CITIZENS IN A MEDIATED WORLD

Digital technology has become a natural part of our daily lives and requires new skills, knowledge and attitudes. Everyone can create their own media content and share it with others, and the distinction between reception and perception is erased.

This development represents a marked departure from the traditional media use of people, and challenges the perceptions about what it means to use and produce media in appropriate and meaningful ways. Critical media literacy, communication skills and competencies for creative and responsible content production have become increasingly important means for empowering people with Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in present media culture.

This book presents the discussions and conclusions from a conference on Media and Information Literacy that was held in Helsinki in May 2016, financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The event was organized by the NORDICOM (Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication Research), together with KAVI (National Audiovisual Institute) in Finland, jointly with the Nordic media and media education authorities: Media Council for Children and Youth in Denmark, Fjölmiðlanefnd (The Media Commission) of Iceland, Norwegian Media Authority and the Swedish Media Council.

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CITIZENS IN A MEDIATED WORLD

A Nordic-Baltic Perspective on Media and Information Literacy

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NORDICOM
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Reinventing the Ideals of Journalism and Citizenry in the 21st Century

Auksė Balčytienė & Ingela Wadbring

Is the concept of ‘news literacy’ something specific, a concept worth distinguishing from a more general understanding of the ‘media and information literacy’ (MIL) idea? Is news (and hence journalism) exceptional?

From our point of view, the answer to both questions is unequivocally yes. Whereas the understanding of MIL seems to be intensely discussed and internationally applied, ‘news literacy’ (although lying under the umbrella of the more general MIL declaration) appears to be a detached, specific concept with its own notion and conceptual boundaries. Journalistic news, too, has a history and still progresses within the frame of specific duties and contracts with the democratic society. As we will suggest later in this essay, news literacy can be treated as one specific (and conceptual) way of journalism’s appreciation.

On the whole, media and information literacy is a very general concept that can include almost everything that is mediated or is to some extent informative. It can be applied to the analysis of popular media content, such as sports or advertising on television, to the analysis of classical media, such as brochures and comics, to the examination of games and music, and so on. Still, not everything that is mediated (and appears informative or otherwise useful) can be assessed as being of societal relevance and importance. Indeed, media and information literacy, though by definition explicitly referring to literacy as classical learning activity, appears to be a much more multifaceted notion signifying not only the creative mastery of ideas in mediated discourses and texts. Modern versions of MIL comprise such attributes as citizens’ active involvement and service to societal needs by the creation and social sharing of information and news; as such, MIL also nurses societally empowering aspirations which suggest that available means of information and knowledge mediation must be applied for creativeness and individual expressiveness. This statement, as a matter of fact, serves us as the main point of departure in this discussion: though we certainly understand that there are many factors contributing to societal happiness (and democracy is certainly one of them), as seen from longitudinal studies (Inglehart et al. 2008), the sense and awareness of...
fairness and equality in society contribute to overall impression of societal agreement and satisfaction. As we are claiming here, predominantly those qualities – of individual inspiration and feelings of self-confidence empowered by modern communications – appear to be acting as ‘societal glue’ installing a more emotionally supportable, sustainable and thus happier form of living and societal welfare.

Though our discussion begins with and explicitly refers to the essentials of good life and societal empowerment, we cannot stay away from a significant number of abrupt encounters that contribute to the ‘dark side’ of communication-saturated life. No matter the roles we ascribe ourselves – citizens or consumers – we need to be informed if we should be able to take relevant decisions. We need to orient ourselves and make decisions about everything – from who should deliver our electricity to who we should elect to govern the country. The electricity decision might not be of great importance, but the election decision is. To be informed requires a fundamental precondition, which is access to accurate, reliable and relevant information.

As children, the school and family is our primary source for learning about almost everything. As grown-ups, we need to find our own sources for all kinds of necessary information. Regarding the goings-on in society, news is our primary source for this kind of information. Still, as we are now well aware, not all news that circulates around meets the standards of reliable and verified journalism, or is produced with an open heart and with good intentions. We have also realised that essential modifications have taken place in the ways in which news and information circulates around. Fundamental shifts have been registered in role exchanges and power games among those who take the lead in news agenda setting and news framing. Therefore, we also need to have a critical approach towards the definition and meaning of ‘news’ and how its fundamental characteristics – of verified information provision, of timeliness and actuality – are defined in order not to be misled. In short, we need to be ‘news literate.’ And this is the main focus of our essay. Briefly, we see two goals in our mission here: the first is to pose relevant questions in the area and conceptual definition of ‘news literacy,’ and the second goal is to stimulate discussion about the two conceptual pillars of democracy – qualitative features of professional journalism and democratic engagement and participation.

Even though any discussion on journalism and democracy also calls to address the cultural issue and tackles comparative aspects, in this essay we have decided to stay on a more general and conceptual (macro) level, focusing on trends and tendencies that modern societies are forced to address. Hence, we will first briefly explain the role of news journalism in society; thereafter we will address the challenges and encounters that news organisations, individuals and societies confront today. As we conclude in this essay, though it is way too early to cast pessimism on the idea of informed and engaged citizens as well as on professional journalism, if not addressed, the critical factors (of circulating fake news, of dominant manipulative discourses, of news sites with radical and propagandist views) might in the long term greatly affect the quality and functioning of democracy within and across European states.
Yesterday’s notion on news and democracy

From a normative perspective, journalistic news is distinctive from all other types of informational content because it claims to be content that is actual, factual and verified. Hence we follow the idea that ‘journalistic news,’ and thus ‘news literacy,’ is unique in such a way that, in spite of the channel that transfers it, journalism carries an implicit meaning of content with societal value. Because of that embedded collective value, journalism turns into a public good, i.e. into the content that is needed in a democratic society. Or so it was for many years, before things started rapidly changing.

News media and democracy are intrinsically interrelated. The media needs democracy since democracy is the only political system that grants the news media the required freedom to attain its goals of critical journalism and transparent communication. Conversely, democracy needs the media (and thus journalism) because, though dependent on complex causes (including socio-economic status, income and class affiliations), the quality and intensity of political decision-making – such as voting in elections and referenda, taking part in political consultations and deliberation, or forming communities of interests – are also indirectly determined by the qualitative features of information provided in the media (Strömbäck 2005).

Democracy also needs informed, engaged and knowledgeable citizens. The normative viewpoint to democracy envisions people as motivated media users. It expects people to base their political activities and engagements on a deep understanding of essential issues discussed in the media (Schudson 2003; Entman 1989; McNair 2000; Strömbäck 2005). Based on that information, people take part in the political processes and societal life and are able to make reasonable decisions.

Generally, the logic described above forms the basis of two necessities for a functioning democracy – the model of ‘informed citizenship’ (which views people as knowledgeable actors of daily democratic life) and the mission and functions of ‘professional journalism’ (which carries the function of detached observer and scrutiniser of elites) (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1](image_url)

**Figure 1.** Reciprocal relations between the concepts of ‘democracy,’ ‘citizenship,’ and ‘journalism’
The conception of ‘informed citizenship’ relies on motivations and abilities of people to use media and take part in public discussions about civic issues, which eventually leads to an understanding about how to participate in a democratic life. Journalism, too, needs to serve the ideal of the public good by making clear distinctions between entertainment and publicly empowering purposes of provided information (Sjøvaag 2015).

There are some evident drawbacks and critical tendencies in society – see below – but people are still inclined to appreciate and live better lives in a democracy, where news plays a crucial role.

As seen from opinion analyses registered by European Social Survey studies, public views of good life and happiness are higher (Figure 2a), societies are trustworthy (Figure 2b), support for democratic institutions (i.e. political parties) is stronger (Figure 2c) and people are less anxious and more optimistic about their future in those European states where positive perception of and actual support for democracy is stronger. It also seems that in those countries where support for democracy is higher, people tend to appreciate the ideals of media freedom and professional journalism (Figure 2d).

**Figure 2a.** Satisfied in the way that democracy works in a country by feeling of happiness (per cent)

Source: ESS (2012).
Figure 2b. Satisfied in the way that democracy works in a country by trust in people (per cent)
Source: ESS (2012).

Figure 2c. Satisfied in the way that democracy works in a country by trust in political parties (per cent)
Source: ESS (2012).
All things considered, democracies of the 21st century are still in need of informed, knowledgeable and engaged citizens. Citizens, too, seem to be motivated and inclined to support democratic ideals. However, something in the contemporary communications sphere has inevitably changed with the advent of ICT. Are the classical concepts of ‘informed citizenship’ and ‘professional journalism’ still valid and appropriate for the current times and news environments defined as hybrid, fluctuating and in flux?

**The transforming news environment**

While countries with long democratic traditions and strong media brands (mostly Western European and Nordic countries) are still able to keep their standards of journalistic professionalism, many smaller media groups have overstepped the ambition of provision of ‘pure’ journalism. And as observed within and across younger European democracies – as well as in those European states which were severely hit by economic difficulties from the last crisis – hybrid discourses of journalism mixed with PR, content marketing and advertisement proliferate in news portals, magazines, television and social media (Balčytienė & Harro-Loit 2009). Hate speech and harassment as well as information wars and propaganda are also content that could be found online, sometimes with a very similar look to news journalism.
It is not only that the modes of news production and consumption have converged and new ideas and actors have entered the public scene. What seems to be of critical significance is that the meaning as well as the democratic value of the content and news that spreads and circulates around appears to be changed and modified as well. Societal agendas appear to be less structured and considerably messier. Moreover, with communicative means and mediums getting increasingly faster and news more spreadable, the news content that moves throughout the networks gets more emotional, animated and expressive, leading to its impact as being far more affective rather than informative, clarifying or explanatory (Grabe & Myrick 2016, Heinrich 2011, Jenkins et al. 2013).

Aside to changes in the media field, a number of other exemplary trends are also registered, predominantly in the political arena. As noted, public engagement and voting numbers, and hence public participation in regular political activities, have remarkably declined in recent years. Likewise, popular support and trust in democratic institutions has declined and is still decreasing, and societies are becoming more and more socially and politically polarised and divided (Mancini 2013).

This raises a number of critical questions: What happens with news journalism when there are many more new actors taking part in news production and communication? How do these practices change our understanding of journalism?

A significant number of such types of questions were continuously asked in past decades, and professional news media organisations have developed their own editorial ideologies and means (such as codes of professional conduct and internal regulations, etc.) for dealing with unwanted pressures and outcomes (Waisbord 2013, Balčytienė et al. 2015). However, it needs to be stated that those means were developed and functioned adequately in rather stable (political, economic and social) conditions. Today’s news environment appears to be less stable and more in flux, thus the circulating content is less professionally supervised and therefore appears more toxic.

The loss of control for media companies

Not long ago, the most important thing for media companies was distribution of media content, while today, circulation has become important. The time when media companies had control over the content as well as the dissemination of the content is almost over. Affected by the transformation in the media industry and its social surroundings, news has gradually become a truly social product (Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013). So-called opinion leaders were identified already in the 1940s and 50s (e.g. Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955), but the concept might be even more relevant today than 70 years ago.

Opinion leaders are important in social networks, because they disseminate news from various sources. They activate and motivate the access and spread of the news. Acting as news distributors, they vigorously feed their views to others. Those influenced by opinion leaders remain reasonably passive and only act as followers of others. In
the long run, such practices contribute to inequalities and knowledge gaps; they also bring about critical outcomes, resulting in polarisation of political beliefs, identities and behaviour (Mancini 2013).

Longitudinal research studies show that though personalised information transmission adjusted by individual preferences might increase people’s knowledge and interest in some issues (also in political and communal matters), news distributed through social networks might bring some unexpected and critical results (Singer 2015). First, the quality of the distributed information appears to be questionable. Second, such trends greatly contribute to the growing social and political polarisation, and even radicalisation of certain views and beliefs, even in those nations that earlier were described as consensual.

Another tendency is noticed in the news media industry, where the boundaries between news consumption and production are in a continuous process of blurring. Though this is not an entirely new trend, and various aspects of such type of (prosumer) capitalism were discussed about already in the late 1980s within the framework of the McDonaldisation theory (Ritzer 2011), the arrival and applications of such logic in the media field seem to cause unprecedented results. A new and concerning phenomenon are new actors who have appeared on the scene and misuse the Internet.

Different kinds of misuse of the Internet

As conditions for the traditional media industry are getting harder and harder, the so-called alternative media and alternative journalism have gained ground at the same time. Some of these types of journalism are characterised by the same ideals as traditional journalism, like citizen journalism, participatory journalism or even social journalism. However, some of the news, outwardly appearing as journalism, follow almost the opposite ideal. The problem occurs when content is presented as news stories, whether true or false, but without any responsible organisation or group behind it, and sometimes with an implicit wish to deceive or incite the reader. If the news audience doesn’t show sufficient critical ability, societal debate will suffer.

Naturally, the sender of news is always an individual, but he or she can also act on behalf of others, or by themselves. One approach of analysing the senders is to differentiate the misuse on three levels: individual trolls/flamers, specific kinds of media forms, and organisations/states.

Concerning trolls and flamers, research is not unambiguous on differences between the two concepts. It is normally said that trolls are simply destructive without any obvious intention with their actions, while flamers are as destructive but also have an intention with their behaviour (Buckels et al. 2014, Hardaker 2010, McDermot 2012). Their driving force is often to challenge authorities in whatever possible way (Phillips 2011). On social media, their opinions can become widespread, while it is much harder for them to enter traditional newsrooms.
The next level is specific media. Specific political media has appeared everywhere, sometimes without any responsible editor, and often with the intention to bring its specific opinions to a wider public. Specific media (or even media channels) with strong political opinions is nothing new – Fox News in the US is a good example of this (Mancini 2013) – but the novelty is linked with wide availability and pervasive online applications even in countries previously portrayed as consensual. As cases from the Nordic countries show (Holt 2016), xenophobic and racist sites have emerged with claims of showing their own agenda and their own “truth”.

It can be argued that if states or authorities aim to mislead the public, it is worse than if single individuals do the same thing. For the public, however, the difference is not necessarily obvious. Having a critical approach is even more important when exposed to ‘news’ or other information from someone on the third level, where organisations or states express opinions. These actors have more resources, and their opinion work can therefore be more thought-out and thus more effective. A political populist party, the True Finns in Finland, is one such example (Lindén & Laurent 2015). The True Finns’ rhetoric is full of hate speech, especially directed against everyone not born and raised in Finland, and one part of the rhetoric is to blacklist journalists, researchers and all other politicians. Populist parties in general do not have access to traditional media, but they always have access to social media platforms. Their opinions and statements are designed to become viral, and thus become an issue in the public agenda and public debate.

Is it not easy to see through what comes out of biased, fake or untrue news? For some people it is no problem at all, but the more skilled the sender is, the harder it is to uncover such news. One of the problems is that many of the supporters of populistic movements and right-wing parties are keen followers of disinformation media sites and truly believe that these sites are providing the real facts. This means that they do not even try to see the bias, because they think the bias has been revealed by the disinformation site. For such users, such news is the real news.

The inexperienced young news consumers

Before social media appeared on the scene, most news was produced by media organisations. In media organisations, mistakes can happen, and not all news is necessarily reliable and produced with adequate editorial scrutiny. Still, there is always someone who is responsible for what is published. On social media platforms, by contrast, no one is necessarily responsible at all, and the less experience of life one has, the harder it is to find out what is reliable and true, and what is not. Young persons have less experience of life than older ones, and they are the ones primarily receiving news online – via traditional and non-traditional news sources. Even more, for young audiences their main preferred news source is social media, where news from traditional media organisations shares its space with news with unclear status and unclear senders, thus offering an informational buffet instead of a full menu.
However, we would like to emphasise that the following argumentation is not only valid for young persons – and not for all young persons – but also for grown-ups without critical abilities. It is nevertheless a fact that young people are more inexperienced due to their age, and get their news from social media to a much larger extent than older ones. We therefore find it reasonable to mainly discuss youngsters.

Algorithms govern the digital flow on social media platforms. The algorithms also set the logic of people’s interactions. Scholars disagree, however, about to what extent algorithms govern the flows, and if it is reasonable to talk about echo chambers or not. Some researchers argue that friendship on social media spans over ideological borders, and hence news and other texts as well (Bakshy et al. 2015, Webster 2014). Others argue that our circle of friends tends to have the same political opinion, and that people therefore are not exposed to different judgments (Colleoni et al. 2014). Other studies show that even if exchanges of information on social media have different ideological points of view, people tend to click and read those pieces that correspond to their own views (cf. Bakshy et al. 2015, Barberá et al. 2015). The disagreement between scholars depends, at least to some extent, on the design of the respective studies.

As far as we can see, it is obvious that there is a potential risk that echo chambers develop, at least among specific groups – and young people are particularly vulnerable because of their limited life experience. Young people are sometimes called ‘the digital natives,’ but being native online is not the same as having a critical mind. Echo chambers are a threat towards individuals who are not media and news literate, and who haven’t developed a critical view on everything that is called ‘news.’

Today’s notion on news and democracy

From a general perspective, there is an increased uncertainty of people’s self-confidence in their own abilities to participate in politics. People also appear to be less certain about their own enthusiasm to take part in democratic processes. Furthermore, they express doubts whether information distributed and made widely accessible in networks should be trusted. Simultaneously, people avoid scrutinising information themselves and tend to stay away from further information checking. Only seldom do they look at original sources that the ‘news’ was built on (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic 2015).

The audience’s behaviour also brings serious effects to the media industry and journalistic professionalism. With the increasing use of new media, news flows in social networks appear to be governed not by standards of professional journalism, but rather by the strength of social ties or managerial decisions (Wiik & Andersson 2013). Hence, social networks run on the use of information, the quality and heterogeneity of which might cause unpleasant outcomes. Over time, audiences might display a polarisation of political identities through their knowledge, beliefs, motivations and behaviour (Mancini 2013, Prior 2013). By implication, this transformation is bound to have a significant social impact on having well-informed, motivated and collectively
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concerned citizens. It seems as if communication in networks translates into stronger, firmer political identity and attitudes (Pariser 2011). This might lead to an increase in engagement and participation. But this might also increase participation which is based on false information, biased opinions and scattered views.

New forms of media as well as new actors in news production and distribution eventually blur the boundaries of the classical understanding of ‘journalistic news.’ As a result, professional journalism will change significantly. Criteria such as core journalistic aims and visions to serve the public good might be neglected, ignored and eventually lost. It seems, however, that contemporary media industries do not appear to be interested in playing a primary role as a provider of ‘pure’ journalism. As a result, journalism appears to be in transition, its ethics in flux, and public trust in democratic institutions is in decline (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Transformed focuses throughout concepts of ‘democracy,’ ‘citizenship’ and ‘journalism’

Generally, the quality of the informational product that circulates influences the quality of civic discourse. Previously, the media industry and journalistic professional ideals were the guardians of dominant societal discourses. Since the news environments have dramatically changed and the media industry is undergoing profound changes, the earlier functions of journalism have gradually shifted towards production of visually appealing, entertaining and engaging products as well as content that is easy to disseminate (Jenkins et al. 2013, Tandoc 2014).

Furthermore, new actors have entered the scene of news production, which on the one hand has pluralised the informational space, but which on the other hand has also contributed to the situation where the guidelines appear to be lost (Carlson 2015). If today’s news users prefer, share and like stories that feature news in a simplistic manner (or, alternatively, high-brow news), and if news editors take cues from how people use social networks and how the news is circling there, such preference could determine the future product level (cf. Tandoc 2014).

No matter how complex and unstructured the contemporary news environment is or appears to be, journalism – and thus news – matters because of its linkage with
civil society and democracy. ‘Fact checking’ still appears to be the core of journalistic function that modern democracies require. Whether this function will be recreated and carried by professionals alone or in cooperation with others (i.e. more news literate, critical and societally concerned users) remains to be seen.

Some final words

All in all, changes taking place in contemporary news environments have a direct influence on the character and meaning of news – and hence on democracy. Thus a significant number of questions and anxieties seem to be legitimate here: What are the long-term effects and consequences of ICT’s application and how do these affect societal power relations and the structure and functioning of democracy? What happens when people make active decisions to bypass journalistic materials and delve into networked communications and spreading of news? What kind of deals and compromises do people make to compensate the integrity of information that reaches them? How can consensus be formed on issues of mutual concern in such societies where people appear to be relying on varying sources of news?

Media policies in Europe have generally rested on the universal principle that people are viewed as informed and engaged citizens. From what has been discussed above it looks like the critical moment has arrived in Europe: It is time to reassess how the idea of the well-informed citizen and, consequently, equal access and knowledgeable use of information is tackled in hybrid media environments.

We envision that ‘news literacy’ can help us build a conceptual understanding – a kind of needed ‘societal glue’ – which reuses the classical ideals and visions of ‘informed citizenship’ and ‘journalistic professionalism,’ and reinvents those to meet all challenges of the changed media conditions. News literacy, accordingly, is envisioned as people’s concern with journalistic thinking, which eventually should empower people to think and act as citizens, valuing and appreciating professionalism in news and journalism.

For modern societies, the idea of news literacy seems to be of primary significance since it predominantly refers to journalistic professionalism (which rests on the ideal to provide verified and accurate information). ‘News literacy’ as a concept also deals with informed engagement and the motivations of people needed to diagnose truthfulness and hence professionalism in news. As such, news literacy appears to be of specific significance in raising public awareness and understanding of what is behind the so-called free information circulating in interactive media and social networks, i.e. what kind of interests media, politics or business may have, and how these may affect political decisions as well as popular perceptions of the role and functions of professional news journalism.

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