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Article

Original Article

The challenge of defining news literacy: Perceptions from the UK news literacy sector

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Abstract

Recent research has lamented a lack of theoretical clarity around the term news literacy, calling on the academy to produce tighter, more nuanced definitions. Vraga, described news literacy as a "bloated" term, warning in another paper that the movement was at a tipping point. If scholars want to do their bit by offering concrete guidelines to those delivering initiatives, they argued, agreement as to what news literacy actually is, and how it should be evaluated, must be reached. This paper seeks to aid this process by providing insights about how news literacy is conceived and operationalised by those delivering such education to UK. Drawn from in-depth interviews with practitioners linked to five news literacy projects in the UK conducted in summer 2021, it finds that far from there being agreement in the sector as to what news literacy is, or indeed what it could be, the term as deployed by UK practitioners is equally 'bloated' and lacking in clear definition. This has implications for the ability of the sector to promote itself, champion its priorities or conduct evaluation work against clear and relevant metrics. By highlighting this lack of clarity around definitions in the UK context, this study adds international weight to existing work stemming primarily from the US. It also demonstrates the need for greater clarity of terminology so that news literacy concepts including critical thinking are not lost within increasingly broad and instrumental skills-focussed definitions of a wider media literacy.

Keywords

Journalism, media literacy, misinformation, news literacy, online/digital media

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Introduction

In June 2022 Will Moy, Chief Executive of the UK fact-checking charity Full Fact tweeted: "Anyone got any other literacies? (Tully et al. 2021) In my time I have heard people talking about news literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, information literacy, technology literacy, numerical literacy, statistical literacy, health literacy, physical literacy, religious literacy, agricultural literacy." (Moy, 2022).

Moy is not alone in noting the proliferation of the term 'literacy' in this context (and perhaps, suggesting its ubiquity might dilute its meaning). The media scholar David Buckingham had noted a similar trend in his blog a month earlier: "It seems hard to imagine an area of human life that could not be defined as requiring a form of literacy." (Buckingham 2022).

News literacy too has found itself mired in a debate as to its precise definition due to this abundance of literacies – what Mihailidis described in 2014 as a "conceptual morass" (Mihaildis, 2014). Mihaildis observed: "Like an emerging academic initiative or movement, defining boundaries and frameworks for news literacy is a thorny and contentious issue. Part of the contention stems from multiple literacies–media literacy, information literacy, digital literacy, news literacy, civic literacy, and so on–that all integrate and overlap around their intended outcomes that advocate for civic engagement and critical thinking."

> "Terminology matters," he wrote, pointing out that without the field being clearly defined, with a conceptual agreement for news literacy, it would be very difficult to build strong and structured metrics for assessment of outcomes (Mihaildis, 2014).

Over the intervening years the debate has continued, as the field has grown, as have ways of teaching, assessing and writing about news literacy. This growth prompted Tully, Maksl et al. in 2021 to publish a paper arguing for more precision around the definition of news literacy from scholars, linked to a need for the accurate measurement of news literacy behaviours. (Maksl, Tully et al., 2021).

The practical question posed by the work of Mihailidis and other scholars based primarily in the USA, is: how can news literacy be measured, if there is no clear agreement as to what it is? This question is fundamental to this paper, which finds a parallel lack of a conceptual agreement for the term from within the news literacy sector in the UK.

By interrogating perceptions and definitions of news literacy within the UK sector, this this paper seeks to fill a gap in the literature, to add an important international comparison to the US-focussed work on this topic to date and to add its weight to calls for stronger and clearer definitions.

The challenges of definitions

News literacy is a relatively new field of research with mentions in the literature from the 2000s.

It is often described as a subset of media literacy (Maksl, et al. (2015) 2015, 30) – a term itself that is characterised by competing definitions and approaches. In 2010 Potter wrote that media literacy "means many different things to different people", be they scholars, educators or the general public, while the literature on the subject is a large complex patchwork of ideas. (Potter 2010). In 2019 Sonia Livingstone referenced the "now-tiresome debate over definitions of media literacy" in a blog but emphasised that definitions do matter, identifying a trend in the UK that has seen fears around online harms shift media literacy education away from mediated learning to teaching about online safety and security (Livingstone, 2019). Her concerns were reflected in the UK government's Online Media Literacy Strategy, published in July 2021, which itself stated: "Globally, there is no universally recognised definition of media literacy. It has been described in multiple different ways, in part due to the fact it encompasses a broad range of topics and issues." The strategy then went on to bullet point a broad definition of media literacy as encompassed by the then Draft Online Safety Bill, including "an understanding of the nature and characteristics of material published by means of the electronic media" (DCMS, 2021: 14).

Buckingham warns of the dangers of literacy becoming a synonym for competence, a functional approach to learning the associated skills rather than the broader forms of knowledge and understanding that truly "literate" people should possess (Buckingham 2022 ibid).

This debate within the wider field of media literacy is germane to the newer arena of news literacy because similar trends have been identified, with scholarly concern focusing on educative approaches that put aside a critical approach to the political economy of the media, and bias and framing, to focus on teaching how journalism works.

News literacy or news appreciation - or both?

Jennifer Fleming's 2012 PhD thesis was a case study of a major US news literacy project at Stony Brook University in New York, USA. Then, she wrote that literature on news literacy specifically was limited, given that the label was relatively new, and that her work intended to fill that gap in the literature. Fleming's thesis included a response to Renee Hobb's 2010 essay "News Literacy: What works and what doesn't", in which the media literacy theorist wrote of the dangers of sessions led by journalists coming too close to a form of nostalgic propaganda – a tension she framed as news literacy versus news appreciation.

Fleming argued in a subsequent paper that the Stony Brook approach did not "blindly evangelise journalism" and observed that the news literacy lessons she had seen were indeed critical of the kinds of unsubstantiated or argumentative journalism the Hobbs was talking about (Fleming 2014). However, her study did find evidence to support Hobbs' view that the news literacy at Stony Brook did little to teach students how to identify and assess commercial biases inherent in American news. Fleming concluded by suggesting that news literacy could be situated as both a specialised approach to media literacy and a type of journalism appreciation. (Fleming 2014).

This notion of journalism appreciation as embedded in a specific media literacy approach was echoed by Jaakola who coins the term journalism media education (JME) and introduces another literacy – that of journalism (Jaakkola, 2020). Jaakola's work focused on examining newsroom efforts in Finland that have seen the journalistic community there engaged as advocates for their field. This approach, which recognises the civic good that journalism can do, is at the heart of news literacy as envisioned by Mihailidis. He sees the practice as way of building a bridge between the reporter and the audience, the journalist and the citizen (Mihaildis, 2012), resulting in the creation of informed sceptics who can both critique the media but also understand its importance in a democracy (Mihaildis, 2009).

This notion is echoed in the work of scholars who have found a link between news literacy and propensity to civic engagement, such as Martens and Hobbs (2015) and, in a UK context, Polizzi (2020). The latter found an inter-relationship between what he termed "critical digital literacy" and civic engagement, "from reading news and discussing politics to campaigning".

Towards a new definition of news literacy

The literature concerning news literacy as a theoretical area of study has grown apace alongside an emergent practical movement, particularly in the US, of educational programmes focussed on delivering news literacy programmes to learners.

The growth is such that Fleming's statement in 2014 that the literature was limited is no longer the case, not least given the work of Tully, Maksl, Ashley, Craft and Vraga who have published widely on news literacy since 2015, in an effort to conceptualise and operationalise the term.

However, for this group of researchers, definitions are no clearer than they were in 2014, indeed, they are "bloated, comprising attitudes, behaviors, skills, and knowledge that should remain distinct". (Vraga et al. 2021). In a separate paper, the same researchers propose a new definition of news literacy via the creation of a framework covering five domains. For them, redefining the term is vital for those involved in the measurement of news literacy across different contexts (Tully et al., 2021).

The new definition is centred around what they call the five Cs of news literacy: Context, creation, content, circulation and consumption –a suite of knowledge and skills related to news production, distribution and consumption alongside the role of news in society. They write: "News literacy requires an understanding of both the content and contexts of news production and consumption." (Tully et al. 2021)

Tully et al. write that they offer their definition of news literacy, and explicate its core components, as a pathway for future research (Tully et al. ibid).

This is precisely where this paper, which analyses how news literacy practitioners in the UK understand and define the term news literacy, hopes to add to the literature.

Methodology

This paper is based on in-depth interviews with practitioners linked to five high profile news literacy projects in the UK. It seeks to answer the research question: How is news literacy understood by specialist practitioners working with UK school children?

The five projects, all of which are members of UK umbrella body the News Literacy Network, were:

(1) BBC Real News (a single session of approximately 1 hour, concentrating on identifying reliable information, then delivered in schools and other youth settings under the Young Reporter arm of the BBC).
(2) NewsWise (a 15-lesson unit of work looking at news literacy concepts for 7-11 year-olds, run by the Guardian Foundation in collaboration with the National Literacy Trust and the PSHE Association, which represents teachers of personal, health, social and economic education).
(3) The Burnett News Club (A year-long, paid-for programme of classroom activity linked to a series of current affairs topics, run by the Economist Educational Foundation. This project has since been relaunched as Topical Talk).
(4) Shout Out UK (a social enterprise based in London that runs workshops on news literacy within secondary schools as part of a combined offer with political literacy teaching).
(5) The Student View (a charity that runs 'pop-up newsrooms' in secondary schools with the aim of providing skills in spotting misinformation and local reporting).

Selection of these projects for inclusion was preceded by a mapping exercise that drew on desk research to compile a detailed spreadsheet containing a snapshot of the UK's news literacy landscape. From that spreadsheet, projects were chosen that worked with schools and offered at least some substantive delivery, as opposed to purely online resources such as web pages, downloads or games. The rationale for this was that projects who deliver or facilitate taught sessions have direct relationships with their end users. As such, they offered the opportunity to gather a much wider range of perspectives, including those of project managers, session leaders, teachers and pupils. This would not be possible in the case of projects that offer only online resources to often anonymous end users.

The five projects were selected to represent a range of funding models, delivery methods and content focuses, as well as varying relationships with the news media industry. They also represent to some extent a convenience sample of projects that were willing to participate (although no project declined to do so).

Each project was asked to take part via email, and this was followed up with further email correspondence and/or an online meeting to discuss the requirements of participation.

For each chosen project, the researchers sought to interview a senior manager, a classroom session leader and a teacher from a participating school (not employed by the project). In total, 14 interviews were conducted of the intended 15, with Covid-related challenges frustrating efforts to speak to a teacher connected to BBC Real News. Covid

also meant that interviews were conducted online using Teams or Zoom, with written consent obtained via an electronic form in advance. All but two interviews were conducted by both researchers. NVivo was used to conduct thematic analysis of transcripts. The interviews were carried out between May and July 2021.

The researchers did not seek to evaluate or rank the case study initiatives, but rather to gather testimony from a range of actors within the UK news literacy sector; to explore what shared themes and differences exist in approaches to news literacy between different initiatives, and to look at how these relate to the perspectives and priorities of participant teachers. The teachers' perspectives, as end-users (and an important 'target market' for these projects) offer a useful additional layer to the data relevant to this paper.

All of the session leaders and project managers interviewed had some form of direct or indirect link to some aspect of the news media industry. The two BBC Real News interviewees were BBC employees. The session leaders and managers of both NewsWise and Burnett News Club were employed by foundations linked to media outlets, namely the Guardian Foundation and Economist Educational Foundation respectively. The Student View (TSV) has received funding from the Financial Times and has FT representatives on its board (plus Alan Rusbridger, a former Guardian editor). The Student View session leader was a former local newspaper reporter. Shout Out UK (SOUK) has received support in kind (free promotion for a COVID-19 misinformation initiative) from The Times. The researchers do not claim that these connections automatically affected interviewees' responses in relation to the news industry or make them invalid. However, it should be noted that the interview sample is unlikely to have nationally-representative views on UK journalism or particular outlets within that industry.

It should also be noted that these in-depth interviews formed part of a larger research project. In addition to the interviews analysed here, and the preliminary mapping exercise and project data collection mentioned above, the researchers also conducted an observation of one classroom session for each project and a survey of a participating cohort of pupils. Projects were asked to provide additional data and documents relating to the content of their delivery, as well as information on participant numbers, finance and funding arrangements, staffing numbers and links to the news media industry.

The research question addressed here (How is news literacy understood by specialist practitioners working with UK school children?) elicited multi-faceted and complex answers. In order to explore these answers as fully as possible, this paper seeks primarily to tackle this one (albeit large) question. The wider project as a whole sought to examine two further main research questions, the answers to which are the subject of other outputs. These were:

RQ2. What is the reach and scope of news literacy education in UK schools?

RQ3. How do practitioners working with UK school children on news literacy view the involvement of the news media industry in news literacy programmes?

The first stage of the project (desk-based mapping) sought to answer RQ2 and inform sampling for the second stage research. This mapping data is the subject of forthcoming

publications and has formed the basis of internal briefings to the UK Government's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and communications regulator Ofcom. Observation and interview data relating to RQ3 is published elsewhere (citation here, removed for anonymous review).

Findings

News Literacy as critical thinking

No shared specific definition of news literacy emerged from the interview data. It was notable that, when asked how they personally would define the term, most participants did not offer a concise 'potted' definition, answering instead using anecdote or example to explain what the term meant to them. Where discrete answers were offered, they included "understanding and being literate in the news" (teacher, SOUK) or "cross-checking and not believing" (teacher, NewsWise). A teacher who had facilitated a Student View workshop before our interview responded: "It is not something I would be familiar [with]…I mean I would hazard a guess. Broad sheets or buzzwords around the news."

All five initiatives are members of the UK's News Literacy Network, which early in its existence adopted a mission statement based on the Stony Brook University explanation of news literacy. Stony Brook states that news literacy is the "critical thinking skills…to judge the reliability and credibility of information, whether it comes via print, television or the internet" (Stony Brook n. d.). No participant referred by name or quotation to this definition of news literacy, or to the NLN's own 'mission statement' that appears online: "The News Literacy Network aims to empower and equip news consumers of all ages with the confidence, knowledge and skills they need to engage critically with news and current affairs." (National Literacy Trust (2017)). Indeed, there was some awareness of the lack of a widely used, shared definition within the sector. A Burnett News Club session leader remarked: "I know this is really different for everyone. I've never been involved in the network directly but I know there's really different...definitions."

However, a shared salient theme from both the above - that news literacy is about critical thinking - was widely present among interview responses. Some used this language explicitly, such as the Student View session leader who said: "For me it's just getting people to critically… think about where they get their information from, and wherever they can trust it". Others described implicitly a skill set that amounts to critical thinking about the news media. A teacher working with the Burnett News Club, asked to define news literacy, replied:

> "I would say it's probably; flip on its head and say, being literate in the news being able to read it, understand it, pick it apart, being able to make a balanced judgement, being able to not just take on face value, and be able to kind of understand the deeper meanings within that context."

News literacy vs media literacy vs other 'literacies'

All five projects are members of the UK's News Literacy Network and as such identify at least some of their substantive work as news literacy.

However, participants differed in their perceptions of the distinctions between news and media literacy. Some saw the two as almost inter-changeable, such as the senior manager at SOUK who said: "In terms of media or news literacy, we, we kind of match the two together". Their counterpart at the Student View defined their own organisation as a "media literacy charity" rather than news literacy, despite it being heavily focussed on the creation of "pop-up newsrooms". They added:

> "We use media literacy, just because we want it to be a bit more expansive and include all types of disinformation, which don't necessarily reflect news itself."

These findings echo the observation of Kajimoto and Fleming (2019) that "some scholars and educators use the two terms [news and media literacy] interchangeably without recognizing the possible differences in some underlying philosophy; others adamantly adhere to one over the other to emphasize the distinction". The potential consequences of this are discussed further below.

Meanwhile, other participants appeared to take a more pragmatic approach to the widely-held perception that news literacy as a term has little awareness outside the sector. Both managers and session leaders said that they use broader terms, primarily media literacy, when dealing with teachers and other external actors, despite perceiving their work to fall under the more specialist heading of news literacy.

A SOUK session leader, asked to define news literacy, expressed a slightly different view to that of their manager on the distinction between news and media literacy:

> "I suppose I would define it a little bit different to media literacy because media literacy kind of covers, I suppose news literacy as well…I suppose yeah news literacy is a subset of media literacy, but focussed particularly on the news and how to read it analyse it and evaluate it."

However, they added:

> "When I'm talking to specific people I use news literacy but if I'm talking to others I use media literacy, I think, I think people often conflate the terms news and media...so I suppose it's only with people that actually know what they're talking about can you, you know, switch the terms, but I just tend to use media literacy when talking to teachers and things."

A senior NewsWise manager described efforts to increase the visibility and profile of the term 'news literacy':

> "We also do pre-project training with every teacher that is going to do the programme so they have…and news literacy is explicitly mentioned through that. We do that because it isn't actually that widely known, as I'm sure that's why you're asking the question, it's a much

bigger term in the States than it is here, and it's very relevant to us because we are specifically critical literacy in the context of news. And so it's a really useful term for us to use, but it isn't recognised by everyone, so we also… use news literacy in all our documentation, when we're describing what the project does."

However, a session leader for NewsWise - a person directly responsible for delivering workshops to schools - indicated that they avoid the term because of its lack of resonance:

"Okay so honest answer I would say I wouldn't use it much outside of NewsWise because I would say, teachers wouldn't be that confident with it…So if someone asked me, what is my job, I would say oh I work for Guardian Foundation delivering news workshops to children in deprived areas, and we look at things like how to identify fake news, and how to put together a news report and reporting on issues that matter to them…I wouldn't use News Literacy when I was describing it."

A session leader for The Student View, meanwhile, said they use 'news literacy' within the organisation and "tried to" use the term news literacy with schools but found "teachers don't know what it means":

"If I say media studies where if I say we're talking about the news or we're talking about critical thinking or we're talking about misinformation and fake news, they understand that - they don't understand media literacy or news literacy, they don't know what it is."

This indicates that parts of the news literacy sector are describing themselves, at least for the purposes of important external audiences such as funders, policy-makers and schools, as part of a much broader media literacy landscape. When seeking to explain what they understand to be news literacy, they refer in fact to other literacies that they perceive to have greater name recognition.

For example, the NewsWise manager expressed recognition that the term news literacy doesn't always resonate, and that there is sometimes a need to define their work in other terms:

"We might also refer to digital literacy, information literacy, there's a lot of literacies out there, and depending on your audience... So if I'm talking to a group of computing teachers…I will refer to news literacy, as well as digital literacy or critical digital literacy. So, yeah, we don't insist on only using news literacy because it's not what makes sense to everybody."

SOUK explicitly describes itself as the "home of political and media literacy" (SOUK, 2022). It was therefore perhaps unsurprising that this inter-connectedness between news and other literacies was most overt in responses from this organisation.

Its senior manager described how they perceive the inter-relationship:

"So political literacy is the understanding the bare-bone basics around how our political system works. So…understanding how a Bill becomes a law, these kind of things, and then

media literacy, which is how to critically analyse the information we receive…because again, it's one thing understanding how the political system works, but then if you don't know how to critically analyse the information you receive to make those voting decisions you're kind of stuck."

A SOUK session leader furthermore explained how in their view, specific news literacy has been added into their work in a range of other literacies and subject areas, including broader media literacy:

"Originally it was just political and media literacy. So we've now gone into climate literacy, focused a lot on extremism and combating extremism, which is kind of my area. And then we've also done a bit of journalism and kind of more suppose traditional news literacy elements of it as well."

This blurring and blending of terminology around understanding online information speaks to Moy's comment about the proliferation of 'literacies' in this sector (Moy 2022) and has implications in terms of clarity of definition and scope. As Kajimoto and Fleming (2019) have suggested, there is a need for greater discussion about whether news literacy is indeed a sub-set of media literacy or a more distinct field that overlaps with media literacy but also with subjects like journalism training and citizenship.

News literacy as empowering active citizens and promoting diversity

A strong theme in the interview data is that part of the definition and purpose of news literacy is the empowering of citizens to play an active and informed part in a democratic society.

This is manifest in the SOUK pairing of political and news/media literacy but was cited also by participants from across the five initiatives.

A session leader for Burnett News Club summarised this position thus:

"I think if you are a news literate person, you are able to engage with current affairs and have the skills to understand them and speak about them in ways that apply across your life."

The notion that an ability to analyse news media correlates with civic engagement has support in the academic literature. Martens and Hobbs found connections between news analysis skills and intent towards civic engagement (Martens and Hobbs 2015); Hobbs et al. found links between intent to participate in civic engagement and "positive attitudes about news, current events, reporting, and journalism" (Hobbs et al. 2013).

A conception of news literacy as training for civic engagement also reflects the position of the UK Government (as published in 2019), which is that news literacy-related concepts are the preserve of the Citizenship curriculum for England and Wales, which "teaches pupils media literacy and explores freedom of speech and the role and responsibility of the media in informing and shaping public opinion". Other components of

a wider digital literacy, it argued, are catered for by teaching in English, history and IT, negating the need for a discrete subject within the curriculum.

For the NewsWise senior manager, speaking in summer 2021, the conception of news literacy as a citizenship tool reflected an evolution in focus. With the COVID-19 pandemic, they argued, "Challenging misinformation has become a bit more accepted…So we don't have to make that case so much any more."

NewsWise's focus has therefore shifted:

> "The critical literacy part especially is absolutely at the core of what we do, but I think maybe what has evolved and is continuing to evolve with so we're still in that process of evolution is the that focus on civic engagement, and…having a voice, and having the confidence to tell the stories that you think are important to tell."

Related to this in the data was the notion of news literacy as a tool for the promotion of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within the news media industry, which was proposed by both NewsWise and the Student View. Explaining the then-recent decision of NewsWise to concentrate its resources more in the Birmingham region of the UK, the same senior manager said:

> "It's got hugely diverse communities but it's quite fractured and so different areas of Birmingham, different communities within…the wider Birmingham region don't necessarily interact or communicate with each other. So, that's an interesting thing to explore. And also because one of the wider aims of The Guardian Foundation is to increase diversity in the media, obviously, Birmingham is a hugely diverse place with lots of diverse communities and in terms of reaching neighbourhoods that maybe don't feel that they're represented properly in the media or by the media."

A manager from The Student View, asked to define what problem their organisation sought to fix, responded:

> "I'd say it is multifaceted…It's firstly your lack of diversity in media. That is a massive issue and one that we can't solve on our own but we can certainly help to make journalism seem more like a realistic career by giving these taster sessions in schools."

This represents a broadening of the working definitions of news literacy in the UK. When combined with the above discussion of the blurring of definitions between news and other literacies, we are left with a picture that echoes the findings of Vraga et al. (2021) that definitions in this space are somewhat "bloated" and amorphous.

Some scholars, including Malik et al. (2013) have argued that a precise definition of news literacy matters less than its central mission to "empower citizens", and in fact that some flexibility in the term might be beneficial in allowing news literacy provision to adapt to different contexts. However, the risk for those that advocate the benefits of news literacy is that a lack of concise, widely-agreed definition of what it is - or by extension the problem it seeks to address - hampers the feasibility of selling these benefits.

News literacy as news appreciation or journalism skills training

Despite a blurring of terminology and limited outward-facing use of the term news literacy by participants, multiple interviewees clearly did conceptualise their work as having the specific function of promoting understanding of and trust in the professional news media; what Hobbs has termed 'news appreciation' (2010) and Jaakkola (2020) describes as journalism media education.

Multiple participants spoke of understanding news processes, journalistic practices or the distinction between professional journalism and other information sources as a facet of news literacy. This was particularly, although not exclusively, true among those interviewees who had been or were practicing journalists in addition to their educational roles.

A session leader for BBC Real News, whose 'day job' is as a BBC journalist, said:

"News literacy I think is understanding the news around you and also understanding the people behind it, and what it means for those who create it and also those who consume it, so it's I think it's quite a broad term. I think it's what news means to someone who is just consuming it and where they're getting it from, but also understanding the people who created as well."

A senior manager for the same project remarked that the BBC's news and media literacy initiatives are "very much engaging with an age group, who might not traditionally engage with the BBC or might not at the moment engage with the BBC. Or engage with news or media." In this way, news literacy can be seen as audience-building or what Fleming has described as "pedagogical public relations" (Fleming 2012).

A Student View session leader, themselves a former journalist, said of participating pupils:

"One thing I feel proud of, and I think it's maybe my bias, having been a local reporter and a journalist, is they start trusting the news a bit more. … It's both and trusting the news but also being a bit more critical when they're online, so it's kind of like more double edged…Because as a reporter that is one thing, that a lot of you just get tarred with the same brush that you're just gonna lie."

Although not directly affiliated to a news media outlet, the SOUK senior manager was explicit in making the link between critical thinking skills and the consumer base required to fund professional journalism:

"The more critical thinkers there are, the more people change their perception of information. And once you change your perception of information you realise that good information costs money, and then people are going to be willing to pay subscriptions."

There is a strong theme in the data that understanding that industry's practices and processes is an important part of news literacy, something that is explored in more detail elsewhere (Yeoman and Morris 2023). Such concepts have been central in a US context to

distinguishing news from media literacy – the development of what some scholars have called the "journalism school approach" - and have attracted both praise and criticism (Kajimoto and Fleming 2019).

Some participants went a step further and said that news literacy is in part about equipping people not only to understand but to produce news content. This perspective is inherent in the Student View model, which centres on 'pop-up newsrooms' within schools during which pupils write their own news stories (these moved online and were truncated during periods of Covid restriction). Its senior manager defined what TSV does as their organisation did, said that TSV "trains school children from underserved backgrounds as local news reporters, and training school children how to spot misinformation."

The NewsWise unit of work similarly culminates in production of written and/or video content among its primacy school participants, while the BBC Real News workshop sits within the broader Young Reporter programme, which has a central strand around the creation of journalistic content by young people.

A senior manager at NewsWise encapsulated this wider conception of new literacy, pulling together the themes of critical understanding, citizen engagement and content creation seen in the wider set of responses, and suggesting that all three form part of any comprehensive definition.

> "It's about understanding and engagement, it's about critical analysis, and it's about production skills, and that I think that's what news literacy is. It has to encompass all of those three things as a kind of model for learning."

Discussion and recommendations

This paper indicates that the Mihailidis position - that news literacy is about building informed, critically aware and empowered citizens who comprehend journalism's role in society - is embedded in conceptions of the UK sector. The twin emergent themes of critical thinking and understanding journalism should in theory mean that the UK sector could comfortably adopt Tully et al.'s five Cs of news literacy - context, creation, content, circulation and consumption - as the basis for a shared working definition of their mission (2021).

However, this paper also provides evidence that the "bloated" definitions of news literacy that have concerned researchers in a US context are present in the UK. Notwithstanding the relatively small scale of this study, the data provides evidence that those involved in delivering some of the most high profile news literacy initiatives currently operating in the UK have broad, sometimes and at times ambitious notions of what news literacy is or can be. While one would not necessarily expect non-specialist teachers in participating schools to reel off pithy definitions of news literacy, it was striking that none of those working for the projects did so either.

The researchers do not criticise our respondents for that, rather offer it as a reflection that as in the US, it appears that in the UK news literacy means "different things to different people" (Potter 2010). Indeed, in a previous study that considered perceptions of news literacy among UK journalism academics, it was striking that even among this

specialist group, news literacy was a contested, malleable and rarely-used term (Morris and Yeoman 2021).

Having originated as a sector largely in response to post-2016 concerns about so-called "fake news", these findings indicate that definitions of - and the rationale for - news literacy education in parts of the UK sector are shifting to foreground issues of civic engagement and diversity. The interviews for this project took place in the summer of 2021 while the Black Lives Matter protests and related discussions about equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) across a range of sectors were particularly prominent in media and public discourse, and it is possible that this context was relevant. In a landscape where funding is often uncertain and short-term - a challenge which came across strongly in interview data - it is possible that this evolving definition has something to do with funder priorities, real or perceived.

While civic engagement and diversification of the media are enormously valid objectives, an expanding conceptualisation of news literacy - and the apparent lack of a shared, widely-used definition across the sector - presents a number of challenges.

Firstly, as Tully et al. have noted elsewhere, the absence of a common definition presents challenges in terms of measuring success. If there is no clarity or agreement on what a news literate person looks like, or what news literacy education should achieve, then it is not easy for the sector to adopt metrics for measuring success. It is noteworthy in this context that a recent Ofcom report noted "difficulties measuring or defining…outcomes" as one of the barriers to evaluation reported by providers of media literacy education and training in the UK (Ofcom 2022). As Mihailidis noted, "terminology matters", and if the new literacy sector lacks a clear conception of a news literate person looks like, it becomes challenging to measure success.

At the same time, an implicit finding from this study was that there *are* conceptual limits to news literacy among UK providers. Among the multiple descriptions of the term that emerged from this project's data, there was no mention of concepts such as privacy; online harassment or grooming; false identities; legal rights online or terms of service, all of which feature in the UK Government's mapping of that country's media literacy sector published around the same time as our interviews took place (DCMS, 2021). Nor was there any explicit reference in our interviews to data poverty or digital exclusion, which in the UK have fallen under the policy umbrella media literacy.

This suggests that news literacy is not, in the eyes of those involved in it, the same thing as media literacy, at least in the latter's broad sense as deployed by policymakers and regulators. In a UK context where media literacy has taken on a scope so broad that it too can be challenging to define, the inter-changeable use of 'news' and 'media' literacy by some of those working on news literacy specifically risks further undermining the distinctiveness of their offer.

The adoption of a clearer shared definition of news literacy such as that proposed by Tully et al. (2021) would make it easier to generate a sales pitch for news literacy as its own field, as well as providing a more firm basis for rigorous evaluation that might generate evidence for its benefits. While the researchers have elsewhere noted the

existence of demotivating factors against this kind of evaluation, including the challenges of a competitive funding landscape, a clearer definition of news literacy would at least allow projects to be assessed on their own terms rather than against broader media literacy imperatives that focus on instrumental digital skills.

Furthermore, the breadth of news literacy as described by some participants - encompassing civic engagement, critical analysis and production skills - is at odds with the breadth and depth of delivery in the UK at the time of writing. NewsWise itself is at 15-lesson unit of work aimed at primary aged children. The Burnett News Club ran as standard over an academic year. Even these projects could not hope to encompass such a broad and complex set of topics. The Student View, meanwhile, condensed its offer from 12 h to three for online delivery during Covid; BBC Real News is a single hour and SOUK typically offers three-hour standalone workshops. It seems inconceivable that any of these initiatives could cover civic engagement, critical analysis and production skills in these time scales, even with the small minority of children who participate in their sessions. The challenges presented by over-relying on external providers to deliver news literacy education, and the need for critical news literacy to be embedded more extensively within schools, have been discussed elsewhere (Yeoman and Morris 2023). In the meantime, however, a more tightly defined news literacy might offer those external providers a more realistic brief to fulfil within their restricted scope.

The researchers argue that there are strong practical reasons why the UK news literacy sector should agree on and then consistently use, wherever possible, a concise definition of news literacy that carves out its place within an increasingly amorphous media literacy landscape. This could be done under the auspices of the News Literacy Network and would generate greater visibility for the work its members are doing, ensuring that its priorities are not lost among questions of instrumental digital skills and the prevention of online harms.

With the UK government and communications regulator Ofcom both pushing for more rigorous evaluation, a tighter definition of news literacy is also a prerequisite for evaluation work that assesses news literacy education against metrics that are specific to its mission.

This study was limited in its scope and did not include the perspective of those regulators or policymakers. Further research that established how if at all such groups define news literacy and its place within their wider media literacy work would be useful. It would also be beneficial to better understand how major funders in the space, including tech companies such as Google and Meta, and indeed major journalism publishers in the UK, understand the term.

This study adds useful international context to a US-focussed body of literature. Many of the findings that emerged from our data echo that US work and have cross-border applicability, particularly within a Western democratic context. However, the UK's country-specific news media landscape inevitably impacted our participants' conceptions of news literacy. Discussion about the parameters of news literacy would be very different in other national contexts, particularly where the relationship between journalism and the state is closer.

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