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Book Review: News Literacy and Democracy

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Book Review

News Literacy and Democracy

The news we consume and share is pivotal in shaping our perceptions of the world. But what is news literacy? What is the connection between news literacy and democracy? The book *News Literacy and Democracy* by Seth Ashley (2019) invites us to go beyond surface-level fact-checking and to examine the structures, institutions, practices, and routines that comprise news media and information systems. Through a critical contextualized approach to news literacy and drawing on research from diverse disciplines, this book aims to inform and empower citizens who rely on news media to participate in democratic and civic life.

Seth Ashley is a media scholar who has spent the past two decades understanding the news media system and what the public should know about it. He also has first-hand knowledge about the production process for news media. The book is intended for everyone because the topics in the book are central to news literacy education that everyone needs in order to be a successful citizen and participant in democratic life. The author uses jargon-free language to cover a range of academic concepts that help examine the news media landscape. This book is laid out succinctly over three parts that contain seven chapters in total. Specifically, Part I (Chapter 1-2) establishes the foundation of a contextual approach to news literacy. Part II (Chapter 3-6) dives into the contextual domains that form the core of news literacy and its role in democratic life. The final part (Chapter 7) considers how news literacy can improve the conditions of democratic life. I will unpack each chapter in greater detail and conclude this review with my evaluation.

In Chapter 1, the author discusses what news literacy is and why we need it. Ashley defines news literacy as the “critical evaluation of information content as well as the contexts where it is produced and consumed” (p. 9). News literacy is vital to democracy because “we rely on news to become informed and make decisions about how government should work and how society should be structured” (p. 13). The author urges us to “think like a sociologist” (p. 23) as we interact with news and information, which is to look deeper into the structures and institutions of the news and information environment and question the arrangement we take for granted in our daily lives. This critical context approach to examine news literacy encourages us to understand the news media landscape and highlights the role of citizens and news in democratic life.

Chapter 2 focuses on what citizens know about news and reviews the theoretical and empirical foundations of news literacy. A survey of News literacy research revealed that people have a relatively low level of knowledge about contextualized knowledge about the news. The author contends that contextualized knowledge about news media is essential to informed participation in democratic life because news literacy will only be helpful if it is grounded in understanding the news environment and the surrounding discourse. Once people become news literate individuals who are broadly knowledgeable enough, they can make decisions that benefit society.

After discussing why news literacy is needed, the author turns to the book's second

section that focuses on "critical context for democratic life." In Chapter 3, the author argues that news consumers would benefit from an expanded view of the broader forces that influence news production. The economic and technological changes have altered the traditional news landscape, resulting in a spread of misinformation and "fake news." For Ashely, fake news is characterized by "a low level of truthfulness and a high intent to mislead or deceive" (p. 71). He points out that although those who lack analytical thinking tend to be trapped by fake news, the good thing is that analytical thinking can be learned. Furthermore, the author elaborates concepts such as *structural bias* and *forms of framing* to illuminate how news we consume take shape like they are.

Chapter 4 looks specifically at the structure of the news media system to help us gain a holistic view of the news and information environment. By reviewing a brief history of legal and regulatory frameworks, the author uncovers how news works and how media laws and policies significantly affect the content we see. Furthermore, the author illustrates in detail the forces that affect news content. The five levels of the "hierarchy of influences" (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013) include individual, routine practices, media organizations, social institutions, and social systems. Finally, international news media systems are compared to show that different societies adopt different approaches in constructing their media system.

In Chapter 5, Ashley applies the lens of political economy to view the relationship between news media and power in society. Political economy refers to "the relationship between a society's economic and political systems and reflects the idea that competing interests among economic forces must be mitigated by political judgment" (p. 120). To reveal how commercialism and monopoly power underlies the internet, the author discusses the origins of the internet and the emergence of monopoly capitalism (digital giants such as Google and Facebook). Moreover, Ashely demonstrates how algorithms work and are manipulated, and thus how they influence our information consumption, as the political economy of the internet centers on personalization and customization. Finally, Ashely highlights that the critical thing that information consumers can do is raise awareness around these issues by learning more about the political-economic contexts that impact and even dictate the frame of the online landscape.

After taking a sociological look at the contexts that create and influence the news and information environment, in Chapter 6, the author turns to explore what shapes our thinking and behavior across the news media landscape at the individual level. The author believes that understanding psychology, or our motivations and desires, is also a contextual approach to news literacy. He first explains from an evolutionary perspective that humans have a quest to reduce the unpleasant sensations accompanying challenging information we encounter. Then, using theories of confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, selective exposure, and the backfire effect, the author explains how a lifetime of socialization affects how we perceive social reality. He also lists evidence to show how serious is the technology addiction problem. In an attention economy, advertisers and marketers are bidding our attention on the digital platform.

In the last chapter, the author proposes a news literacy agenda that we can incorporate into our daily lives in order to get engaged with news and democracy (see p. 174). He emphasizes that cultivating good critical analytical thinking associated with a higher degree of

skepticism is valuable to discerning misinformation. As he points out, much can be done on both the demand and supply sides to improve the news media environment. On the demand side, we can increase our critical awareness and knowledge to analyze the content and the context that shapes the media landscape. And on the supply side, there need significant structural changes to contribute to satisfying the information needs of society.

Overall, *News Literacy and Democracy* is a highly insightful book that demonstrates a refreshingly holistic approach to news literacy and the criticality of understanding the political, economic, historical, and cultural context in which news and information are produced and consumed. Throughout the book, the author clarifies how using critical perspective and contextual knowledge to access information can help us become effective participants in democratic life. More importantly, Ashely outlines a practical news literacy agenda that we can use in our daily life. Although the book title suggests an emphasis on literacy around news and current events, the contextualized approach introduced in this book can also be applied broadly to information and media literacy. Furthermore, this book is a responsive and timely work that can empower us in sifting through an increasingly complex online environment saturated with disinformation and misinformation.

Despite these merits, this book would have been more informative and reached out to more international audiences if it had included an analysis of contextualized forces of information landscape in countries other than the United States. Navigating in an open internet landscape with online resources based on all countries, news consumers and information seekers can be more literate and agentive if they understand that the content they see has been influenced and shaped by different national, historical, sociocultural, economic, digital, and linguistic contexts. Given that news and information literacy is an issue for a global agenda, this book inspires future research to compare contextualized online environments of different countries. It is also worth adopting a contextualized approach to examine the news and information literacy of transnational people. Distinct from the people in the host country, transnationals consume news and information across digital borders and their news consumption and media practices are impacted by their multiple belongings and skepticism of a single version of the news (Christiansen, 2004). Their rich and global information networks can be regarded as information assets that were usually hidden from view in the dominant culture in the host society (Pyati, 2010; Srinivasan & Pyati, 2007).

I sincerely recommend the book *News Literacy and Democracy* to researchers, educators, and practitioners interested in expanding knowledge and gaining new perspectives in studying news and information literacy. Furthermore, this book can be helpful for news and media literacy educators and classroom teachers who would like to integrate contextualized approach to news and information into their curriculum and instruction. This book is also a great read for global audiences who want to understand more about the media terrain of the United States.

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