

# 27 Using Newsroom Reconstruction to Understand Metacognition in Journalism

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## Introduction

Laura, a seasoned journalist, is in the middle of crafting her latest story. Today's assignment revolves around a community rally that focuses on bodily autonomy and responds to recent legislation enacted at the state level. Laura sits at her desk, surrounded by notes, recordings, and annotated reference materials. She begins talking through her process with a colleague.

"First, I need to set the scene," Laura explains. "I have to capture the crowd's energy, chants, and speeches. It's crucial to convey the facts, atmosphere, and emotions. There seemed to be a few different groups of people at the rally, but I'm nervous about highlighting one more than another. I know how some of our audience will be in our comments if I'm not telling the 'objective' story. Can you help me by listening to me think through some of these sources?"

Laura's process is inherently metacognitive, involving the interplay between her knowledge and the decisions she must make. "Which voices do I highlight?" she continues. "There were so many compelling stories. I want to ensure a balanced perspective representing the diversity of opinions." She knows her choices here will shape the narrative and impact the audience's perception of the event.

As she works, Laura questions every step. "Am I being fair in my representation? Have I cross-checked all my sources?" She knows that accuracy is paramount, but so is the trust she must maintain with her readers. This self-interrogation is not merely about getting the story right; it's about ensuring her reporting is transparent and credible.

"How do I frame this to reflect the broader social implications?" Laura wonders aloud. She knows that her story is more than a recounting of events; it must contextualize the rally within larger societal issues. This layer of analysis requires her to draw connections and infer significance beyond the immediate happenings.

Laura's colleague listens and occasionally interjects, providing a sounding board that helps Laura refine her thoughts. Together, they navigate the

story's complexities, discussing potential angles and ethical considerations and engaging the audience effectively. "We need to be mindful of our biases," Laura notes. "It's easy to let our perspectives slip into the narrative, but our job is to report, not editorialize."

In this narrative, Laura exemplifies the core of newsroom reconstruction—an intricate dance of reflection, decision-making, and ethical considerations. Her methodical approach highlights the unseen processes that shape news production, offering a deeper understanding of how journalists work. By capturing such reflective practices, researchers can gain invaluable insights into cognitive and professional dynamics. This enhances our understanding of journalistic practice and underscores the importance of metacognition in maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of the news. Laura's story illustrates the mental and ethical engagement required in journalism, providing a foundation for further exploration of metacognitive strategies in the field. The newsroom reconstruction method allows scholars to gain insights into news production processes by helping journalists like Laura to process her practice openly. This method emphasizes understanding how journalists conceive, develop, and present news stories, providing a detailed examination of the step-by-step decisions and considerations made during the production process. By capturing journalists' reflections on their editorial decisions within their organizational and social contexts, newsroom reconstructions bridge the gap between self-reported practices and produced content, uncovering the invisible factors influencing news production.

This chapter links newsroom reconstruction to metacognition and introduces an innovative approach to understanding journalistic practices and education. Metacognition involves the awareness and control over one's cognitive processes, including self-awareness, critical thinking, and adaptive strategies. In journalism, metacognition fosters continuous improvement, ethical decision-making, and reflective practice, essential for maintaining credibility and transparency. Journalists can enhance their cognitive skills by integrating metacognitive strategies, leading to more effective and impactful journalism. Scholars adopting this method can reveal the complexities of contemporary journalism, highlighting the relationship between individual decision-making and broader organizational and societal influences. In this chapter, I combine two ideas: the method of newsroom reconstruction and the framework of metacognition. First, I will explain newsroom reconstruction as a method, before introducing metacognition and providing context for its relevance to journalism studies. I then offer two examples of studies that use different forms of newsroom reconstruction—journaling and interviews—to give journalists a space to be more metacognitive of their practice. Within these sections, possible methods of analysis are also explored. The chapter concludes with future directions and opportunities for using newsroom reconstruction and metacognition to improve the field of journalism studies and enhance journalism practice.

## Literature Review

### *Newsroom Reconstruction*

The newsroom reconstruction method isn't new to journalism studies. It stems back to early gatekeeping work (White, 1950). White's work, while not explicitly identified as a form of reconstruction, interrogated the subjective decisions of "Mr. Gates," and in turn, emphasized the process of what Mr. Gates did and why he chose to include and not include specific stories. While the paper itself is more of a content analysis, the underlying premise behind White (1950) asking Mr. Gates to keep all stories and identify what he used and did not use could be seen as an early example of newsroom reconstruction as a method. Newsroom reconstructions provide unique insights into the processes and routines underlying news production. This approach, particularly through retrospective reconstruction interviews, allows researchers to understand how news stories are conceived, developed, and presented more critically, thus offering a comprehensive understanding that traditional content analysis, observations, or interviews often miss. However, this chapter is unique because it links the reconstruction approach to understanding a more educational aim: metacognition.

Newsroom reconstructions involve a detailed examination of how journalists create news stories. This method focuses on the step-by-step decisions and considerations made during the news production process, often through retrospective interviews where journalists recount specific stories they have worked on. As Brüggemann (2013) and Reich and Barnoy (2020) note, this technique allows researchers to explore news origins by capturing journalists' reflections on their editorial decisions within their organizational and social contexts. The primary advantage of newsroom reconstructions lies in bridging the gap between journalists' self-reported practices and the content they produce. This method's ability to reveal the hidden processes and influences behind news stories makes it a valuable tool for studying the complexities of contemporary journalism, such as organizational constraints, professional ideologies, and external pressures. Reich and Barnoy (2020) emphasize that newsroom reconstructions provide an in-depth understanding of news production by capturing journalists' reflections on their editorial decisions. The authors note that reconstructions can address methodological challenges posed by the fragmented nature of modern news environments, making it possible to study both observable and non-observable aspects of newsmaking (Reich & Barnoy, 2020). Zhong and Newhagen (2009) add that cognitive and decision-making models are essential for understanding how journalists select and prioritize information. By integrating these models with newsroom reconstructions, researchers can gain a more comprehensive view of the cognitive processes that drive news production. This combined approach can illuminate the interplay between individual decision-making and broader organizational and societal influences, offering a richer analysis of journalistic practices (Zhong & Newhagen, 2009).

Moreover, newsroom reconstructions facilitate a holistic analysis of journalism practices across different levels of influence. Newsroom reconstructions are particularly well-suited to practice theory, emphasizing the importance of understanding the everyday practices that constitute professional work. By examining the micro (individual journalist), meso (organizational), and macro (societal) factors, researchers can better understand how these various influences shape the news production process. This multi-level analysis is crucial for contextualizing journalistic roles and practices within broader social and political frameworks. For example, Hoxha and Hanitzsch (2018) found that journalists' story ideation often involved proactive and reactive processes, heavily influenced by external sources. This self-referential nature of conflict coverage underscores the importance of understanding news production's iterative and interconnected processes. Similarly, Schwinges (2024) highlighted how journalists negotiate their professional roles and the various levels of influence on their work, from individual beliefs to organizational norms and societal expectations. Using reconstruction provided a space to understand how journalistic ideals are translated into practice in the context of reporting on powerful corporate entities.

Despite its strengths, the newsroom reconstruction method is not without challenges. One significant limitation is the reliance on journalists' memories, which can be selective or influenced by hindsight bias. Additionally, the method requires detailed and time-consuming interviews, which may not always be feasible for large-scale studies. Furthermore, journalists might still present an idealized version of their practices, even when discussing specific stories, thus requiring careful cross-examination of their narratives with the produced content. Despite its challenges, the reconstruction method remains a critical approach for studying the complexities of journalistic practice and news production.

### *Metacognition and Journalism*

Metacognition, a concept rooted in education and cognitive science, refers to the awareness and control over one's cognitive processes. It encompasses two primary components: metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive regulation. Metacognitive knowledge involves an individual's understanding of their cognitive processes, including awareness of learning strategies and recognizing their cognitive strengths and weaknesses (Flavell, 1979). Metacognitive regulation involves planning, monitoring, and evaluating cognitive activities during learning or problem-solving tasks (Schraw & Dennison, 1994). In journalism, metacognition fosters a culture of continuous improvement, ethical decision-making, and reflective practice. Journalists and journalism students can use metacognitive strategies to enhance their cognitive skills, leading to more effective and impactful journalism (Johnson, 2024b; Johnson et al., 2025).

Metacognition in journalism involves journalists reflecting on their own experiences and how these experiences shape their work. It means being aware

of how they consume information and how it influences their journalistic practices. For example, a journalist using metacognitive strategies might reflect on their source selection process, considering the credibility and biases of their sources. This continuous self-assessment leads to better journalistic practices, ensuring that news stories are accurate, balanced, and deeply connected to the communities they serve (Johnson, 2024b). Metacognition helps journalists navigate ethical dilemmas, such as balancing the public's right to know with concerns for privacy and sensationalism (Johnson, 2025). Metacognition is crucial in journalism education as it enhances student learning and achievement. Research shows that students who effectively use metacognitive strategies can reflect on their learning processes, leading to better comprehension and retention of material (Zimmerman, 2002). Educational theorists argue that metacognition is at the heart of self-regulated learning, where learners set goals, monitor their progress, and evaluate outcomes, resulting in more effective and autonomous learning (Pintrich, 2002). In journalism education, metacognition encourages students to be aware of their cognitive processes and reflective of their experiences. This awareness helps future journalists understand how their thinking and learning impact their daily practice. By fostering metacognitive skills, journalism educators can prepare students to be more adaptable, self-aware, and critical thinkers, essential qualities in the rapidly evolving media landscape.

This belief is the driving force behind my work developing a metacognitive model of journalism practice called News Literate Journalism (NLJ). In the context of News Literate Journalism, metacognition is a guiding principle that emphasizes a process-oriented approach to journalism practice. This approach ensures journalists know the products they produce can explain the processes behind their creation (Johnson, 2025). Metacognition in NLJ means that journalists continuously reflect, leading to revision and improvement of their work. This reflective practice helps journalists frame their thinking as a constant educational endeavor, making them more self-aware and critical of their processes. This chapter explores how newsroom reconstruction and metacognition intersect, building upon my definition of News Literate Journalism (Johnson, 2024b):

*A metacognitive model rooted in prioritizing a process-oriented approach to journalism that emphasizes news-literate behaviors—assessing credibility, staying current, relationship building, and understanding audiences—and values—service, engagement, and transparency—in practice.*

When using newsroom reconstruction as a means to understand more critically how and why journalists do what they do, the emphasis on metacognition sheds light on the news literacy of the journalists (Johnson, 2024b). To illustrate how metacognition can be understood and methodologically can be practically applied, I turn to case studies showcasing the use of newsroom reconstruction.

### **Example 1: Trusting News and Reflective Journaling**

Trusting News is dedicated to enhancing trust between news organizations and their audiences. They focus on addressing the credibility crisis in journalism by equipping journalists with the tools and strategies needed to build and maintain trust. They operate on the principle that transparency, engagement, and accountability are crucial for fostering a healthy relationship between the media and the public. The organization offers resources, training, and support to journalists and newsrooms, helping them understand audience perspectives, convey their journalistic processes transparently, and engage with their communities more effectively. Through workshops, webinars, and collaborative projects, Trusting News empowers journalists to demonstrate their commitment to ethical practices and accurate reporting.

The organization recently created a series of materials they call “Trust Kits.” The Trust Kits are comprehensive guides designed to help journalists build and sustain trust with their audiences. Recognizing the declining public trust in news media, these kits offer practical, step-by-step strategies for journalists to enhance their credibility and transparency. Each kit breaks down complex trust-building techniques into actionable steps, encouraging journalists to engage more openly with their audiences. For example, the engagement kits emphasize listening to audiences and incorporating their feedback, while the ethics kits focus on transparency about journalistic practices and corrections. The kits are examples of how news-literate journalism practices can improve democracy and civic engagement (Johnson, 2024a).

In this study, journalists agreed to participate in a six-week study in partnership with Trusting News where they worked through implementing either the transparency or corrections Trust Kit (Johnson et al., 2025). Each week, journalists were given questions (see Appendix A) formed using metacognitive language to think critically about their experiences implementing the Trust Kit into their journalism practice. Early questions focused on the existing understanding of trust and corrections, while later queries explored how these concepts evolved through practical application. Journalists documented their weekly experiences, detailing how they adapted their practices based on the Trust Kits. Optional “in-the-moment” reflections provided additional insights into their thought processes. This method facilitated a deeper understanding of how and why journalists apply certain practices, fostering a culture of critical self-evaluation and continuous improvement. The weekly questions were designed to guide journalists through the implementation process progressively. For instance, Week 1 focused on initial knowledge and goals, while subsequent weeks examined changes in practices, challenges faced, and adjustments needed. By Week 6, journalists were asked to articulate how they would mentor others in adopting similar practices and how they communicated these changes to their audience.

This approach encouraged journalists to reflect on their cognitive processes, deepening their contextualization of journalistic practices (Johnson et al.,

2025). By helping journalists to think critically about their knowledge and process, the reconstruction protocol encourages deeper scrutiny of journalistic practice. The study aimed to improve their awareness of their cognitive processes, ultimately leading to more transparent and accurate reporting practices. The structured journaling and reflection exercises provided a practical framework for journalists to internalize and sustain trust-building practices in their newsrooms, aligning with the broader goals of metacognitive enhancement and sustainable journalism. Regular journaling over time reveals consistent patterns in how journalists approach transparency and corrections, indicating the development of habitual metacognitive practices. One notable pattern is the evolution of thought, where reflections show a progression in understanding and applying trust-building techniques, illustrating cognitive and professional growth.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a suitable approach to analyzing the journaling responses and reflections of journalists participating in the Trust Kits study. CDA allows scholars to examine the language journalists use to reveal underlying power dynamics, ideologies, and social practices (Carvalho, 2008; Reynolds, 2019) embedded in their reflections on transparency and corrections. CDA focuses on how discourse shapes and is shaped by social power relations. Analyzing the language used in the journalists' reflections can uncover how they perceive their role, the impact of transparency and corrections on their practice, and the broader implications for trust in journalism. This analysis method involves coding the text to categorize different aspects of journalists' metacognitive processes, such as self-awareness (how journalists reflect on their initial understanding of trust and corrections), critical thinking (how they evaluate and adapt their practices based on Trust Kit implementation), and adaptive strategies (how they navigate challenges and adjust their processes). This approach highlights both the content of the journalists' reflections and the broader social and professional dynamics influencing their thought processes.

### **Example 2: Journalist Work Samples and Article Critique**

In this example, reconstruction was done through a traditional interview protocol. This study aimed to understand journalists' news literacy and how they enact certain news-literate behaviors and values in their practice. The interview protocol included two qualitative newsroom reconstructions: one shared among participants and one selected by the participants. These reconstructions provided a glimpse "inside journalists' minds" (Zhong & Newhagen, 2009, p. 589), emphasizing contextual richness through "particular stories presented to [journalists], anchored in particular real-life circumstances, decisions, actions, and thoughts" (Reich & Barnoy, 2020, p. 974). For the first reconstruction, participants brought a recent story they produced to the interview. For the second reconstruction, I selected a story that no interview participant had written. The chosen story was a 300-word Associated Press article about

the banning of a horror film in Hong Kong. This reconstruction allowed for granularity, comparability, and contextual understanding. While it is traditional to have journalists explain their work, it was unique to have them assess the work of another. The purpose was to see how journalists engage in news analysis and what they ultimately value in the practice of others. For example, journalists could explain what they would do differently, talk through why specific examples were unethical, or even think about the impact of language. Reconstruction, in this case, enhanced the metacognitive capabilities associated with performing news-literate actions.

The use of reconstruction served as a chance to explore a range of sources and technologies—assemblages—that help address (1) the news literacy of journalists, (2) the implications of formal and informal education, and (3) the impact of norms and values on journalists' behaviors. Co-presence, representing a sense of co-creation, is crucial for interrogating macro and micro-level concerns, enhancing sustainability, and fostering more conversations about institutional needs within nations or cultural systems. Journalists first discussed how they produced the story they brought to the interview, then analyzed the story I provided by talking through their analysis. Combining the traditional interview method with the reconstruction approach helps address research questions sociologically while considering ecosystem concerns. Bringing journalism practice, education, and news literacy into conversation through this method advances theory-building on journalism as a discursive institution, journalism education as an assemblage in a hybrid institutional structure, and news literacy as a journalistic practice, not just an audience-focused concept (Johnson, 2024b). The journalist's story represents how they explain their practice as a form of news literacy. The selected story represents the journalist as a news-literate consumer.

Several recurring themes emerge from these reflections, such as self-critique and recognizing areas for improvement. This indicates a proactive approach to enhancing journalistic standards. Journalists often discussed the perceived impact of their practices on audience trust, underscoring the importance of audience perception in their metacognitive evaluations. Additionally, themes of adaptability and flexibility in adopting new practices highlight the dynamic nature of journalism and the continuous need for self-improvement. Examining these reflective practices is vital for understanding journalists' metacognitive capabilities. Comparing reflections on self-produced work with those on provided articles helps journalists better understand their strengths and weaknesses, promoting self-awareness. This comparative analysis fosters enhanced critical thinking skills as journalists critically analyze their practices and decisions. These metacognitive processes also encourage ongoing professional development. By reflecting on their experiences and benchmarking against external standards, journalists can identify areas for improvement and implement changes in their practice.

Understanding journalists' metacognitive capabilities involves delving into their reflective practices, particularly how they assess their work versus provided

articles, and identifying patterns and themes in their reflections. These insights are crucial for enhancing self-awareness, critical thinking, and professional growth among journalists, ultimately fostering greater trust and transparency in journalism. When journalists reflect on their self-produced work, they often exhibit a higher degree of personal investment, leading to deeper self-reflection and critical analysis. They possess comprehensive contextual knowledge of their work, including the decisions and challenges encountered during production. This allows for a nuanced critique of their processes and outcomes, promoting more self-awareness of their biases and influences. Reflecting on self-produced work can thus uncover personal biases and prompt journalists to consider how their perspectives shape their reporting. In contrast, journalists are encouraged to adopt an outsider's perspective when analyzing a provided article, fostering a more objective critique and comparison. Engaging with external work exposes them to different styles, approaches, and decisions, broadening their understanding and sparking new ideas for their practice. This exercise also helps journalists identify industry standards and best practices, providing a benchmark against which they can measure their work.

### **Future Directions**

The study of metacognitive reflections on journalistic practices through newsroom reconstructions reveals critical insights into journalists' self-awareness, critical thinking, and adaptability. By comparing reflections on self-produced work and external articles, journalists enhance their evaluative frameworks and identify personal biases, leading to more transparent and accurate reporting. Their reflections' consistent patterns and evolving themes illustrate cognitive and professional growth, highlighting the importance of reflective practices in fostering trust and transparency in journalism.

Encouraging scholars to utilize this approach in their research can deepen their understanding of journalistic practices and promote critical self-evaluation. By exploring these areas, researchers can better understand how metacognitive practices enhance journalism, leading to more transparent, accurate, and impactful reporting (Johnson et al., 2025). Combining traditional interview methods with reconstruction approaches provides a comprehensive framework for understanding journalists' metacognitive processes. This method advances theoretical development in journalism studies, highlighting journalism as a discursive institution, journalism education as an evolving assemblage, and news literacy as an essential journalistic practice (Johnson, 2024b). Future research should build on these foundations, exploring how metacognitive practices can further professional development and public trust in journalism. Potential study areas include:

- Investigating how journalists' personal and professional identities influence their reflective practices and the implementation of trust-building measures.

- Analyzing how metacognitive practices affect coverage decisions, particularly in complex or controversial news topics.
- Developing and testing educational interventions that integrate metacognitive strategies, assessing their impact on journalism students and practicing journalists.

### Further Reading

- Johnson (2024b) introduces the concept of News Literate Journalism in his dissertation, emphasizing how newsroom practices can be improved by focusing on news literacy and metacognitive reflection, which are central to building sustainable journalism models.
- Johnson et al. (2025) provides a knowledge base of how the eight pillars of metacognition interact with journalism practice.
- Reich and Barnoy (2020) provide an overview of nearly two decades of research on newsmaking reconstructions, offering insights into the methodological complexities of reconstructing newsroom decisions.
- Zimmerman's (2002) work on self-regulated learning serves as a foundational text on metacognition. This article can offer an analytical framework for understanding how journalists can use metacognitive strategies to assess and improve their news production processes.

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### *Appendix A: Journaling Protocol*

Journalists will provide journaling responses to questions associated with participating in the Trust Kits study each week. The responses are meant to help the journalists discuss their process and experiences implementing the educational materials in their newsrooms.

#### *“In-the-moment” reflections: OPTIONAL*

Beyond the questions we provide you each week, we encourage you to reflect as you implement the Trust Kit. For example, record yourself talking through your process of adjusting your practice and think out loud about what you are doing and why you are doing it. These in-the-moment reflections will help you answer the questions each week and give us more opportunities to understand what you are doing and why you are doing it. These reflections can also assist you in your training and development and coach others in your newsroom. You can submit these optional reflections each week to your assigned folder.

#### *Week 1 | Laying the groundwork*

- 1 What do you know about your community’s trust in your newsroom?
- 2 What do you know about [Transparency/Corrections] in your newsroom?
- 3 After reading through the Trust Kit, what stood out about how it differs from your current journalism practice?
- 4 How do you plan to implement the Trust Kit in your newsroom? Walk me through your process.
- 5 What are your goals for implementing this Trust Kit?

*Week 2 | Getting started*

- 1 After your first week of implementing the kit, discuss how you changed something about your journalism based on what you learned in the Trust Kit.
  - What did you do?
  - How did you do it?
  - And what specifically do you think the Trust Kit did to help with that process?

*Week 3 | Moving forward*

- 1 You've now completed two weeks of implementation. What, if anything, did you notice was different about your journalism or newsroom this week compared to last?
- 2 How is the Trust Kit changing your process of [providing corrections/becoming more transparent]?
- 3 Do you need to adjust anything in your journalism practice to meet your goals better?

*Week 4 | Bumps in the road*

- 1 What has been difficult about this experience so far?
- 2 How well do you understand the Trust Kit?
- 3 Do you need additional resources to improve [corrections/transparency] in your newsroom?
- 4 What part of the Trust Kit have you struggled to implement in your newsroom?
  - Can you tell us more about what roadblocks or barriers you ran into and why?
  - How do you believe you can course correct?
  - What would be the outcome if you didn't overcome that barrier?

*Week 5 | Wrapping up*

- 1 Do you see a change in your journalism or your newsroom? How do you know?
- 2 Are these changes in service of your newsroom? Of your community members? If so, how?
- 3 Explain how you plan to make this a sustainable practice in your newsroom.

*Week 6 | The future*

- 1 Now that you've completed your five weeks explain how you would help another journalist change their [corrections/transparency] process.
  - What would you do to help them understand the need to change?
  - How would you help guide them through this process?
  - How would you explain the change?
  - What would you do to support them?
- 2 How did you explain this process to your community/audience? How did it go?
- 3 How could this Trust Kit help address news avoidance?