WHITE PAPER

News Literacy as Observation, Not Judgment:
A Methodological Argument

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ABSTRACT

News literacy instruction has made real progress. Educators, librarians, and researchers have built frameworks, curricula, and assessment tools that have meaningfully expanded the field and the public's awareness of how to engage with news. This paper builds on that work by exploring a question the field is actively wrestling with: when news literacy is taught as a credibility evaluation skill, how do we assess whether it transferred?

Credibility evaluation asks readers to render a judgment: is this source trustworthy? Is this outlet reliable? Those are useful questions. They are also questions that route through prior knowledge and existing belief in ways that make consistent, replicable instruction genuinely difficult to achieve. This paper proposes a complementary approach: news literacy taught as an observation skill. The question shifts from "is this credible?" to "what is this article doing?" Observable language patterns. Defined criteria. Text-present or text-absent.

When the criteria are defined in advance and applied consistently, news literacy becomes more teachable across contexts, more comparable across classrooms, and more genuinely assessable before and after instruction. This is not a replacement for credibility evaluation. It is a foundation that makes credibility evaluation more grounded when it follows.

The Clear-Sight Analytical Framework (CSAF) is presented here as a worked example of what this methodology looks like in practice. Ten dimensions. Observable language patterns. A shared scoring vocabulary that aligns with UNESCO and Ofcom Media and Information Literacy standards. The framework is the argument. The platform is the delivery mechanism.

SECTION 1

The Trust Collapse Is Real, and the Field Is Responding

The numbers are not subtle. In 2025, Gallup measured U.S. adult confidence in mass media at 28 percent, one of the lowest readings in the survey's history. The News Literacy Project's 2025 study of American teens found that 84 percent distrust news and 80 percent express some inclination toward conspiracy theories. These are not fringe readings. They represent a broad structural erosion of the relationship between the public and the information it depends on.

The policy response has been substantial. Since January 2024, eleven U.S. states have passed K-12 news, media, or information literacy legislation. New Jersey was the first to mandate instruction. The legislative energy reflects a genuine recognition that something has gone wrong and that education is the lever to pull.

But a policy response and a methodological response are not the same thing. Most legislative mandates describe outcomes (readers who can evaluate news sources) without specifying a method for achieving them. The trust decline the data describes has many causes, and no single pedagogical approach can be expected to address all of them. What a methodological argument can address is whether the instruction being delivered gives readers something concrete and transferable to work with.

The trust collapse is real. The data points toward a gap between what readers encounter and what they feel equipped to evaluate. One reading: people have been exposed to more information, across more formats and platforms, than any previous generation, and the challenge of navigating that volume has grown alongside it. Another reading: there is an opportunity to give readers a more concrete, transferable framework for understanding what they are looking at. Those two readings are not mutually exclusive, and this paper is concerned with the second one, because it points toward something the field can build instruction around with greater consistency.

SECTION 2

What the Field Is Teaching, and Where the Questions Are

Tully (2022) positions news literacy as the foundational gateway literacy, the competency from which media literacy, digital literacy, and information literacy all extend. That framing is right. News literacy is the most concrete, most text-anchored, and most directly teachable of the four. It is also the one with the most developed academic tradition, running from the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy through the News Literacy Project's curricula and into an expanding body of peer-reviewed work.

The credibility-evaluation tradition within that body of work is serious and well-developed. The Stony Brook framework gives readers substantive tools for distinguishing news from opinion, for understanding how professional journalism works, and for recognizing the difference between evidence-based claims and assertion. The News Literacy Project's resources for educators are among the most practically useful in the field. These approaches have reached educators and readers in ways that matter, and any methodological conversation worth having starts from genuine respect for that work.

The question this paper is exploring sits alongside that tradition rather than in opposition to it. Credibility evaluation asks readers to assess the reliability of sources and outlets, a skill that draws on prior knowledge, institutional familiarity, and contextual judgment. It is a genuine and teachable competency. The question the field continues to work on is how to build it consistently across diverse learner populations, and how to assess whether it transferred after instruction.

SIFT (Stop, Investigate, Find better coverage, Trace claims) and lateral reading are valuable tools with a growing body of evidence behind them. They give readers a structured process for investigating claims and sources, and they have reached educators in ways that matter. What this paper explores is a complementary entry point: an observation-based approach that works at the level of the text itself, and that may offer a useful additional layer for instruction and assessment.

The assessment question is one the field is actively working on. When the skill being taught is a judgment, measuring whether that judgment has improved is genuinely difficult. Readers may feel more confident after instruction. Whether they are applying more consistent criteria to what they read is harder to establish. That gap between self-reported confidence and observable, replicable practice is where an observation-based approach offers something additional.

SECTION 3

The Observation/Judgment Distinction

The distinction is not complicated, but its implications are significant.

Judgment, in the news literacy context, asks: should I trust this? Is this credible? Is this source reliable? Is this consistent with what I already know? These questions draw on the reader's prior knowledge, existing experience, and contextual sense of reliability. Different readers, approaching the same article from different starting points, will naturally reach different conclusions. That is a feature of judgment-based thinking, not a flaw in it.

Observation asks: what is this article doing? Is the emotional language present in the editorial voice, or is it confined to quoted sources? Are the key claims attributed to named, on-record sources, or to anonymous officials? Are the perspectives of affected communities represented with substance, or mentioned in passing? Is the statistical data presented with context that allows comparison, or stripped of the denominator that would make it interpretable?

Those are different questions. They look at the same text, but they are asking about what is present or absent in it rather than how the reader feels about it. A reader who learns to ask observational questions builds a skill that can travel across articles, outlets, and topics, because the criteria stay the same regardless of what is being read. Credibility evaluation and observation are not in conflict. Observation gives credibility evaluation something more concrete to work on.

> *The shift from interpretation to observation is what makes news literacy teachable at scale.*

This is not a claim that observation eliminates subjectivity entirely. Reasonable people can disagree about whether a given passage constitutes emotional language or measured tone. But the range of reasonable disagreement is narrower, the criteria are explicit, and instruction can be designed to reduce that range over time. That is what makes the approach assessable: the criteria exist before the article does, and they do not change based on who wrote the article or where it was published.

UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy standards point toward this kind of text-based competency without fully specifying the methodology. The competency framework calls for readers who can "access, retrieve, understand, evaluate and use, create and share information

and media content" across formats and contexts. Understanding and evaluation, in that sequence, are observable acts before they are judgment acts. You look at what is there. You describe it. Evaluation follows from description, not the reverse.

What the field has called "gaps and threads" in journalism practice, the observable absences and patterns within a piece of coverage, provides a useful way of thinking about what observation surfaces. A reader trained in observation looks for what is missing as much as what is present. Not as a suspicious act, but as a reading habit. Who is not quoted here? What context would change how I read this claim? Is the precision in this sentence accompanied by verification?

Observation-based literacy does not tell readers what to conclude. It gives them a vocabulary for what they are seeing, and it lets the conclusions follow from evidence rather than precede it. In that sense it is not a replacement for credibility evaluation. It is a complement to it, one that makes the judgment that follows more grounded and more consistent.

SECTION 4

The Four Literacies as a Progression

Before making the case for a progression, it is worth acknowledging what the field is actually debating. There is no settled consensus on how news literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, and AI literacy relate to one another. Some frameworks treat them as overlapping competencies with no fixed hierarchy. Others, particularly in library and information science, subsume all four under a broader umbrella of information literacy that also includes textual, visual, and data literacy. Still others argue that separating them is counterproductive, that the distinctions are academic while the skill is unified.

These are not trivial disagreements. They reflect genuine differences in institutional context, disciplinary tradition, and pedagogical priority. A state librarian working within an information literacy mandate sees the landscape differently than a journalism professor teaching credibility evaluation, who sees it differently than a media studies faculty member building a curriculum around platform critique. This paper is not attempting to resolve those differences. It is making a narrower claim: that wherever the boundaries between the four literacies are drawn, instruction benefits from a concrete, text-level anchor, and that news literacy, understood as an observation skill, is well suited to serve as that anchor.

News literacy is where the skill is built. It is text-anchored, article-level, and directly observable. A reader learning to identify emotional language in editorial voice, or to notice that a high-specificity

article contains no verifiable evidence, is learning a concrete skill applied to a specific artifact. The criteria are definable. The practice is replicable. Tully (2022) describes news literacy as the gateway literacy precisely because it is the most bounded and most teachable of the four, the place where abstract competency becomes concrete practice.

Media literacy is where that skill generalizes. The same observational habits that apply to a news article apply to a documentary, a podcast, a social media post, an advertisement. The formats change. The underlying questions about construction, framing, evidence, and autonomy do not. A reader who has developed the text-level observational habit has something portable to bring to new formats.

Digital literacy is where the skill scales. Information moves across networks, platforms, and recommendation systems that shape what readers encounter before they ever apply any analytical framework. Understanding how content is surfaced, amplified, or suppressed is a competency that sits above the article level. A reader who can evaluate an individual piece of content is better equipped to reason about the systems that distribute it. The article-level skill does not have to come first in time. But it needs to be present in the reader's toolkit for the systems-level thinking to have something to work on.

AI literacy is where the skill becomes urgent. When the construction of content itself can be automated, the gap between surface signals (specificity, fluency, internal consistency) and depth signals (genuine reporting, original sourcing, real-world complexity) becomes the central literacy challenge. An AI-generated article can achieve high scores on every surface metric while containing no actual journalism. A reader trained to observe construction patterns, rather than judge by surface appearance, is better positioned to notice that gap.

> *The article is where the skill becomes concrete. That is the starting point this paper is building from.*

The objection worth taking seriously is this: why not teach all four simultaneously, as aspects of a single integrated literacy, rather than in sequence? Integration is not wrong. Many practitioners do it well, and integrated approaches have real value in contexts where readers are already bringing prior knowledge to the table. What this paper is exploring is what the integration is anchoring itself to, and whether a concrete, text-level skill gives that integration more traction in practice.

What a progression model offers is not a rigid curriculum sequence but a starting point for a conversation the field is already having. If observable, text-level skill is what makes the higher-

order literacies transferable rather than theoretical, then the question of what to anchor instruction around has a practical answer, even if the boundaries between the four literacies remain genuinely contested. This paper is not attempting to settle those boundaries. It is arguing that wherever they are drawn, the article is a productive place to begin.

The legislative moment the field is currently in, with eleven states mandating instruction since January 2024, makes this conversation more pressing. Mandates without method leave implementation to individual educators working from different assumptions with different tools. A shared anchor, observable, text-level, and consistently applied, is what gives those mandates something to build on.

SECTION 5

What an Observation-Based Framework Looks Like

The Clear-Sight Analytical Framework is presented here as a worked example of the methodology described above. It is not the only possible instantiation of that methodology, but it is a fully developed one, and examining its structure makes the argument concrete.

The CSAF evaluates news articles on ten dimensions, each defined as a text-observable language pattern. Every metric asks a question that can be answered from the article itself, without reference to the outlet's reputation, the journalist's track record, or the reader's prior knowledge of the subject matter. The criteria are defined in advance. Either the pattern is present, or it is not.

The ten dimensions are organized across four categories that correspond to the four things a structured reader needs to evaluate:

Presentation: Is it informing or steering you?

Balance measures structural choices, framing, whose voice gets space, and whether multiple perspectives are represented with substance or only acknowledged in passing. Logic measures the emotional intensity of language in the article's editorial voice, distinct from what sources are quoted as saying. A high Logic score indicates that the article's own voice is measured and factual, not that it contains no emotional content. Autonomy measures directional pressure. Does the article's structure close off alternative conclusions, or does it leave the reader free to form their own judgment?

Substance: How well-supported are the claims?

Evidence measures the ratio of verifiable fact to opinion or assertion. A high Evidence score does not mean the article is right; it means the claims it makes are grounded in checkable information. Sourcing measures the quality, diversity, and transparency of attribution. Named, on-record sources score higher than anonymous attribution, reflecting the principle that verifiable sourcing gives readers more to work with. Specificity measures whether the language is concrete or vague. Precision is easy to manufacture; the Specificity metric, read in combination with Evidence, reveals whether precision is grounded.

Integrity: Does the internal logic hold?

Consistency measures internal coherence, whether the article contradicts itself in framing, tone, or fact across sections. Nuance measures whether the subject receives the complexity it deserves, whether competing interests, uncertainty, and counterarguments are present, or whether the article reduces its subject to binary framing.

Completeness: What is missing from the story?

Context measures whether sufficient background is provided for the reader to evaluate the story on its own terms. A high Context score indicates the reader has what they need; a low score indicates that critical background is absent. Claims measures how quantitative information is used, whether statistics are presented with the context that makes them interpretable, or stripped of the denominator that would allow comparison.

The full framework produces an article-level score on each of the ten dimensions, an overall composite, a Mode classification (Informational, Interpretive, or Persuasive), and a named construction pattern where one is detected.

The table below provides a reference view of the ten dimensions:

Dimension	The Question It Asks	A High Score Indicates
Balance	Are multiple perspectives represented with substance?	Multiple viewpoints given proportionate weight
Logic	Is the editorial voice measured, or emotionally charged?	Tone informs rather than activates
Autonomy	Does the structure steer readers toward a conclusion?	Reader is free to form their own judgment
Evidence	Are claims grounded in verifiable facts?	Majority of claims backed by checkable information
Sourcing	Are sources named, diverse, and on-record?	Named, credible, diverse attribution
Specificity	Is the language concrete or vague?	Precise, examinable detail throughout
Consistency	Does the article contradict itself?	Internal coherence of claims, framing, and tone
Nuance	Does the article engage with complexity?	Competing interests and uncertainty present
Context	Does the reader have what they need to evaluate?	Sufficient background provided
Claims	Is quantitative data presented with context?	Statistics given with comparison and denominator

The Six Construction Patterns

Beyond the ten dimensions, the CSAF names six construction patterns, recurring combinations of metric scores that describe recognizable techniques in news and content production. These patterns are the curriculum layer: they give educators and readers a vocabulary for naming what they see.

Breaking News: Good vs. Bad. Both good and bad breaking news carry low Evidence and Sourcing scores, because information is genuinely thin at the moment of publication. The difference is in how the article handles what it does not know. Good breaking news compensates with measured tone, honest acknowledgment of uncertainty, and internal coherence. Bad breaking news compensates with emotional activation, directional framing, and selective context.

The Credibility Illusion. High Specificity combined with Low Evidence. Numbers, named details, and precise language create an impression of rigor, but the underlying claims are not verifiable. Precision is easy to manufacture. Verification is not. The more specific an article sounds, the more carefully a reader should ask whether that specificity is grounded.

The Emotional Trap. Low Logic combined with Low Autonomy. Emotional activation and directional pressure together are the signature of content designed to move readers rather than inform them. Facts may be present, but they are in service of the emotional narrative. When both Logic and Autonomy are low, the article wants the reader to do something, not think something.

The Echo Chamber Article. High Consistency combined with Low Balance and Low Nuance. This pattern feels coherent because it holds together internally, but the internal consistency comes from a narrow selection of perspectives rather than from genuine engagement with the full picture. The CSAF surfaces this combination so readers can see it and ask their own questions about what might be missing.

The Attribution Trap. High Sourcing combined with Low Balance. Well-attributed quotes from a single perspective is still one-sided journalism. This pattern passes every basic credibility check without a framework. Sourcing is high. Balance is low. Attribution tells the reader where the information came from. Balance tells them whose information was sought.

The AI-Generated Article. High surface signals (Specificity, Consistency, Logic) combined with low depth signals (Nuance, Context, Evidence). The article feels complete. It reads smoothly. But when the reader looks for genuine complexity, original reporting, or depth of context, it is not there. The question is not whether an article was written by a machine. The question is whether it has the depth that genuine reporting produces.

Each pattern is named, defined by a specific combination of metric scores, and designed to be used as a teaching unit. A reader who can name the pattern in front of them has moved from passive consumption to structured reading. That is the competency the framework is designed to produce.

SECTION 6

What This Makes Possible

An observation-based framework opens up some practical possibilities that are worth naming.

First, a shared vocabulary. When educators, librarians, and readers work from defined criteria for what they are looking at, conversations about news quality gain a common reference point. A reader who says "the Autonomy score on this article is low" is making a claim that can be examined, debated, and learned from. The vocabulary does not resolve disagreement. It makes disagreement more productive.

Second, pre and post measurement with a defined baseline. One of the genuine challenges in assessing news literacy instruction is establishing what changed and why. Under an observation model, the criteria exist before instruction begins, which means assessment can ask whether readers are applying them more consistently, not just whether they feel more confident. That is a more useful signal for educators trying to understand whether their instruction is working.

Third, standards alignment that is structural rather than retrofitted. The CSAF was built against UNESCO and Ofcom MIL standards from the ground up, not adapted to them after the fact. The ten dimensions map to the competencies those frameworks describe, which means instruction built around the CSAF is simultaneously building toward the standards that higher education, library systems, and curriculum developers use as reference points.

Fourth, scalability across contexts. A librarian running a one-hour information literacy session, a journalism professor building a semester-long course, and an independent reader using a browser extension are all working from the same framework. The criteria do not change by context or audience level. That consistency is what makes the framework genuinely portable.

The legislative moment is relevant here. When states mandate news literacy instruction, they create demand for a teachable method, and educators are working hard to meet that demand with the resources available. A framework with defined criteria, named patterns, and a shared scoring vocabulary is one way to give that implementation a common reference point, particularly across institutions and instructors who may be approaching the work from different directions.

This is not an argument that the CSAF is the only framework that can do this. It is an argument that the methodology, observation first, defined criteria, text-based assessment, is what makes any framework capable of fulfilling what the legislative mandate and the field's own standards describe.

SECTION 7

A Note on Where This Fits

The methodological argument made here does not require any particular tool. Observation-based news literacy is a pedagogical approach, and educators can begin building toward it with existing materials by reorienting instruction away from verdict questions and toward pattern questions. The framework is prior to the platform.

What a framework like the CSAF adds is a specified set of criteria, a scoring vocabulary, a named pattern library, and a pre/post assessment instrument, all developed against existing MIL standards. That makes the approach faster to implement, easier to assess, and more portable across institutional contexts. But the underlying methodological shift, from "is this credible?" to "what is this doing?", does not depend on any platform to be valid.

Credibility evaluation will always have a role in news literacy instruction. Understanding how professional journalism works, recognizing the difference between news and opinion, knowing how to investigate a source's track record, these are legitimate and useful competencies that the field has developed carefully. The argument here is not that those competencies should be set aside. It is that observation gives them a stronger foundation to build on.

A reader who first learns to describe what an article is doing, and then brings credibility evaluation to bear on what they have observed, is working from evidence rather than instinct. The two approaches reinforce each other. Observation makes the judgment that follows more grounded. Credibility evaluation gives the observation a purpose. Together they produce something neither produces as well on its own.

The trust collapse that the data describes is an invitation. Readers want to engage with news more confidently. The field has built real tools for helping them do that, and this paper is adding one more instrument to that set. An observation skill, text-level and criteria-defined, gives readers a vocabulary for what they are seeing before they are asked to judge it. It is teachable. It is assessable. And it works alongside everything the field has already built.

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About Clear-Sight

Clear-Sight (clear-sight.ai) is a news literacy platform built on Anthropic's API. The Clear-Sight Analytical Framework evaluates news articles on observable language patterns rather than source reputation. The platform includes a browser extension, Vantage (a curated article analysis destination), and the Lens, a pre/post media literacy assessment aligned to UNESCO and Ofcom MIL standards.

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