



Article

# Tactics of news literacy: How young people access, evaluate, and engage with news on social media

new media & society  
2023, Vol. 25(3) 505–521  
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DOI: 10.1177/14614448211011447  
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## Abstract

Young people's increasing dependence on social media for news demands increasing levels of news literacy, leading to a rise in media literacy programs that aim to support youth's abilities to critically and mindfully navigate news. However, being news literate does not necessarily mean such knowledge and skills are applied in practice. This article starts from young people's own news practices and experiences on social media to explore when news literacy becomes meaningful in the practice of everyday life. Based on in-depth interviews with 36 young people aged 16–22, it explores what strategies and tactics they employ to access, evaluate, or engage with news. It argues that such practices can be considered as expressions of news literacy, through which young people negotiate platform structures and norms taught in media education. Moreover, it reconceptualizes news literacy as a form of situated knowledge, emphasizing how platform and social contexts shape users' attitudes, motivations, and perceptions of agency.

## Keywords

Audience studies, everyday life, media literacy, news literacy, news use, social media, tactics, young people

## Introduction

For decades, schools, libraries, and other educational institutions have aimed to foster young people's skills, competences, and knowledge around news and media, through various media literacy programs and pedagogical approaches (Mihailidis, 2012). Contemporary debates about misinformation and the importance of critical thinking

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skills have further intensified this call (Bulger and Davison, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). In today's news-saturated society, the ability to deal with all this information in a critical and mindful manner may be more crucial than ever.

At the same time, however, being news literate is becoming increasingly demanding in the current media environment. First, it encompasses knowing how to deal with a growing supply and variety of content that is only partially produced by professional journalists (Broersma, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018a). Second, social media timelines mix previously clearly demarcated genres of information, blurring the concept of "news" and what it means to be up-to-date (Edgerly and Vraga, 2020; Swart et al., 2017). Third, the increase in available platforms, devices, and access points for news also requires additional technological skills to use all the various tools that may now be part of users' media repertoires (Hasebrink and Domeyer, 2012).

These complexities raise questions on how to support the development of young people's news literacy—defined as the "knowledge around the personal and social processes by which news is produced, distributed and consumed, and skills that allow users some control over these processes" (Tully et al., 2021). For Generation Z, the demographic cohort born after 1995 that has never known a world without the Internet, social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram have become major gateways to news (Newman et al., 2019). However, young people's high frequency of social media use does not necessarily equal high levels of news and media literacy. Young people from more vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds, in particular, are likely to lack basic news and media literacy skills, such as recognizing political bias or identifying when a social media post has been sponsored (Kleemans and Eggink, 2016; Plantinga and Kaal, 2018).

Moreover, while previous work has examined how media education contributes to young people's levels of news literacy (e.g. Fleming, 2014; Kleemans and Eggink, 2016), such knowledge and skills are not necessarily applied in practice (Vraga and Tully, 2021). This may be inhibited by users' individual attitudes (Hobbs et al., 2013), limited motivation (Tamboer et al., 2020), or lack of agency (Head et al., 2018), but may also relate to (perceived) existing norms within the social and everyday contexts of young people's news use (Vraga et al., 2021). In particular, on social media, navigating news and other content is not just a matter of technological and critical competences, but also increasingly a social practice that requires various communicative and participatory skills (Festl, 2020; Livingstone, 2014; Pfaff-Rüdiger and Riesmeyer, 2016). Yet, previous work has paid only marginal attention to the contexts in which news literacy is performed.

This article departs from the practices and experiences of young people themselves to understand when news literacy becomes relevant for accessing, evaluating, or engaging with news in everyday life. Specifically, it focuses on the strategies and tactics (De Certeau, 1984) through which young people either follow or negotiate social media's platform structures and do or do not employ the news literacy knowledge and skills. The article argues that such practices can be considered as expressions of news literacy and thus form productive entry points for understanding how news literacy becomes fruitful in the practice of young people's everyday life. Employing in-depth interviews, it demonstrates how these strategies and tactics are developed, performed, and adapted in response to the communicative norms and contexts of young people's news use. Thus,

instead of considering news literacy as a fixed set of cognitive skills and knowledge to be acquired, this article sheds light on news literacy as *practiced*, highlighting under what circumstances news literacy, from the perspective of young people themselves, becomes meaningful for navigating news.

## Young people, news literacy, and social media

Media educators have taught students about the use of news and journalism since the 1970s, prioritizing this genre of information due to its link to democracy (Tully et al., 2021). Such programs are built around the premise that consuming news is central to practices of informed citizenship, with the truth-seeking, sense-making nature of journalism differentiating it from other media producers (Burroughs et al., 2009; Fleming, 2014). News literacy, thus, has often been conceptualized as a form of *civic* literacy and a prerequisite for democratic participation (Ashley et al., 2013; Kendrick and Fullerton, 2019). Proponents of news literacy education also argue that audiences' ability to recognize and distinguish quality news from other information is vital to the survival of the news industry and the democratic role of the press. If news media fail to sustain the attention of audiences, they are unlikely to remain economically viable or societally relevant (Klurfeld and Schneider, 2014; Notley and Dezuanni, 2019). Fueled by the omnipresence of news and concerns around misinformation, these potential democratic benefits have resulted in a growth of news literacy programs worldwide (Mihailidis, 2012).

This stands in stark contrast with the scarcity of academic work around news literacy, resulting in three major gaps. First, the concept of news literacy has remained relatively under-theorized (Vraga et al., 2021). Most previous studies discuss media literacy more generally, with only minor attention for news specifically (Kleemans and Eggink, 2016; Notley and Dezuanni, 2019). Moreover, there is a little agreement over what news literacy exactly entails (Tully et al., 2021; Vraga et al., 2021). While definitions of (news) media literacy traditionally have emphasized users' ability to critically evaluate information (Aufderheide, 1993; Potter, 2004), more recent conceptualizations include elements around news production, understanding media effects, the sociopolitical contexts of news, or even people's engagement in society through media in general (e.g. Craft et al., 2016; Fleming, 2014; Klurfeld and Schneider, 2014; Livingstone, 2014; Vraga and Tully, 2021).

Second, while studies have assessed levels of news literacy knowledge and skills among different demographics (Ashley et al., 2013; Chan et al., 2021; Kleemans and Eggink, 2016), little work discusses how or when news literacy is actually *employed* within youth's practices of everyday news use. As Vraga et al. (2021) argue, having knowledge and skills around news content, systems, and practices does not necessarily mean such literacy will also be applied. Such discrepancies between competence and performance may arise in relation to various news practices. Concerning the evaluation of news, for instance, Tully et al. (2020) found that even users who recognize the variety of complex ways in which news bias may occur, in practice, rarely critically reflect on news bias beyond the political partisanship of particular sources. Likewise, the authors note that being aware of the importance of consuming diverse news for addressing personal bias does not always result in more diverse news practices (Tully et al., 2020: 222).

Similar disparities have been found around users' engagement with news. Perceptions that public debate around news is important do not necessarily translate into behaviors of sharing and discussing news, in particular, when such news concerns sensitive topics, or when participation takes place on relatively open platforms and thus raises privacy concerns (Marwick and boyd, 2014; Swart et al., 2018, 2019). Thus, young people's news literacy skills and knowledge do not necessarily predict its application (Vraga et al., 2021). In some cases, news literacy may even backfire and have unexpected side-effects (boyd, 2017). For instance, while promoting critical thinking has been considered crucial to news literacy (e.g. Hobbs, 2011), studies also show there is a fine line between increasing healthy skepticism and creating cynical users who come to distrust and discard all news sources (Mihailidis, 2018).

Finally, while news literacy is typically considered at the individual level, its acquisition and application are socially situated practices, that are shaped in conjunction with others (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Livingstone, 2014; Pfaff-Rüdiger and Riesmeyer, 2016). Young people give meaning to media within particular social and everyday contexts (Martens, 2010). Yet, little is known about when and how (perceived) social norms, contexts, and processes affect news literacy behaviors (Vraga et al., 2021).

In other words, there is a need to go beyond assessing young people's knowledge and skills, to instead explore how young news users actually *employ* news literacy within the everyday contexts of their news use. Such a user-centric approach highlights the use and the impact of news literacy in people's everyday life—or reversely, the consequences and potential issues of being news illiterate. This could help to align media education programs with young people's everyday lived experiences; after all, being news literate is of little help when people do not put such knowledge, skills, and competences to use (Vraga and Tully, 2021). Moreover, a user-centric approach opens up the space to explore the many different contexts in which youth may learn about media, from home and school to the workplace and online communities (Lee, 2018; Meyers et al., 2013).

This article explores how young people express their ability to use news on social media in a mindful, empowered, and engaged manner in their everyday news practices. Based upon an inductive, thematic analysis of 36 in-depth interviews, it distinguishes three types of strategies and tactics that give insight into youth's application of news literacy. First, it discusses how young people negotiate platform structures when accessing news, drawing upon their ability to navigate, select, and consume information in algorithmically tailored spaces. Second, it looks at how youth evaluate content to determine what is news and when such information is judged as trustworthy and reliable. Finally, the article discusses how young people actively engage with news on social media platforms, satisfying their needs for expression, opinion formation, and self-presentation, while simultaneously managing their privacy. It argues that taking these strategies and tactics seriously fosters our understandings how news literacy empowers users in navigating news on social media, and reversely, where literacy, motivation or agency might be lacking.

## Method

To explore how young people employ news literacy within the context of their everyday social media use, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 36 participants

aged 16–22 years old. In-depth interviews allowed for uncovering the perceptions and experiences of young people themselves, focusing not just on the practices, strategies, and tactics through which young people express news literacy, but also on how and when such literacy becomes meaningful to navigate news in practice.

Previous work has found that level of education is a strong predictor of young people's levels of news and media literacy (Kleemans and Eggink, 2016; Plantinga and Kaal, 2018). Yet, media literacy research has predominantly focused on the relatively literate groups of college and university students (e.g. Ashley et al., 2013; Kendrick and Fullerton, 2019), while low-educated news users still remain underrepresented. This study aims to address this gap by studying the news literacy of students at schools for vocational education (MBO), the lowest and most common level of tertiary education within the Dutch education system. Its sample included students from a variety of programs in different stages in their education, leading up to qualifications on different levels (MBO 2–4). Some studied to become car mechanics or caregivers; others were working toward a career as an administrative assistant or sports trainer. Nineteen of the interviewed students were female, 17 were male. About 40% had a parent born in another country or was an immigrant. Some students were enrolled in programs where media literacy was a compulsory component of the curriculum; in other cases, media literacy received minor or no attention. The interviews were conducted at schools in three regions of The Netherlands, equally divided between the capital city, a major Dutch city and a rural area. Students were recruited through their teachers and could participate in the study as a substitute activity during class.

Every interview started by participants describing their previous day with media: from the moment she or he got up, what was the first moment she or he encountered media? These day-in-the-life interviews served to map young people's overall media use and its everyday context. Second, the student was asked to draw a mind map of his or her world of social media, including the platforms they used and their purposes, who they followed there and the content they encountered in their timelines. While drawing, the respondents were asked to explain their mind maps and elaborate on their social media use. As Hathaway and Atkinson (2003) note, offering participants a more creative means to engage with a research topic can help to tap into the "backstage" of people's perceptions and experiences, encourage reflection and sense-making and prompt "more spontaneous answers" (p. 162). Likewise, in this study, mind maps were predominantly used as a means to elicit verbal responses from the students, not to collect a full visual representation of young people's viewpoints. In addition, they served as a point of reference during the subsequent phases of the interview that participants could draw upon. The third part of the interview focused on students' news and media literacy, discussing their experiences with determining the trustworthiness of media content, algorithmic curation on social media, and so forth. Finally, the students discussed how their social media use impacted their orientations toward public life and their engagement as citizens. The interviews were conducted at the students' schools from February until June 2019 and lasted around 45 minutes in total. Students did not receive a reward for participation. To test the comprehensibility and feasibility of the interview protocol, three pilot interviews were conducted prior to the study.

Every interview was audio recorded, transcribed, and uploaded in Atlas.ti for a qualitative, inductive thematic analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). First, the transcripts were

coded line-by-line for young people's practices, experiences, emotions, beliefs, discourses, (news) media content, platforms and sources, and their contexts of everyday social media use. The mind maps were coded per main visual element (i.e. a bubble/node, or set of keywords written alongside a node). Next, these codes were merged into focused codes. The material was re-read to identify patterns of recurring or related codes that were of relevance to the research question. This process was documented in analytic memos, elaborating on these evaluations with reference to relevant literature (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Codes were then grouped, merged, and re-labeled in Atlas.ti based upon their common thematic elements. The final step of analysis involved theoretically elaborating these focused codes into themes, by reading them against the dataset, and by comparing and contrasting the practices, meanings, and processes represented in the segments, to examine possible theoretical connections between the focused codes. This iterative process resulted in a list of strategies and tactics through which young people performed their news literacy, relating to three types of news practices: (1) accessing, (2) evaluating, and (3) engaging with news.

## Results

### *Accessing news*

First, news literacy encompasses the ability to find and access news and journalism, a practice that is becoming increasingly serendipitous. The dominance of the smartphone in the interviewees' everyday life and their heavy use of apps such as YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp provoked a strong "news finds me" attitude, reflecting a more general trend (Toff and Kleis Nielsen, 2018). Moments of directed, purposeful news use, thus, were rare. While some participants had installed dedicated news apps on their phone, they accessed them considerably less frequently than their social media applications, or only when prompted by the app's notifications. Some interviewees watched television news, but this was typically initiated by their parents as a family activity: they rarely watched of their own accord. Newspaper reading was almost non-existent among this sample. Instead, young people mainly received their news incidentally, through face-to-face conversations with family members, friends and classmates, and through peer and algorithmic recommendations on social media and news aggregator apps. For such monitoring to be effective, it was essential to set up a surveillance system of notifications and apps that alarmed them in case of important updates (Van Damme et al., 2020). However, interviewees' abilities to set up, tailor, and manage incoming information streams varied greatly.

Some interviewees had a clear filtering system in place. Twitter, for example, was used to follow niche interests, from monitoring updates about certain music genres (Pablo, 18 years) or games (Tim, 18 years) to science news (John, 19 years) and international politics (Ayla, 18 years). Instagram and Facebook functioned as broader information hubs, but would likewise be tailored to the preferences of these young people by actively befriending users, liking pages, or reversely, unfollowing people or snoozing content. Table 1 gives an overview of these strategies and tactics, that can be divided into acts of explicit and implicit personalization (Haim et al., 2018; Thurman and Schifferes, 2012). Some respondents even created multiple accounts on one platform to separate

**Table 1.** Practices around accessing news on social media.

	Practice
<b>Explicit personalization strategies</b>	
<b>Adding content</b>	Following a variety of accounts to ensure topic- or viewpoint diversity Liking pages that you would like to follow (Facebook)
<b>Ordering content</b>	Adjusting platform settings to display “Recent Posts” instead of “Relevant Posts” Marking accounts or friends as “Close Friends” or “Acquaintances” Creating and using multiple accounts on the same platform to order incoming information Using different devices to access social media to intervene in targeted advertising
<b>Removing content</b>	Clicking the “Hide” or “Snooze” button to remove content from your timeline Disliking a video on YouTube to educate the algorithm about your preferences Unfollowing accounts completely
<b>Implicit personalization tactics</b>	
<b>Actively adapting user behavior</b>	Visiting profiles of friends who you would like to see more of Watching stories of friends who you would like to see more of Liking posts of friends who you would like to see more of
<b>Passively adapting user behavior</b>	Quickly scrolling past irrelevant social media posts Ignoring the recommendations that social media platforms suggest Refraining from searching for certain content to avoid the algorithm to start recommending similar content

incoming content, although not always successfully. Mariam (20 years) explained how she tried to beat the YouTube algorithm by creating separate accounts for personal and school-related use. However, presumably because she accessed both accounts using the same device, videos watched with one account would still influence the Suggested Videos section of the other. Despite such failed experiments, young people like Mariam can be characterized as relatively news literate: the tactics used to negotiate platform structures show how users’ basic understanding of how social media work is employed in attempts to create more satisfactory news experiences.

However, other participants made a little effort to explicitly personalize their online news environment, even when they were unsatisfied by the content shown on their feeds. First, manual personalization is laborious (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2014). Scrolling down and ignoring content require considerably less time compared to actively unfollowing someone or “hiding” content. Second, users’ motivation to personalize news was low; most interviewees had only a moderate interest in current affairs. News was primarily consumed incidentally or out of habit; for instance, the relatively frequent use of Google and Apple News mainly depended on these widgets coming pre-installed on the home screen with the latest versions of mobile operating systems. Third, respondents were discouraged by a lack of individual control they experienced in adjusting their social media feeds. Tactics to personalize news are employed in a particular social

context, shaped by platform dynamics. Because the news that social media algorithms highlight is partially based on connections' liking, sharing, and commenting behaviors, interviewees perceived it as difficult to tailor these platforms to their own interests and preferences. Anouk (19 years) had quit Facebook for this reason:

I deliberately don't have Facebook, because on Facebook things come along that you don't follow, because others share it. [ . . . ] At some point, it drove me completely crazy that everyone – if you just comment on something on Facebook, it shows up on your page, because you're friends with the person who commented.

Such defeatism was strengthened by a fourth factor that inhibits young people's ability to monitor and access news: their limited knowledge about what algorithms are and do, and what influences its decision-making. Similar to previous findings of US-based research (DeVito et al., 2017; Eslami et al., 2015), the interviews show considerable gaps in young people's algorithmic literacy. Despite spending hours a day using Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat, some respondents were unaware that these platforms shape people's timelines based on their behavior and the data that users supply. Moreover, young people's algorithmic literacy was strongly context-dependent. While the basic principles of how Facebook selected its content were relatively well-known, where the impact of friends' likes and comments on your timeline is communicated explicitly, few interviewees realized that Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter were subject to similar mechanisms. Likewise, interviewees explicitly mentioned how their search behavior shaped their advertisements or how YouTube's Suggested Videos section would recommend content based on the previous videos watched. Surprisingly, however, such awareness did not lead to further reflections on how algorithms might impact the selection of "regular" content of social media news feeds. For some young people, finally, even the awareness *that* news on most social media platforms is algorithmically tailored was missing.

These knowledge gaps are indicative of how media education approaches tend to focus primarily on news content and pay relatively little attention to the role of platforms and technologies in shaping the information that audiences encounter (Mihailidis, 2018). Of course, the commercial nature of social media platforms means that full information about how timelines exactly are composed is classified for anyone outside these companies (Pasquale, 2015). However, a basic understanding of algorithmic news curation and awareness of the non-neutrality of algorithmic decision-making would enable young people to reflect more critically on the completeness and potential biases of the selections that different news platforms make (Cotter and Reisdorf, 2020). Especially at a time when the news young people consume is increasingly curated by algorithms, such knowledge is quickly becoming a crucial element of news literacy, that could help young people to follow news more efficiently and potentially foster more diverse patterns of news use.

### *Evaluating news*

At the heart of news literacy is the ability to recognize news and journalism, and to critically analyze and evaluate information (Aufderheide, 1993; Potter, 2004). The interviews demonstrate that for young people, these two assessments are strongly related (see also



**Table 2.** Tactics around assessing the trustworthiness of news.

	Tactic
<b>Individual verification tactics</b>	
<b>Validating content</b>	Checking other online sources for news about the same issue (cross-verification) Checking non-digital sources for news about the same issue Checking news videos about the same issue Comparing news to your personal experiences Relying on your “gut feeling” or “common sense”
<b>Validating sources</b>	Checking the source of the news item Checking the author of the news item
<b>Validating form</b>	Checking imagery for manipulation (e.g. use of photoshopped pictures) Checking the style and spelling of the language used
<b>Social verification tactics</b>	
<b>Relying on judgments of known others</b>	Asking friends, family, or colleagues to verify news content
<b>Relying on judgments of unknown others</b>	Checking the comments below a news item Checking number of subscribers or followers Trusting platform moderators to remove false content

Edgerly and Vraga, 2020). Participants such as Anouk (19 years) defined news as information about things that “you know are real,” explicitly linking classifications of “news” to judgments of trustworthiness. As perceptions of what constitutes news have widened due to the use of platforms like Facebook that frame all posts in their “news feeds” as equally important regardless of content type or source (Swart et al., 2017), traditional news values, such as the public relevance, longevity, or geographical magnitude of issues (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017), become less distinctive. Instead, according to the interviewees, news sets itself apart primarily by its veracity, in addition to the novelty, recency, and the potential for facilitating sociability (i.e. providing “the talk of the day”) of such content.

However, due to blurring boundaries between professional and non-professional sources and the abundance of often conflicting online information, evaluations of what news is trustworthy have become increasingly difficult to make (Broersma, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018a). For some respondents, this provoked cynicism and apathy, making them abandon all efforts to verify information. Mike (18 years), for example, would simply take all news he encountered with a grain of salt, remarking that “you never know anyway – it’s always a gamble whether it’s true or not.” Most participants, however, would employ various tactics (see Table 2) to assess the news they encountered on social media. Despite their belief that news on such platforms was less trustworthy than news provided through newspapers, television, or news apps, social media were still considered the most convenient way to satisfy their needs for information.

Given the prominence of the critical evaluation of news in media education and the emphasis in public debate on the importance of filtering out misinformation, it is perhaps unsurprising that most interviewees were well aware of possible verification tactics, such

as the cross-verification of news by checking other sources. In practice, however, researching issues in the news and validating information was only likely to occur if a message raised some red flags. As Mariam (20 years) said, “Normally I don’t think about whether it’s true or not; I assume it’s true.” Instead, young people mostly relied on shortcuts and heuristics for assessing reliability (see also Swart and Broersma, 2021). Brand names, for example, acted as important source cues: most young people would simply take the trustworthiness of news from well-reputed, much-used brands as a given, without questioning their potential political leanings or commercial bias. Other examples of such “shortcuts” were the number of followers or subscribers (the higher, the more reliable), and the style, tone, and spelling of the language used. Young people recognized these tactics were not fail-safe and considered them less reliable than the cross-verification practices they were taught at school. Yet, they still applied them more frequently, as they cost considerably less time and effort.

Moreover, the interviews show how strategies and tactics for critically evaluating news are only likely to be activated under certain circumstances. Whereas Facebook was associated with fake news almost by definition, news on other social media received considerably less scrutiny. Max (18 years) distrusted news on Facebook, but was confident he never encountered any misinformation on Instagram. Most interviewees were also far more trusting if news was reported in certain formats (video) or by particular platforms (newspapers or television). Alan (20 years), who followed local news through groups chats on Instagram, stressed that he did not read but watch news: “It’s really the videos that have been recorded, at that moment, so that has to be a hundred per cent true.” As deep fakes become increasingly easy to generate, however, such tactics may lull users into a false sense of security. The same issue occurred with the often implied trustworthiness of news on non-digital platforms, which paradoxically was sporadically used, yet often trusted more or less implicitly.

Finally, consistent with earlier findings (Notley and Dezuanni, 2019), participants lacked the confidence to recognize dis- and misinformation. The interviewees here echoed neoliberal ideals of the self-sufficient citizen who has the obligation to critically review any news she or he encounters, such as Amira (19 years):

If you haven’t seen it with your own eyes or heard it with your own ears, you don’t have to assume it’s true. I just find that important. So yeah, if you then find out the truth is a lie, then it’s your own fault.

Yet, at the same time, young people also felt that such expectations were difficult to uphold. While most interviewees could easily recite the verification tactics they were taught at school, they also felt these were largely inadequate in a media environment where, in their perception, everything could be fake. Such perceptions were strengthened by a missing broader frame of reference about news production, industries, and effects (see Craft et al., 2016 for similar findings). Increasing background knowledge here, for instance about the partisanship or commercial logics of news sources, but also the various forms of “fake news” that exist (Tandoc et al., 2018b), might aid young people in making trust assessments more confidently and effectively. Furthermore, young people described how on social media, not only algorithms drew them to content from

unreliable sources—for example, Jesse (20 years) complained Google News did not understand that satire website *De Speld* deliberately published false stories—but their connections also shared misinformation, which was then often amplified by platform mechanisms. Such experiences show how misinformation presents a complex societal issue, that cannot simply be addressed by individual news literacy interventions alone but requires multi-layered solutions (boyd, 2017; Schwarzenegger, 2020). Educational approaches, consequently, should also present it as such, to prevent placing responsibility for filtering out misinformation solely on individuals.

### *Engaging with news*

Finally, social media platforms afford multiple practices through which users can engage with journalistic content, such as sharing, commenting, liking, remixing, or even creating news. For this reason, contemporary news and media literacy frameworks increasingly include creative and participatory dimensions (Festl, 2020; Hobbs et al., 2013), that enable young people to express themselves as citizens (Mihailidis, 2018). The ability to share and discuss news, for instance, aids young people's sense-making processes around current affairs, allowing them to compare viewpoints of others with their own and to validate their own perceptions toward news. While studies have argued that media educators can play a role in fostering such forms of civic engagement (e.g. Notley and Dezuanni, 2019), the interviews particularly highlight the importance of parents in this process. In families where parents regularly consumed news, current affairs were a frequent topic of discussion, both face-to-face and online, such as for Sanne (18 years) who mainly followed the news through links shared in her family's WhatsApp group. Young people also frequently talked about news with peers through WhatsApp and Facebook communities, private messages on Instagram and Snapchat, and on private Discord channels. All of these so-called "dark" social media platforms allow users to set clear group boundaries and give them fine-grained control over who can view the content that is being posted (Swart et al., 2018, 2019). Beyond these enclosed spaces, however, most interviewees rarely actively engaged with news on social media. Young people considered such forms of engagement to be problematic for two reasons.

First, educators' expectations about public engagement with news online contradicted existing social norms among youth that condemn openly sharing one's opinions about current affairs, in particular, when it concerns potentially sensitive, public issues that might cause disagreement. Confronted with the polarization of online debate and hateful or abusive comments on social media platforms, most young people valued harmony over deliberation. While interviewees did mention examples of peers engaging with politics online, they were quick to downplay these as exceptions to the rule. For example, Ashley (17 years) mentioned how one of her classmates had posted an Instagram Story about the founding of a new political party:

And then I think: I agree with you, but is it necessary to share this? [. . .] Look, it's my opinion and I dare to voice it, but there will also be people who feel attacked. And then, I think, you should take that into account a little. Because on social media, you're always more pronounced than in real life.

**Table 3.** Tactics to engage with news and other social media content, while securing social and data privacy.

	Tactic
<b>Technical privacy management</b>	
<b>Restricting accessibility</b>	Setting a social media account to “private” or “friends-only” Only befriending people that you know
<b>Restricting visibility</b>	Posting in private groups and chats instead of on timelines Posting Stories instead of posting on timelines (Instagram) Manually deleting posts after a few weeks or months
<b>Restricting traceability</b>	Sharing an account with someone else Using a pseudonym or username that is not personally retraceable Entering other fake personal information in your social media profile, such as age
<b>Changing online narratives</b>	Deleting outdated posts Deleting one’s social media account and creating a new one
<b>Self-censorship</b>	Not sharing any personal information Not or rarely posting anything at all
<b>Social privacy management</b>	
<b>Pre-emptive tactics</b>	Agreeing with friends to always ask permission before posting content about each other Instituting “penalties” in your friends group when friends make and/or distribute screenshots of your posts
<b>Reactive tactics</b>	Removing tags in other people’s posts

Online engagement with current affairs and public issues was sometimes also dismissed as unauthentic or even dishonest: experiences with sponsored content by social media influencers made them wary of potential personal gain (such as increasing numbers of followers), questioning the genuineness of such behavior.

Second, for young people, participatory behaviors around news are not just a matter of civic engagement—which most did perceive as important—but also a major privacy concern. Parents, educators, popular TV shows like MTV’s *Catfish*, as well as stories by peers all tended to strongly emphasize the finality of their digital footprints, which discouraged young people from public acts such as posting, liking, or commenting on news. Consequently, participants emphasized how in a media environment where online behavior is continuously being tracked, little room is left for the unencumbered exploration of one’s opinions and identities. The interviews show a variety of tactics (see Table 3) through which young people aim to mitigate this tension, between their needs for self-expression and sense-making of news on one hand, and securing social and data privacy on the other hand. Demi (21 years), for instance, used her Instagram and Snapchat Stories to raise awareness of the urgency of climate change. Because her posts would disappear after 24 hours, she felt this was a relatively safe way to express her political views: “That way, it’s only visible for a short time. I often post about the climate or when something bad has happened, just things to improve [the world].” Romy (20 years) took a different approach and used various pseudonyms and multiple social media accounts to share and

comment on issues, such as the refugee crisis. This way, she could circumvent potential repercussions of voicing political opinions against social norms, which she feared might have negative consequences for current and future employment. For most interviewees, however, the definite character of online engagement resulted in very passive social media use, both in relation to news and regarding sharing content with large groups of users in general.

The results suggest two potential ways for media educators to promote civic engagement and participatory behavior around news online. First, participants indicated that they would like to see more positive examples of how the continued visibility of their digital footprints might also be used to their advantage. For instance, media educators could show cases of publics or movements that use their online presence to raise awareness for issues young people find important, or examples of individuals who engage with issues in the news to showcase their professional expertise. Such strategies could help to create more balanced media education programs, that do acknowledge and address young people's concerns around social privacy, data surveillance, and context collapse (Marwick and boyd, 2014), while simultaneously encouraging young people to develop competences related to performing citizenship.

Second, it may be helpful to frame the benefits of such engagement in social, not just political, terms. For most young people, engaging with news had little to do with its content. Instead, liking, sharing or discussing news was done primarily with the goal of fostering sociability and connection with others. As Lisa (18 years) explained about news talk with her friends on WhatsApp:

It's usually a topic that we've recently been discussing, for example, that comes up in an article. Then we'll forward it. That doesn't mean that it's really big news, or whatever. [. . .] But it's more like a reminder of the conversation you had.

In other words, young people's main motivation to actively engage with news was not to share and discuss different opinions. Rather, they cared about monitoring news to be able to warn others, in case of news events that could affect them or be of personal relevance. Educational programs, thus, could use such social perceptions of citizenship as an entry point for discussing participatory and creative elements of news literacy, and relatedly, teaching students about journalism's civic role of fostering people's informed citizenship.

## Conclusion

This article explored how and when news literacy becomes useful to young people within their everyday news practices on social media. Employing a user-centric approach, it has demonstrated how platform contexts and supportive social norms are major prerequisites for the application of news literacy in users' strategies and tactics of news use and shape young people's individual attitudes, motivations, and agency toward engaging in news literacy behaviors (Vraga et al., 2021). Consequently, it argues that news literacy should be understood as a form of *situated* knowledge (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This has three implications for news literacy education and research.

First, it emphasizes how the application of news literacy is not just an individual, but also a social and connective act, performed in relation to collective norms and group identities. The article shows how this complicates the application of news literacy in practice, where users need to balance personal needs for creativity, self-expression, and opinion formation with social expectations and privacy concerns. Efforts to stimulate news literacy behaviors might thus be more effective if they acknowledge such practices are socially constructed. This aligns with recent calls to expand the focus of news literacy programs from technological and critical thinking skills to including social, communicative, and participatory competences (Festl, 2020; Pfaff-Rüdiger and Riesmeyer, 2016).

Second, it stresses how news literacy is not necessarily or automatically transferable and applicable across platforms and situations. Instead, skills (e.g. critically evaluating news content) and knowledge (e.g. around algorithmic curation) are only likely to be activated in particular contexts (e.g. Facebook). In particular, as the significance of Facebook in social life decreases, and young people's social media repertoires to follow news expand with platforms like YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Snapchat, this highlights the importance for media educators to demonstrate how news literacy taught might be applied within different situations and media environments.

Finally, reconceptualizing news literacy as situated knowledge highlights how social media are experience technologies (Blank and Dutton, 2012), where users develop understandings, norms, and practices around content, platforms, and technologies (partially) through frequent use. Time-specific knowledge objectives, therefore, may be problematic, especially in a news environment where social media platforms quickly go in and out of fashion. News literacy behaviors, thus, should not be understood as stable or fixed; instead, the way news literacy is performed may change over time as patterns of news use evolve. Future research could shed light on when, how, and what everyday news experiences contribute to young people's news literacy, and how such learning-by-doing interacts with the formal knowledge and skills taught in news literacy programs.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Laurence Guérin, Paulo Moekotte and Daan van Riet for their valuable feedback during the set-up of the research project and for their help with recruiting participants. I would also like to express my gratitude to all teachers participating in the project (in alphabetical order): Anneloes Haagsman, Edwin Bollema, Elske Mooijman, Houda Al Abouti, Ingeborg Kertesz, Kübra Gögen, Lidy Winters, Marc Visscher, Marit Monsanto, Monique Greefhorst, Menno de Waal, Michel Dalen and Natasha Meijer.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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