort to combat polarization or help her communities

understand the impact of these decisions on students within the school district. This reframing of transparency, as reflective cognition rather than mere disclosure, advances metacognitive theory by embedding journalism studies within the cognitive sciences. In effect, the journalist becomes a metacognitive modeler: someone who teaches others by revealing their own thought processes. This challenges more superficial notions of transparency as reputation management and instead repositions it as an active pedagogy, where the performance of reasoning serves both accountability and education.

Reflective Workflows and Adaptive Practice

Journalists described metacognitive checkpoints within their workflows, including note annotation, team debriefs, justification of framing, and iterative revision. Journalist S noted, "I keep notes on my thought process. Not just what I asked, but why I asked it, and whether the answer helped or confused me." Her notes were designed to travel. She works across a network of reporters and appears on regional radio programs, so she records not only the facts but also the path to them, including the prompts she used with agronomists, farmers, and policy staff. That record lets her hand off work across markets, refine questions for different sources, and anticipate what listeners will ask when they hear her live, where there is no chance to reread. She also uses the notes to adjust pacing and vocabulary for on-air delivery, turning technical terms into short, repeatable explanations that keep agricultural information intelligible in real time. Journalist V explained, "We sit down and say, 'How did we get here? What were we trying to do?' It's like an audit of your own thinking." These reflect metacognitive monitoring and evaluation, where cognition is both examined and adapted in response to evolving conditions.

Such checkpoints often served dual purposes: facilitating immediate editorial decisions and fostering longer-term professional development. Journalist J reflected, "I'll look at an old story and annotate it just for myself, what worked, what I missed. It's like coaching my past self." Journalist Q described how these internal reflections became part of training younger staff: "When I edit someone's story, I try to explain not just the what, but the why. That's how you build better instincts." Here, metacognition moves from private reflection to communal learning, highlighting its pedagogical potential in both newsroom and classroom environments.

These practices demonstrate applied metacognition through the core strategies of planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Journalist L, a managing editor, shared, "I ask myself constantly: Is this framing still right for what I'm learning? That internal conversation keeps evolving." Journalist M, another managing editor, echoed this adaptive stance: "Sometimes, I realize I've written half the story from a frame that doesn't hold anymore. You have to pivot, and that only happens when you're listening to your own logic." These metacognitive adjustments are not merely cognitive; they are affective and epistemological. They represent journalists acknowledging their fallibility, attending to context, and reorienting themselves toward clarity or service. Collaboration often amplified these reflections. Multiple journalists mentioned "Slack postmortems" and informal chats where peers troubleshoot ethical or narrative decisions. Journalist S explained, "Sometimes, it's just a quick 'Do you think this is fair?' message. But it makes me pause and reconsider. That's the value." Journalist Z added, "We have these short huddles where we ask, 'What are we missing?' That's where the real thinking

happens." These rituals of collective cognition demonstrate that metacognition is not always solitary; it can be distributed across relationships and technologies, aligning with Vygotskyan social learning theories.

Nevertheless, these routines were increasingly constrained. Journalist O, a multimedia journalist, described institutional erosion: "We used to have these regular postmortem meetings. Now, with staffing and speed, those just don't happen. We've lost our thinking time. It's rush, publish, and move on." These gaps reveal that metacognition, while natural to reflective practitioners, is not sustainable without structural support. This underscores a central argument of NLJ: Cognitive excellence is not just a personal trait but an institutional practice. To cultivate adaptive thinking, newsroom leadership and journalism educators must protect time, foster feedback loops, and revalue reflection, not only as a luxury but also as labor.

News Literacy Behaviors as Cognitive Application

Participants consistently described enacting what Vraga et al. (2021) call news literacy behaviors, but in this case, rooted in metacognitive reasoning. These included evaluating credibility, interrogating sourcing, reflecting on public service goals, and adjusting to audience feedback. Journalist I recalled, "I had to tell them why I picked certain voices, and in doing that, I understood my process better." Journalist R shared, "Teaching our interns to justify their source selection helped me rethink my own standards." These acts are not only professional norms but also cognitive routines that develop through iterative self-assessment and justification. Journalist G added, "Even just going back to write a tweet about how we chose a photo makes me reflect more deeply than I expected; it's like I suddenly have to see my process from the outside." These forms of thinking-through-doing illustrate how the practice of journalism becomes an act of learning. Such reflections suggest that news literacy is not only a necessary audience need but also a key journalistic competency. When journalists explain their methods to others, they reinforce their own learning, mirroring pedagogical strategies like think-alouds and self-explanation from educational psychology. As Journalist G emphasized, "You can't teach the public unless you understand your own decisions." Similarly, Journalist J noted, "When I walk people through our sourcing or corrections, I realize where my own gaps are. It's like being your own instructor." That reflexivity, when consistently practiced, becomes a form of professional cognition. Journalist T pointed out, "If I can't clearly explain how I got there, maybe I shouldn't be publishing it yet." These remarks reveal that explanation itself becomes a mechanism for internal regulation, a moment where ethical and epistemological commitments intersect.

Crucially, participants framed these behaviors as dynamic and revisable, not static competencies. Journalist O shared, "Sometimes, I get reader emails that make me go back and ask, 'Was I clear about how I got this?' If I wasn't, that's on me." Journalist Q described news literacy behaviors as "moments where you step outside the story and ask if your assumptions are showing." These patterns reflect active monitoring and evaluation, where cognitive flexibility and ethical responsiveness are practiced in tandem. Journalist U commented, "I used to think of sourcing like a checklist, but now it's more of a conversation with the audience. I have to anticipate what they'll want to know and be able to justify what I did." The shift from routine to reflection, from habit

to dialogue, marks the emergence of metacognitive regulation as a normative practice in journalism. This positions NLJ as a practice of reciprocal modeling: Journalists model news literacy, which in turn cultivates it in the public. The modeling is more than performative; it is pedagogical and relational. Metacognitive theory suggests that self-regulation becomes most powerful when embedded in social contexts, and journalism provides a rare professional space where cognition is made public (Johnson et al., 2025). When journalists model their thinking aloud, explain their revisions or annotate their logic, they transform journalism from a transmission-based practice into a reflective dialogue. As Journalist W observed, "There's something transformative about having to defend your decisions, not in a defensive way, but in a thoughtful, rigorous way. It forces clarity."

News literacy behaviors are not merely about information accuracy; they are about cultivating habits of clarity, humility, and reflexivity. In this view, the journalist becomes not only an informant but also a cognitive mentor, a role that many participants implicitly embraced. Journalist Z explained, "The more I explain why I did what I did, the more I'm accountable to the story and to the audience. It's a loop." That loop is the metacognitive engine of NLJ: a recursive cycle of explanation, evaluation, and adaptation made visible. It is also, as several journalists emphasized, a survival strategy in an information ecosystem increasingly marked by distrust, noise, and fragmentation. As Journalist W concluded, "The only way through the chaos is to slow down and show your work. That's what builds trust. And that's also how I stay sane in this job."

Discussion: News Literate Journalism in Action

This study introduced NLJ as a metacognitive approach to journalism, in which practitioners deliberately reflect on, regulate, and communicate their decision-making processes to enhance their own understanding and foster audience learning. The findings revealed that journalists are already engaging in cognitive routines, such as audience-centered reflection, justification of editorial choices, and collaborative revision, which align with metacognitive principles, even if they do not always explicitly label them as such. These routines, however, are often constrained by structural conditions or omitted entirely from educational training. To realize the full potential of NLJ as a model of sustainable, reflexive journalism, it must be embedded more intentionally in both newsroom practice and journalism curricula.

Applying NLJ in Professional Practice and Development

To move NLJ from description to practice, newsrooms need to convert individual habits into shared routines, visible artifacts, and explicit expectations. The findings show that journalists work as educators in practice, treat transparency as a thinking aid, build reflection into their workflows when time allows, and turn news literacy behaviors into everyday problem-solving. The task is to make those patterns durable. NLJ defines this shift as deliberate reflection, regulation, and communication that improve a journalist's understanding and foster audience learning. That definition only takes root when the cognitive work becomes part of the daily rhythm, not a discretionary add-on.

Treating newsroom practice as educational praxis means naming what a story is supposed to teach and designing for comprehension. Participants routinely anticipated what their communities did or did not know, and several described writing with an imagined learner in mind. Editors can formalize that instinct by asking reporters to include a brief learning aim in every pitch, stating what a reader should be able to understand after publication and what prior knowledge the story provides. According to the journalists, working drafts can include a brief reader note that justifies the order of information, identifies terms that require definition, and flags the most likely points of confusion. These are not cosmetic additions. They enact the educational praxis finding by requiring metacognitive planning before drafting, and, in line with the NLJ definition, they require the reporter to make reasoning visible first to themselves and then to others. At publication, small context elements make the teaching explicit: a "why this matters" box in a budget story, a microglossary on a science piece, or a simple "how we got these numbers" explainer on a database analysis. Reporters in the study who engaged in this kind of scaffolding described clearer writing and fewer postpublication clarifications from editors and readers, which is consistent with NLJ's emphasis on articulation as a pathway to better judgment.

Transparency operates similarly. Journalists who explained their sourcing and framing decisions discovered that the act of explanation exposed gaps earlier. Several described annotating drafts for editors to narrate "why this, not that," while others posted quick rationales in Slack so colleagues could pressure-test a choice. Those habits should be normalized. Editors can incorporate concise process notes into the editing cycle and utilize the content management system to capture source rationales that address three practical questions: Why this source is appropriate, what this source cannot establish, and what new evidence would alter confidence in the claim. For selected investigations or sensitive topics, a brief "how we reported this" note can serve as a mirror to the internal memo and, when appropriate, be published alongside the story. This does not turn transparency into reputation management; it turns it into a metacognitive checkpoint. In the findings, reporters who discussed their logic with peers avoided late-stage reframing and felt more confident in fielding skeptical questions after publication. That is NLJ's regulatory layer in action.

Reflection and adaptation require time, which the findings show is the scarcest resource. Journalists described the erosion of postmortems and a shift from reflective to reactive work, where time for thinking was crowded out by throughput: faster cycles, volume targets, and the need to publish continuously. When reflection is scheduled, it becomes work rather than something borrowed from the margins of the day. For example, during daily stand-ups or morning huddles, reserve 5 min for a quick debrief with three prompts: What did we decide, what changed, and what did we learn? Record one sentence for each in a shared document, add a follow-up task with a named owner, and check in on it at the next huddle. Rotate who leads the debrief so the habit belongs to the whole team. Each desk can run a weekly discussion of one published piece that highlights the assumption that emerged, the frame that shifted, and one concrete adjustment to try next week. Longer projects benefit from a revision journal with dated entries that record what the reporter believed at the time, what they believe now, and what changed their mind. A rotating think-aloud, where a reporter walks colleagues through a decision trail from first call to final line, turns private cognition into a shared method. Several participants described improvised versions of these rituals, often in Slack huddles or quick shoulder-to-shoulder chats; institutionalizing them

answers the reflective-workflow finding with structure rather than nostalgia. To strengthen adaptation, teams can agree on pivot triggers in advance. If a key data set contradicts the working frame, if independent sources challenge the premise or if audience questions cluster around a misunderstanding that the current structure does not resolve, the team will pause and reframe. Writing those triggers down lowers the social cost of changing course and aligns with the NLJ requirement that regulation be explicit and reviewable.

Measurement should match the goal. If NLJ seeks clarity and accountability, then attention metrics alone are insufficient. Comprehension and correction are better learning signals. A simple post-publish pulse can work, for example, a one-item reader check in a newsletter, a tally of clarifying questions received by the desk, or a scan of misunderstandings that appear in comments or email. Corrections should be treated as opportunities for after-action learning rather than a source of embarrassment. Capture where the reasoning or explanation broke down, then feed that finding into the following week's postmortem and the beat's signal scan. Several participants described learning more from a well-handled correction than from a high-performing story; NLJ treats those moments as curriculum for the desk.

The most important lever is training and development. The findings show that learning accelerates when reporters reconstruct decisions, name value conflicts, and narrate pivots for peers. Training should, therefore, teach judgment, not only tools, and it should do so in formats that respect real newsroom constraints. A monthly reconstruction session, similar to the methodological approach journalists used in this study, can invite a reporter to present the decision-making process behind a recent story. The team maps the conflict that mattered, identifies the moment the frame changed, and writes a short plan for repeating the work with greater clarity next time. This directly extends reflective workflows and transparency into a teachable practice, generating reusable artifacts for future staff. A strong onboarding program grounded in NLJ is where metacognition becomes the norm rather than an individual quirk. From Week 1, new reporters should practice short process notes, think-aloud shadowing with an editor, and brief "explain your logic" memos so that reflecting, regulating, and communicating decisions become muscle memory. Setting these habits early gives the newsroom a shared language for judgment, reduces uncertainty under deadline, and signals that clarity of reasoning is as valued as the final story.

Short scenario drills can make metacognition a routine rather than an episodic process. Desk meetings can begin with a concrete challenge drawn from recent work, such as a dubious document arriving, a source retracting after publication, or analytics spiking on a misleading headline. The team decides aloud how it would verify, reframe, and explain each case. Editors should carry portable coaching prompts that move conversations from product to process, such as what would convince you that you are wrong, how you would explain this to a skeptical neighbor, or what the audience will need to understand first. These prompts mirror the study's most poignant moments of peer reflection, when a colleague's question surfaced an assumption that no one had previously named. They also provide editors with a common language for coaching thinking, which several participants said they previously lacked.

Evaluation and recognition must reinforce the same habits. If performance reviews reward only volume and reach, reflection will always be crowded out. Reviews can include criteria such as models' ethical reasoning, explaining editorial choices in writing or meetings, adapting frames as facts evolve, engaging in reflective dialogue with

peers, and contributing to shared learning artifacts, such as process notes or debriefs. Recognition should be public. When leaders share their process notes on complex edits and celebrate a colleague for a well-documented pivot, permission spreads quickly. This was evident in newsrooms where editors asked reporters to explain the logic in pitch meetings; journalists in those settings described stronger stories and more comfort in acknowledging uncertainty.

When these routines are in place, the newsroom begins to behave like a classroom. Process notes resemble critique sheets, reconstruction sessions look like seminars, and scenario drills approximate case teaching. Junior reporters learn by watching seniors make their thinking visible, and senior reporters refine judgment by having to teach their choices. The profession and the academy meet on shared ground: The same meta-cognitive habits that produce clearer stories also produce a teachable method. Training and development become an extension of the classroom, not a replacement for it, which sets the stage for the education section that follows. If journalism schools culti-vate these NLJ habits early, newsrooms can absorb graduates who already plan, moni-tor, evaluate, and explain their reasoning. If newsrooms reinforce those habits with artifacts, coaching, and evaluation that align with the findings and discussion pre-sented here, the bridge between education and practice finally runs in both directions.

Applying NLJ in Educational Contexts

If NLJ is to be more than a descriptive framework, it must inform how future jour-nalists are trained to think, not just what they are trained to do. The findings of this study present a challenge to journalism education: to move beyond the technical instruc-tion of journalistic storytelling toward a metacognitive model of learning that centers on reflection, regulation, and articulation. NLJ calls for an educational paradigm in which students are taught not only how to produce journalism but also how to make visible the reasoning, uncertainty, and learning that are embedded in that production.

Journalism education must explicitly position journalism as a form of educational praxis. The journalists in this study often viewed themselves as teachers, emphasizing explanation, scaffolding, and promoting public understanding. This mindset must be cultivated early in journalism classrooms. Courses should include assignments that require students to anticipate audience comprehension, articulate public service and utility goals, and revise stories based on pedagogical reflection. For instance, students might be asked to write a story and then compose a companion explanation that walks an audience member through the key decisions made in framing, sourcing, and struc-ture. Or, in beat reporting courses, students could be tasked with identifying prior knowledge gaps and writing with the intention of audience learning rather than simple delivery. These practices support NLJ's goal of modeling journalistic thinking and highlighting that journalistic legitimacy depends not only on accuracy but also on intelligibility and usefulness.

Transparency should be embedded in instruction not only as a norm but also as a method of learning. Journalism curricula often teach transparency as a reporting out-come and ethical value, usually by explaining why corrections are issued or how sources are selected. This study's findings showcase transparency as a metacognitive checkpoint: a moment when students reflect on and narrate their decisions for

themselves and others. One way to support this in the classroom is through routine "explain your logic" reflections attached to every major assignment. These could be short process notes, voice memos, or in-class discussions. Similarly, instructors can require students to annotate drafts, noting where they considered ethical questions, audience needs, or alternative framings. By treating transparency as a metacognitive process, instructors help students learn how to interrogate their decisions and recognize when clarity or justification is lacking.

Instructors should also model this behavior. During workshops or critiques, faculty might pause and explain their reasoning: Why they are flagging a paragraph for revision, how they are evaluating sourcing, or what assumptions they are noticing in student work. This creates a pedagogical culture where metacognition is made visible, and learning is collaborative. Assignments should not be designed solely to assess product quality; they should be used to assess students' ability to explain and refine their reasoning. These strategies support NLJ's definition by aligning to foster deliberate, self-aware decision-making that improves both journalistic clarity and student confidence. Journalism education must structure its curriculum around recursive, adaptive learning. The findings reveal that journalists employ iterative, reflective workflows, revisiting past work, questioning their assumptions, and refining their approaches in response to new information. Courses should make space for this kind of adaptive practice. Rather than treating revision as a one-time task, instructors might assign longitudinal projects that unfold over the semester, requiring students to track the evolution of their understanding. Reflection logs, revision journals, and structured self-critiques can help students identify when and why their thinking changed. These tools are not merely assessment mechanisms; they are exercises in metacognitive regulation, helping students develop the ability to monitor and adjust their journalistic processes in real-time by discussing their process, not just their products.

Pedagogically, this also means rethinking how feedback is delivered. Instructors should move beyond evaluative comments and instead engage students in reflective dialogue. Feedback sessions might begin with student self-assessments or follow-up questions such as "How would you explain your sourcing decision to a skeptical reader?" or "What changed in your framing since your first draft, and why?" These questions train students to think-aloud, revise their assumptions, and become more attuned to the evolving nature of journalistic judgment. Group work can also be reframed in terms of metacognition. Rather than assigning traditional team reporting, instructors might ask groups to design and lead a postmortem analysis of one of their own stories, identifying both successes and overlooked complexities. These rituals mirror the newsroom practices that journalists in this study described as essential to reflective growth.

The findings suggest that news literacy behaviors should be taught as professional competencies for journalists themselves, not only as tools to be instilled in audiences. Journalism education has historically positioned news literacy as a defensive shield for the public: A set of habits designed to protect people from misinformation. NLJ reframes news literacy as an internal journalistic skill, one that reporters must model and master if it is to be credible. NLJ incorporates opportunities for students to engage in public education into their journalism training. If NLJ positions the journalist as both practitioner and pedagogue, then students must have the chance to model journalistic thinking in ways that are legible and useful to nonjournalists. This could take the form of public learning events (e.g., panels, workshops, or community conversations)

designed and led by students to demystify journalistic processes and support audience learning. Topics might include how to vet sources on social media, understanding the difference between opinion and news, or tracing the funding of a local news outlet. It would also include the interview process and what happens during the editing process. One class might organize a "News Literacy Day" at a local library, featuring stations that guide attendees through sourcing decisions, corrections policies, and red flags for misinformation. Another might develop a workshop for older adults on how to spot manipulated images online or distinguish between satire and disinformation. These events not only reinforce the pedagogical principles of NLJ but also give students practice in translating their knowledge into civic learning. They create reciprocal environments where students learn to articulate the reasoning behind their work, and where communities gain insight into the systems and values that shape journalism. Instructors should treat these as capstone experiences; they are opportunities for students to synthesize their professional values, reflect on their role in the information ecosystem, and contribute to public knowledge in real-time, with the aim that these early experiences translate into lifelong news-literate behaviors both as producers and consumers.

To that end, educators can also design in-class assignments that focus on "modeling the method," in which students publicly explain their reporting process, source selection, and fact-checking strategy. These could take the form of recorded explanations, social media posts, or in-class presentations. Instructors might also assign peer reviews that focus not only just on story content but also on the visibility of cognitive reasoning: Did the student clearly communicate how they made their choices? Did they identify potential limitations or assumptions? Courses that teach corrections, transparency statements, or editorial memos can be reframed through the lens of metacognitive behavior. Rather than treating these tasks as isolated deliverables, instructors can integrate them into the story development process, prompting students to practice public reasoning throughout the story's life cycle. This positions NLJ as a framework that integrates seamlessly into instruction, rather than a separate module. The pedagogical goal is to produce not only more accurate reporting but also more accountable and self-aware reporters. As students learn to explain their thinking, they internalize the values that guide ethical journalism and see themselves as teachers as well as informers.

By embedding NLJ into curriculum, instruction, and assessment, journalism education can foster a generation of journalists who are better prepared to navigate the uncertainty, complexity, and cognitive demands of public-facing media work, including the emerging freelance and independent content-creator work. Journalists who learn to reflect, justify, and adapt are better positioned to build public trust, contribute to civic learning, and support democratic systems (Johnson et al., 2025). NLJ, when applied in the classroom, transforms journalism education into a space of intellectual apprenticeship. It prepares students not only to write the news but also to understand and articulate how they know what they know, and why that knowledge matters.

Conclusion: Toward a News Literate Journalism

This study introduces NLJ as a metacognitive approach to journalism in which practitioners deliberately reflect on, regulate, and communicate their decision-making processes to enhance their own understanding and foster audience learning. Rather

than treating journalism solely as a product or output, NLJ reframes it as a process-oriented, self-reflective practice that emphasizes cognition, transparency, and pedagogy as core to ethical, sustainable news work. The findings of this study indicate that journalists already engage in forms of metacognition by monitoring their reasoning, adjusting to audience expectations, and negotiating competing values in real time. For example, when Journalist Z explained the internal negotiation between editorial standards and community trust, or when Journalist N described his rationale for omitting specific details, these moments reflected not only just ethical decisions but also metacognitive acts. These moments of internal dialogue (e.g., What am I doing? Why am I doing it? and What will the audience understand from this decision?) are central to NLJ and its insistence on journalism as a practice of continual learning.

This metacognitive turn positions NLJ as a theory of sustainable journalistic labor. As pressures mount in the industry, from economic precarity to disinformation, journalists need cognitive tools to navigate uncertainty, ethical trade-offs, and public distrust. NLJ offers these tools. It provides a way of seeing journalism not only as a collection of best practices but also as a set of teachable habits and intellectual commitments. As Journalist Z reminded us: "We can't expect our audience to be news literate if we're not modeling it ourselves." Through the lens of metacognition, NLJ builds the bridge between what journalists do and how they, and their audiences, come to know why it matters. In this way, NLJ is not just an approach; it is a mission and a call for journalism to become a literate, reflective, and pedagogically rich civic force.

This framework is not only descriptive but also prescriptive. NLJ calls for shifts in how journalists are educated, how newsrooms structure their workflows, and how the profession envisions its role in civic life. NLJ is not just an approach for how journalists should work; it is an approach for how journalists should think, and how that thinking should be made visible.

In practice, NLJ requires institutional support. Newsrooms must build structures that allow time and space for reflection. Editors must foster cultures where process is not only permitted but also expected, where explaining a sourcing decision in Slack, as Journalist A did, becomes a pedagogical act for the whole team. NLJ recasts transparency not only as a checkbox for accountability but also as a metacognitive checkpoint: an invitation for journalists to articulate their logic for others and for themselves. In education, NLJ demands more than skills training or abstract ethical principles. It requires journalism programs to treat metacognition as a core professional competency. That means creating space in curricula for reflective journaling, structured feedback on reasoning, annotation of process, peer dialogue about decision-making, and designing public education events where students must help explain the *process of* not just the *product of* journalism to community members. As Journalist L observed, "I wasn't taught to explain my decisions, just to make them. But learning to articulate . . . changed how I see the work." Metacognitive practice should not be an afterthought; it should be the foundation.

This has direct implications for how we teach news literacy itself. Much of the literature assumes that audiences become more news literate by emulating journalists (Jaakkola, 2022; Morris & Yeoman, 2023). If we have not critically examined whether journalists themselves are literate in their processes (such as how they assess credibility, how they manage bias, and how they understand audience needs), then we are replicating a model without first refining it. NLJ invites us to reframe news literacy as a shared, mutual process of reflective knowledge-building between journalists and the

public. In doing so, journalism becomes not only just a civic service (akin to a library, public schooling, or a community center) or a civic utility (like water or electricity) but also a civic pedagogy. When journalists practice NLJ, they do not merely produce information; they teach it. They model the habits of mind that allow both professionals and the public to navigate an uncertain information environment with greater clarity, humility, and care.

NLJ offers more than a new way to define journalistic practice through news literacy. It provides a sustainable, actionable framework to improve public trust, strengthen editorial transparency, and build intellectual resilience in the face of disruption. Through this metacognitive turn, journalism has the opportunity to reclaim its civic purpose, not only by informing the public but also by helping the public understand *how* information is made and *why* it matters.

Limitations

This article has two core limitations. First, only 30 journalists were interviewed. While the number of journalists in the United States is debated depending on the agency collecting the data, my participants are only a tiny portion of them. This also means that the diversity of the journalists is not as strong as I would like. While the pool of journalists might represent the field, the lack of industry-wide data being tracked means there is little to be guessed about how representative my collaborators are. I would have preferred to see more demographic diversity represented in this study. Still, in selecting the collaborators, I did my best to ensure that there was as much representation as possible. Although there is always more work to do. In addition, the lack of experimental methods hinders the determination of the cognitive weight on journalistic practices or the metacognitive abilities of journalists in their reconstruction. More experimental methodologies may be needed to understand the extent of metacognition involved when journalists undergo exercises like reconstruction, while also testing the applicability of this approach in classroom settings and assessing its success within the curriculum or its impact on issues such as audience trust.

Appendix

Journalist Information

Information included below is self-identified.

Demographic information	
Gender identity	
Female	12
Male	18
Race	
Asian or Pacific Islander	1
Black or African American	1

(continued)	
Hispanic or Latino	2
Lebanese	1
Multiracial or biracial	1
White or Caucasian	24
Sexual orientation	
Bisexual	4
Gay	3
Heterosexual	23
Generation	
Baby Boomer	6
Gen X	7
Millennial	16
Gen Z	2
Political ideology[a]	
Strongly liberal	7
Liberal	10
Somewhat liberal	3
Moderate	7
Somewhat conservative	2
Don't know	1
Journalist information	
Role	
Anchor	1
Editor-in-chief/executive editor	2
Managing editor	2
Producer	3
Reporter	19
Senior editor	1
Journalism or other communication degree in college	
Journalism degree	14
Other communication degree	2
Both	3
Neither	11
Newsroom information[b]	
Geographic location	
Midwest Region/East North Central Division: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin	3
Midwest Region/West North Central Division: Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota	3
National	4

(continued)	
Northeast Region/Middle Atlantic Division: New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania	3
Northeast Region/New England Division: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont	1
South Region/East South Central Division: Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee	1
South Region/South Atlantic Division: Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia	6
South Region/West South Central Division: Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas	2
Transnational	3
West Region/Mountain Division: Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming	3
Media type[c]	
Internet native	4
Magazine	2
News agency	6
Newspaper	12
Radio	5
Television	4
Size of media organization	
Local	9
Regional	9
National	8
Transnational	4
Ownership type	
Purely private	23
Purely public	6
Mixed ownership, but mostly private	1

[a]Journalists were also asked to identify their political affiliation in the survey. More of the journalists identified in the independent category or were independent-leaning when it came to affiliation compared with the much more liberal identification of ideology. [b]Journalists were asked to provide the name of their newsroom to verify identity at the top of the survey. As part of the IRB, once journalists' identities were verified, this information was stripped from the data set to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Several journalists in the interviews identified that they were traditionally unable to do interviews with researchers because of their newsroom guidelines and were grateful that all of that information was not part of the data set. [c]Some journalists identified themselves in multiple categories.

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