

# Media Literacy and the News

[Media Education/Media Literacy/Awareness]

by

Fifi Schwarz

Managing Director of the Dutch Newspapers in Education Programme (Amsterdam)

Researcher at Windesheim School of Media (Zwolle)

THE NETHERLANDS

*If media literacy programmes are to be successful in the making of media-literate citizens, a coherent and comprehensive approach to media literacy is required. This approach should include news literacy, which can be defined as: "the ability to critically evaluate, interpret and process as well as participate in news media and journalistic content in order to participate as active citizens in democratic society".*

In the Netherlands, it has taken just under five years for media literacy to assume a prominent position on the educational policy agenda. Currently, we can identify over 350 national organizations that are making an effort to improve the media literacy skills of young Dutch citizens (or that are, at least, articulating viewpoints to that end). And increasingly, there is talk of integrating media literacy into the educational curriculum.

However, schools and teachers struggle to incorporate media literacy into their educational scheme. Based on an inventory of the initiatives, it can be concluded that this hesitation is caused by a number of factors, the most prominent being that there seems to be a great lack of coherence: Most initiatives operate on their own, based on a particular expertise.

## The Missing Link

In order to overcome the fragmentation of all these specialized initiatives, educators must understand both the importance of media literacy in general and its relevance to their own educational goals.

The missing link here is the relationship between media literacy and citizenship. Educators in the Netherlands are expected to integrate civic education into their curriculum, which means that apart from the specific knowledge domains such as language, mathematics, biology etc., teachers have to equip their students with the skills needed to participate in society. This explains why media literacy in the Netherlands has been defined in relation to citizenship, the goal of media literacy being to enable citizens to make informed choices with regard to their active participation in society (1).

Interestingly, the most logical and relevant sources for informing citizens about social, economic and political affairs - news media - are often overlooked in media literacy education. This seems rather odd, considering that interest in news media among (young) citizens clearly relates to their civic engagement (2).

Most likely, this is due to the fact that mainstream news media - newspapers and news programmes on broadcast television - are considered 'old media', whereas media literacy programmes often tend to focus on 'new media'. Nevertheless, news media and journalism play a crucial role in safeguarding democratic societies and democratic citizenship (3). Their principal goal is to provide the public with information about political, economic and societal affairs, providing background information and serving as a platform for debate among experts and the public (4). As such, news media can serve as valuable instruments in teaching all kinds of media literacy skills at all levels.

## News Literacy

Incorporating news media into media literacy education requires news literacy, which we define as "the ability to critically evaluate, interpret and process as well as participate in news media and journalistic content in order to participate as active citizens in democratic society" (5). This implies a number of skills, such as linguistic skills, recognition of genres and evaluating the identity of an author or a medium. These skills are most useful when applied to a wide variety of sources: Being able to 'read the media', to *compare* media content and media messengers, is a prerequisite for determining the reliability and credibility of the information at hand. At the heart of news literacy is the combination of the critical reception and critical production of news media content. Simply stated: Before one can judge how media work, one must inform oneself.

Several international studies (6) show that media literacy educators can teach students to analyse any news media text (written, photographed, drawn or filmed) by applying the 5 W questions journalists are always expected to answer in their reports: **What** happened, **Where**, **When** and **Why** did it happen, and **Who** was involved. Often, the **How** question is added to describe the specifics of the news event. The idea here is that educators do this at various levels: text, author, source or medium, and receiver. For example: A right-wing politician may write a column, explaining his

viewpoints on immigration for the op-ed pages of a left-wing oriented newspaper. A student can 1) analyse the text itself, decoding the vocabulary and styles of argumentation, 2) discuss with fellow students why the author chose this specific medium as his platform and why the medium chose to publish the column, 3) compare what this author states to what others state on the same subject and 4) discern how readers (from varying backgrounds) may interpret and reflect on this information.

### **The Greatest Challenge**

The complexity of incorporating news media into media literacy education is that journalists can hardly ever be completely objective. News reports, as factual as they aim to be, are often somewhat biased.

Furthermore, educators are often tempted to use the term 'media' as a representative of all media messages, media technologies and media professionals as though they are one collective - and combine these with a strong judgment: 'Media have a bad influence on (young) media consumers'. They forget to acknowledge the diversity and pluriformity of the media landscape.

The challenge for media literacy educators is to refrain from imposing their values and opinions on their students. Often, 'a critical attitude' is confused with 'distrust in the media' rather than being regarded as objective and thorough discerning, weighing, and reflecting on both the choices authors may have made while producing content and the choices consumers may make when they give meaning to this content themselves.

This is why several media literacy scholars have pointed out the importance of dealing with both the negative and the positive impact of media, highlighting the relevance of media the empowerment of citizens (7).

Teachers should allow different opinions to exist, as long as students critically reflect on and respectfully discuss the various ways they analyse media texts.

To a great extent, teachers and students should be able to rely on professional journalists, who adhere to the Code of Principles adopted by the International Federation of Journalists (8). This does not, however, relieve them of the responsibility to be constantly critical and aware of how media work. It is only through continuously reading media texts in its broadest definition that citizens can become and remain truly media literate. And vice versa: Media-literate citizens require and challenge journalists to provide high-quality information.

*About the author:*

*Fifi Schwarz conducts research on the relationship between media literacy and journalism at the Windesheim School of Media in Zwolle, the Netherlands. She combines her research position with her job as Managing Director of the Dutch Newspapers in Education programme.*

### **Notes**

1. Dutch Council for Culture (2005) *Mediawijsheid, de ontwikkeling van nieuw burgerschap*.
2. Drok, N. and Schwarz, F. (2009) *Jongeren, nieuwsmedia en betrokkenheid*.
3. Gans, H.J. (2003) *Democracy and the News*
4. Having said this, journalists are becoming aware of the changing relationship between themselves and the public. Rather than being a passive, receiving audience, news consumers are increasingly becoming conversational partners in the exchange of information. See, for instance, Rosen, J. (2008) "The People Formerly Known As Audience"
5. The concept of news literacy was coined in the United States. See [www.newsliteracy.org](http://www.newsliteracy.org). In *Beyond Cynicism. How media literacy can make students more engaged*, Paul Mihailidis (2008) relates news literacy to global citizenship.
6. For example: Hobbs, R. (2007) *Reading the media. Media Literacy in High School English*. Segers, K. and Bauwens, J (2010) *Maak mij wat wijs. Media kennen, begrijpen en zelf creëren*.
7. See for instance Frau-Meigs, D. and Torrent, J. (2009) *Mapping media education policies around the world. Visions, programmes and challenges*.
8. The code specifies what citizens may require of trustworthy news media. International Federation of Journalists (1954) *Code of Principles on the Conduct of Journalism*