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Placing trust in others: how college students access and assess news and what it means for news literacy education

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Keywords: college students, credibility, journalism, mixed methods, news consumption, news literacy education, news media perceptions, mixed methods, personal influence

Abstract: This mixed-methods study (survey and subsequent in-depth interviews) investigates the role of personal influence in how students (n=135) across disciplines at a U.S. university find news, evaluate the credibility of news sources, and form their opinions about the news media. Specifically, this study explores how opinion leaders and primary socialization sources shape students' understanding and use of news at this stage of their development. Findings show that students place great trust in those around them to access and assess news, sometimes at the expense of making independent choices and judgments about the content they consume. Implications for news literacy education are discussed.

News organizations across the United States face an uncertain future as they seek to find sustainable economic models in the digital age (Pew 2013a; Picard 2010). Critical to their efforts are attracting the attention and earning the loyalty of young audiences as they develop their news consumption habits and form their views of the news media.

People in their teens and twenties are often portrayed as disinterested in the news (Bennett 2000), and more likely to gravitate toward satirical news than to the work of professional journalists (Pew 2012a; Hart and Hartelius 2007). Research shows that when young people follow the news, they often place a premium on convenience at the expense of credibility (Jarvis, Stroud, and Gilliland 2009). If young audiences do not regularly follow

news, consume credible content, and develop a favourable view of journalism, the news media's function in the democratic process may be undermined.

In response to concerns about the future of journalism and civic life, educators developed news literacy curricula that aims to teach students the critical thinking skills necessary to become discerning news consumers in the digital age. News literacy pedagogy stresses analytic information-processing techniques that are informed by journalistic mindsets and methods (Fleming 2012). Students are taught to sort through a high volume of content and identify credible news from trustworthy sources (Schneider, personal communication, July 6, 2010). Central to the notion of being news literate is the ability to make independent choices about what news to consume and whether that news is credible (Silverblatt 2008)—all of which is critical to being an engaged, well-informed citizen in a democracy (Mihailidis 2012; Martens 2010).

Rather than focusing on the future supply of journalists, news literacy education targets young news consumers and hopes to build demand for credible journalism. One of the pedagogical challenges facing news literacy educators is understanding how students access and assess news. Why do students follow news and how do they choose what news to consume? When students talk about “credibility” and “bias” what do they mean? How do they form opinions about the news media in general and about specific news outlets? Do they make these choices and evaluations independently or rely heavily on others? Answers to these questions may help news literacy educators tailor their curricula to the ways in which college students engage with and perceive news at this stage of their development.

To better understand a population that is critically important to the future of journalism and lives in a highly networked digital environment (Watkins 2009), this exploratory, mixed-methods study (survey and subsequent in-depth interviews) investigates the role of personal influence in how students across disciplines at a U.S. university access news, evaluate the credibility of news sources, and form their views of the news media in the digital age. Specifically, this research considers the extent to which students' perceptions of the news media are based on direct experience versus what others have told them, as well as how much they actively seek out news content or let others – including “opinion leaders”—filter and select it for them. This study examines how well the two-step flow theory of communication (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) and the primary socialization theory explain students' news consumption habits and perceptions of the news media, and suggests ways to expand the definition of opinion leaders. Survey (n=135) and interview (n=20) results reveal that students, the minority of whom studied journalism or communication, rely heavily on “primary socialization sources of the family, the school and peer clusters” (Kelly and Donohew 1999, 1034) to determine their news diet, evaluate credibility, and help shape their opinions about the press. Implications for news literacy education are discussed.

Accessing and assessing news

Many young people are in the habit of consuming news as part of their daily routine. A study from the American Press Institute and the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 85% of 18- to 34-year-olds in the United States reported that keeping up with the news is at least somewhat important to them, and 69% said they consume news daily. Becoming an informed citizen was the top reason cited for following news (Media Insight Project 2015). However, young people spend less time with news daily than other age groups (Pew 2012b) and commonly report turning to news outlets that they do not trust (Jarvis, Stroud, and Gilliland 2009).

The ubiquity of digital and portable media technologies and ever-growing media content have altered the way young people access and consume news (Broddason 2006; Pew Research Center 2010). Ninety-four percent of 18- to 34-year-olds in the United States own smartphones connected to the internet, and half own tablets (Media Insight Project 2015). People under age 25 are more likely to access news online than through print or broadcast platforms (Pew 2012a). The trend toward online media consumption among young adults, coupled with the vast supply of content on competing media platforms and the constant decline in credibility ratings for major news organizations over the past decade (Pew 2012b), raise the question of how college students evaluate news credibility in the digital age.

Credibility evaluation is a complex process in which users may weigh a range of factors (Metzger 2007; Rieh and Hilligoss 2008), including their relationship to the medium, the news source, and the content itself (Flanagin and Metzger 2007). Seminal news source credibility scales developed by Gaziano and McGrath (1986), and Newhagen and Nass (1989) include criteria such as fairness, bias, accuracy, trustworthiness, concern about the public interest, and concern about the community. Flanagin and Metzger (2000) gauged how credible students considered various media channels based on the dimensions of believability, accuracy, trustworthiness, bias, and completeness. They found that students were more trusting of online information than were adults (Flanagin and Metzger 2000). Subsequent studies found that students displayed a low level of proficiency in identifying or making distinctions between sources of information and weighing source credibility (Britt and Aglinksas 2002; Kioussis and Dimitrova 2006), and were at greater risk for falsely accepting a source's self-asserted credibility (Flanagin and Metzger 2008).

Students often compensate for the uncertainty that comes with evaluating news sources by relying on “an authority they trust or on sources that corroborated each other” (Francke, Sundin, and Limberg 2011, 691). Rieh and Hilligoss (2008) found that students placed a premium on information that is convenient to access and considered search engines such as Google as authoritative sources. Many students viewed the first search engine result as credible because they trusted the search engine brand to identify relevant content (Hargittai et al. 2010). A later study (Powers, 2014) also found students to be very trusting of sites that rely upon algorithms to deliver the most newsworthy results. Relying upon perceived reputation or prominence was the strategy used most commonly to evaluate the credibility of news outlets. Students said they perceived “brand-name” news outlets as credible because they had earned the trust of others over time. Students often were at a loss to determine how to evaluate a news item and thus relied upon the reputation of the news outlet as a proxy (Powers, 2014). These findings align with what Tseng and Fogg (1999) called reputed credibility, evaluations based on the assumptions of others, in contrast to experienced credibility, a user's first-hand experience with media sources.

While studies have examined the ways in which college students find news and evaluate credibility, few have specifically examined the role that personal influence plays in students' decision making. Given the emphasis in news literacy education on students making independent evaluations of news stories and news sources, educators would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of whether college students primarily use their own well-defined criteria or rely on the judgments of others when accessing and assessing news.

Personal influence and the two-step flow theory

Social purposes were just behind being an informed citizen as the top reasons why 18- to 34-year-olds in the United States follow news. Specifically, young people cited an interest

in talking to friends, family, and colleagues about news. “The findings suggest that Millennials view news as fairly important and use it in ways that are an almost equal mix of social, civic, and practical” (Media Insight Project 2015, 7). Young people are exposed to news they may have otherwise missed or ignored because friends recommend and comment on stories through social media and personal networks (Pew 2013b). “The news, in effect, is already contextualized as important to their lives because it is important to the members of their social networks” (Media Insight Project 2015, 7).

Young people rely heavily on their personal networks to identify news (Kushin and Yamamoto 2010). Those under 30 are the age group most likely to have news forwarded to them (Purcell et al. 2010). College students far more commonly “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement that “I like to receive news from other people” (75%) than said “I like to actively search for news” (48%) (Powers, 2014). Pew Research Center (2013b) found that 70% of 18- to 29-year-olds in the United States reported that word of mouth is the most common way they get news from family and friends, with social media sites (23%) as a distant second. Interpersonal exchanges such as word-of-mouth communication are often viewed as highly credible (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989; Bickart and Schindler 2001). Family members’ views about news sources (particularly local newspapers) have been found to influence credibility evaluations (Armstrong and Collins 2009).

One explanation for these findings is the primary socialization theory, which suggests that family, friends, and peers are essential for young people to learn normative behaviors and values. Media and other socialization factors become secondary, while “parents, schools, and peers are the primary mediators of media in an adolescent’s life” (Kelly and Donohew 1999, 1041). Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) described these primary mediators as opinion leaders who pay close attention to the media and their messages, influencing others by passing on that content with their interpretations. The two-step flow theory of communication highlights the influence of interpersonal networks in the dissemination process of news media messages. Katz and Lazarsfeld argued that personal influences through opinion leaders can have a significant impact on attitudes and the behaviour of others.

Even though interpersonal relationships have been widely recognized as influencing attitudes and behaviour, with more than 3,900 studies testing the two-step flow theory (Watts and Dodds 2007), few studies have examined the sway of opinion leaders on college students as they develop their news habits. This study proposes that personal influences, as described in the two-step flow theory, are major factors in how young adults access news and evaluate the credibility of the news media and individual news outlets. College students are often still in the early stages of developing an understanding of and a relationship to the news media as an important information source. Thus, examining students’ news consumption habits, credibility evaluations, and views of the news media during their time in college can provide a better picture of the socialization process.

In order to explore the ways in which personal influence plays a role in how college students access news, evaluate news sources, and form their views about the news media, this study included an online survey and subsequent interviews with a cross-section of undergraduates, as described below. Given the complexity of these processes, researchers focused on open-ended research questions rather than hypotheses. Specifically, this study addressed the following three questions:

RQ1: What is the role of personal influence in college students’ news consumption habits?

RQ2: What is the role of personal influence in how students evaluate the credibility of news?

RQ3: What is the role of personal influence in shaping students’ views of the news media?

Method

Participants

This mixed-methods study targeted undergraduate students at a large university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. We did not attempt to extrapolate from this sample of students to the entire adult population. Rather, this study considered students themselves as an audience worthy of investigation, particularly given that they are the primary targets of news literacy education. In order to recruit a wide variety of students across academic disciplines, we randomly selected large introductory courses found through the university’s course registry system, as well as residential college programs that include students of all years. We attempted to avoid over-sampling journalism or communication students because they represent a minority of undergraduates, and likely have news consumption habits and views of the news media that are not representative of most college students.

Procedure

We introduced the study to students and requested their participation at the start of course lectures. Directors of randomly selected residential college programs also forwarded a survey link to undergraduates. The online survey was distributed via e-mail to students. They completed the survey at a time and place of their choosing with no time limit. The survey’s final question asked whether students were interested in taking part in an interview about their news consumption habits and views about news media credibility. We e-mailed all students who expressed an interest in the interviews. We met with students for semi-structured interviews that lasted 20 to 45 minutes. Participants were asked permission to have their comments recorded. We masked the identities of the interviewees by using pseudonyms that indicate gender. Descriptions of students also include their academic major for context.

Instrumentation

We selected a mixed-methods approach starting with an initial survey followed by semi-structured interviews in order to triangulate findings in this exploratory study. Statistical data used in conjunction with interviews may be used for inductive reasoning (Bromley and Neal 2011; Feeney and Heit 2007). This sequential, mixed-method design (Creswell 2009) was employed for the purpose of complementarity—to elaborate, illustrate, and clarify quantitative findings through qualitative interviews (Greene 2007; Plano Clark 2010). Interviews were deemed ideal as a form of “biographical description” (Fontana and Frey 2005, 699), which helps to shed light on the “hows” behind the “traditional whats” (698), enrich the data, and make up for some limitations of the non-probability sample. The number of survey respondents (n=135) allowed researchers to keep the standard error reasonably small (Gorard 2003). The number of interviews (n=20) were within the range of what Kvale (1996) suggests as reasonable to provide information to “investigate in detail the relationship between the individual and the situation” (102-3).

The online survey included 31 questions about students’ demographics and news consumption habits—including interest in news, use of technology to access news, and social engagement with news. Specifically, interest in news included Likert scale items such as “I consider it important to follow the news” and “I think of myself as paying close attention the news,” adapted from a news interest index utilized by Armstrong and Collins (2009). Use of technology to access news was measured by multiple-choice questions such as “What is the way you most commonly access news?” Social engagement with news was measured by Likert scale items such as “I like to discuss news with others after I read it.”

Researchers purposefully defined news broadly—“published or broadcast reports about current events or public affairs”—so that students would have latitude to discuss their experiences.

Students' views about news media credibility were assessed by selecting and ranking qualities that factor into students' definition of credibility. Participants were asked to check all that apply from choices such as: accuracy, balanced reporting, expertise, familiar news outlet, familiar author, coverage of issues of interest, forthcoming about political views, and avoids conflict of interest. The dimensions of credibility, adapted from pre-existing credibility scales, included: accuracy/factualness, balance/lack of bias trustworthiness, and concern about community/watches out for your interests (Flanagin and Metzger 2000; Gaziano and McGrath 1986; Newhagen and Nass 1989; Kiouisis 2001). Likert scale questions addressed both source and medium credibility: “How credible do you consider the U.S. news media generally?” and “How credible do you consider news from the following sources (national newspapers, network television, social media sites, etc.)?” (Armstrong and Collins 2009; Tseng and Fogg 1999).

Semi-structured interviews allowed students an opportunity to expand on their survey responses and to cover new ground. Questions explored credibility evaluations and the influence of others on students' news consumption habits: “Why do you follow the news?” “How important is credibility of the news source to you when you are evaluating content?” “What do your friends and family say about particular news sources or the press in general?”

Data analysis

Survey results were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive (frequency count, percentage, correlation) and inferential statistics (t-tests, regression) were used to analyse and present college students' news habits to tease out possible differences between majors and political attitudes. Interview data obtained from the students were coded thematically and analysed together by the researchers. We employed emergent coding, creating categories based on student responses that covered themes such as news consumption habits, credibility evaluations, and perceptions of the news media. As a first step, we independently reviewed the material, taking notes to create a theme checklist. Then we compared notes and reconciled differences that occurred in the initial checklist. After the checklist was refined and consolidated, a codebook was created. In the final step, we worked in tandem using the codebook as a reference to code all interviews.

Results

Survey demographics

A majority (61%) of the 135 survey respondents were female. Respondents were largely underclassmen: freshmen (45%), sophomores (30%), juniors (13%) and seniors (12%). Nearly two-thirds of students (65%) reported being politically liberal, compared with 25% politically conservative and 10% centrist. Journalism/communication was the most common major (22%), but the vast majority of participants were in other disciplines. Thirty percent had taken a university course in journalism, and 26% indicated having experience working as a journalist.

Findings from both the survey and subsequent interviews with 20 students whose demographics closely match the above description are reported in the following sections. Results are broken into categories that correspond to our three research questions: news

consumption habits, credibility evaluation, and perceptions of the news media.

News consumption habits

Our first research question asked: What is the role of personal influence in college students' news consumption habits? Findings reveal that students relied heavily on people in their personal networks—and on technology—to access the news they consumed, and they were driven to consume news for social reasons. Interviews revealed that friends (n=11) and parents (n=10) were most commonly referenced by students as being influential in determining what news they consumed. Teachers were rarely mentioned (n=2).

While several students said in interviews that they actively seek out news and enjoy being the tastemaker who directs their friends to online news, far more said they would rather have friends, family, or people in their social networks find and filter news for them. Astronomy major Florence noted:

“I don't go out and read the news, and I get things from social networks or from my friends and family passing on news. So I don't seek it out but I do follow what I hear.”

Computer engineering major Morris said that he trusts how people select news and information on social networks.

“The way I usually get news is on a Facebook news feed or Twitter. I'm basically having someone else find the most relevant and most important news for me. You wouldn't just post any piece of garbage on your Facebook status.”

Computer science major Tyson did not so much crowdsource as he outsourced the news collection process to one person:

“I have one friend that reads The New York Times and the campus newspaper every day and he keeps me informed.”

When it came to sharing and analysing news, survey respondents generally did not return the favour: Only 4% reported somewhat or very often commenting on news posted online, and nearly half (47%) rarely or never forwarded news to family, friends, or acquaintances.

Survey results showed that the vast majority of students (87%) at least somewhat agreed that they like to discuss news with others after they read it. Florence noted that:

“I read a lot of what my friends post because it's interesting and pertains to them and I want to be up to date on what's interesting to them.”

Family members also played an important role in influencing students' news consumption habits – more so when they lived at home than after they arrived at college. Students commonly mentioned in interviews that they first became interested in news by reading the newspapers and magazines that their parents had delivered to their homes. Several students noted that they discussed the news with their parents and often continue to read the same publications as college students that their parents received. Caitlyn, a political science major, commented that:

“A lot of times I talk to my parents about [news] because they know what's going on. With things that are kind of going over my head or with things I haven't been paying attention to, it's nice to have someone who gets it fill me in.”

Students not only trusted other people to access news, but they also allowed decisions about what they read to be made by algorithms on sites like Facebook and Google, and by software presets on their computer. Justin, an undeclared student, explained that:

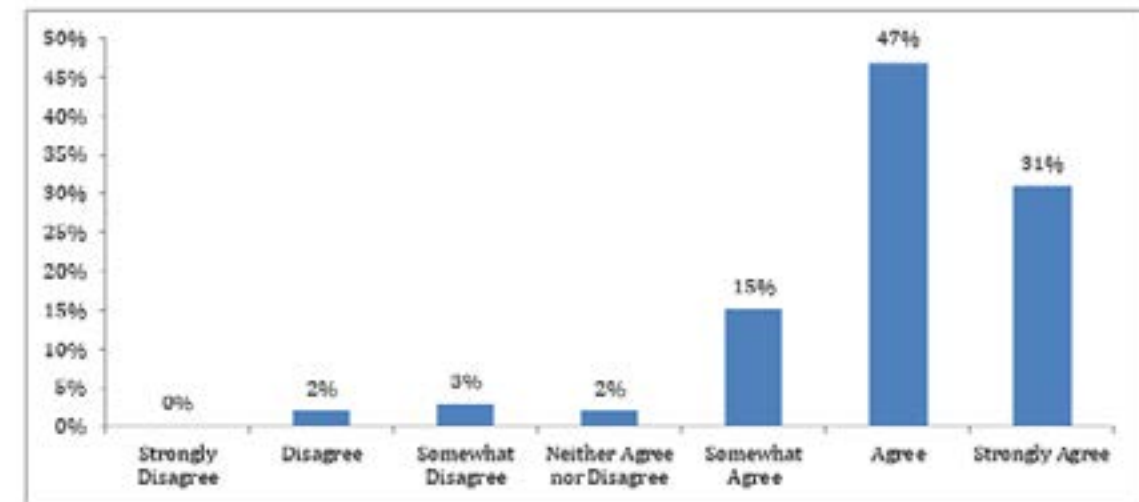
“When you download Firefox, they have the BBC feed. So you just click on it and it happens to be the BBC. If I downloaded Google Chrome and they had MSNBC I'd do that. I do use MSNBC a lot, too, because that's my homepage.”

Students commonly reported accessing news that required little effort to find, as illustrated by computer science major Ben's comment that:

Sometimes I feel like looking for interesting stories and I go to some sections of the site, but usually it's just whatever happens to be on the front page or, you know, whatever pops up on my screen.

Survey results showed that many students spent little time accessing news: 43% reported spending one hour or less a week watching, reading, or listening to news, while just 27% spent more than two hours weekly consuming news. Charts 1 and 2 (below) illustrate the discrepancies in students' answers when asked on the survey both whether they consider it important to follow the news and whether they think of themselves as paying close attention to the news.

Chart 1. Response to the statement "I consider it important to follow the



news."

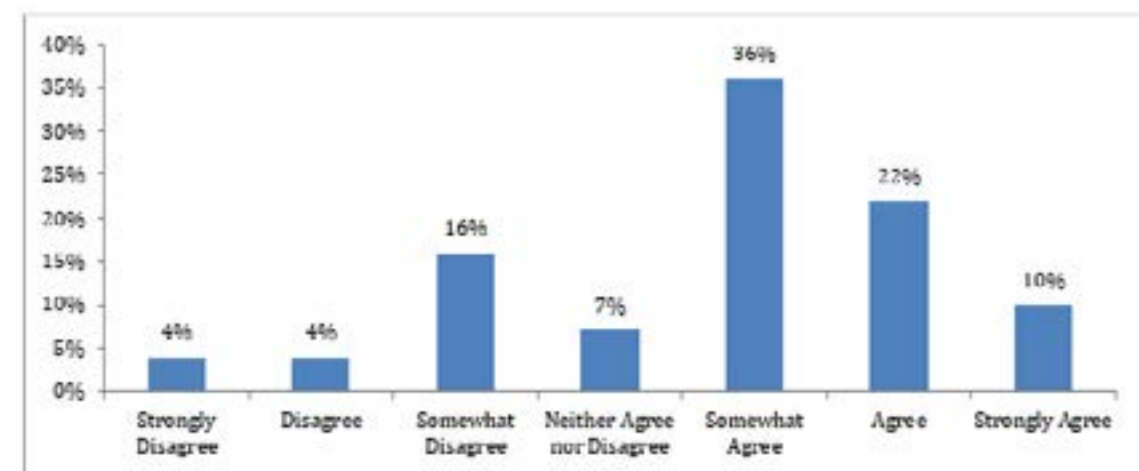


Chart 2. Response to the statement "I pay close attention to news."

Both variables above strongly correlated ($r(133) = .64, p < .001$), and the responses show that participants much more frequently at least somewhat agreed that they want to follow the news (93%) than say they at least somewhat closely follow the news (68%).

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During interviews, many participants explained that they follow news as a way of staying informed and escaping the "college bubble." Journalism major Karl responded that he considers it his responsibility as a citizen to follow the news:

"A lot of people have opinions but I don't think a lot of people have stuff to back it up. When I go into a political debate or form my opinions I'd like to have information to back up [my arguments]."

Interviewees listed a variety of reasons why they choose not to follow the news. The most common response was being too busy. Several students also responded that they would not go out of their way to follow news or that news is too depressing to follow. Astronomy major Florence noted that:

"General news and world news – it doesn't pertain to me so I don't really follow it."

Similarly, computer engineering major Morris commented:

"I don't have a personal stake in the news so I'd rather stay away from it."

Students surveyed preferred reading news to watching or listening to it, as Chart 3 (below) illustrates.

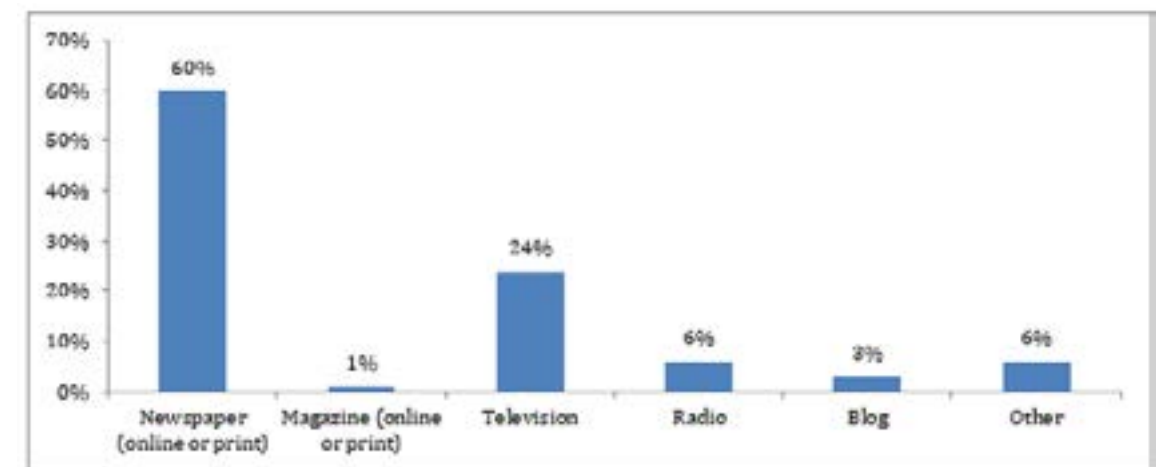


Chart 3. Students' preferred medium for accessing news

Differences between journalism/communication students and other majors were identified through Independent samples t tests. These groups were in several ways significantly different. As compared to their non-major counterparts, journalism/communication students thought of themselves as paying more attention to the news ($t(133) = 2.82, p = .006$; MJ/C = 5.40, SD = 1.25, MNon-J/C = 4.54, SD = 1.53), forwarded more news to family and friends ($t(133) = 2.10, p = .038$, MJ/C = 2.80, SD = 1.07, MNon-J/C = 2.41, SD = .95), and also spent more time reading news per week ($t(133) = 4.05, p < .001$, MJ/C = 3.43, SD = 1.07, MNon-J/C = 2.51, SD = 1.10). Willingness to pay for news also differed significantly between journalism/communication and other majors ($t(40.4) = 3.91, p < .001$, MJ/C = 3.47, SD = 1.66, MNon-J/C = 2.18, SD = 1.34).

Credibility evaluations

Our second research question asked: What is the role of personal influence in how students evaluate the credibility of news? Findings suggest that students often rely heavily on the judgments of others rather than first making an independent evaluation of a news story

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or news outlet. The most common theme mentioned in interviews about news credibility was the importance of prestige and how well respected a news outlet is by others. Students commonly placed trust in the masses—if enough people were reading something, it must be trustworthy. They more often referenced trusting the crowd – largely made up of weak ties such as acquaintances and strangers online – than trusting close ties such as parents and friends when making credibility evaluations.

Students tended to look either at the overall body of work or at a specific historical event, illustrated by one student who mentioned trusting the Washington Post because of its Watergate coverage. But they often seemed to assume that there is a reason a news source has become trustworthy without being able to name it. Said Justin:

“I figure if a lot of people are reading it I’ll skim through and see what they are reading. Usually I go to the most read unless I see something that interests me on the home page.”

Environmental studies major Marlen said she trusts reputable brands:

“I don’t really know much about news sources so if everyone respects The New York Times or The Washington Post the more likely I am to believe that.”

Reputation played a large role in students’ views on credibility. Students explained that legacy news outlets were known entities that had earned others’ trust over time, as illustrated by Morris’ comment that:

“Any of the big-name companies, big-name journalists, I would trust them more mainly because they are big and credible and shown time and time again that they are credible... Since I’m not into picking out what’s good and what’s bad I do leave trust in other people...I guess I just use the public to determine the news source credibility.”

Government and politics major Marianne also trusts other people to assess the credibility of news outlets:

“I know that’s kind of blindly following. But [the news outlets have] gotten to be as big as they are for a reason so people seem to trust them.”

A minority of interviewees reported that their views about credibility depended largely on what they were exposed to at home and through their peers. As neurobiology major Tori said:

“Being raised in a house where we got The Washington Post, I would see it every morning and I just kind of never assumed that it wasn’t credible.”

In their answers about prestige and trusting others, several themes emerged: Students wished they were better equipped to vet sources independently, but absent that training decided to put faith in people who pay close attention to the news to do the vetting for them.

On the survey, students were asked to select all that apply from a list of possible concepts that factor into definitions of news outlet credibility. The most common answer (chosen by 97% of respondents) was “accuracy,” followed by “balanced reporting” (84%), “expertise” (78%), “avoids conflict of interest” (52%), “forthcoming about political views (if any)” (41%), “provides regular coverage of issues important to me” (41%) and “familiar author/anchor/host” (28%). When asked during interviews to expand on their definitions of news outlet credibility, a majority of students said that they want news presented in an unbiased fashion—devoid of opinions and considering all viewpoints—although several mentioned that this is a mostly (or entirely) unattainable goal.

Several students described their practice of clicking on links to see the original source of information, cross-checking information found on blogs and paying attention to whether an author is a dispassionate source. But interviews often revealed a difference between

what students say about credibility in theory and what they do in practice. Several students admitted that they do not actually pay close attention to the credibility of their news source.

Perception of the news media

Our third research question asked: What is the role of personal influence in shaping students’ views of the news media? Findings revealed that students were mostly trusting of the press—specifically legacy news outlets—and were less often influenced by others than they were in the other two research questions. Just four students said their parents, three said their friends, and three said their teachers had influenced their perceptions of the news media.

Survey respondents were asked to rate the U.S. news media as a whole and specific categories of news outlets on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 being not credible and 7 being very credible. Results show that students generally found the U.S. news media credible (Chart 4).

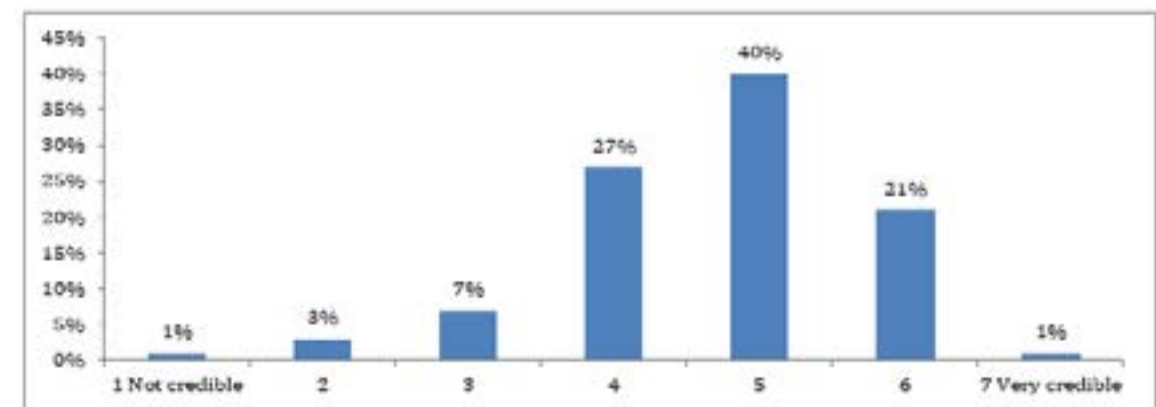


Chart 4. Students’ ratings of U.S. news media credibility

Interviews showed that few students were disillusioned with the news media as a whole—many didn’t have strong feelings about the press one way or another. Most students could not name a personal experience with the news media that greatly shaped their perception of the press. But one factor in students’ evolving views about the news media was exposure to college classes. Said government and politics major Marianne:

I’m more sceptical of news now than when I first started watching...Specifically in the last few years, I’ve taken a communications and a journalism class here. You realize even if you try to write completely objectively you can’t. Your political views and your fundamental beliefs are always going to come through.

Economics major Ben was among the minority of students who said his family influenced his views of the news media, commenting that:

“I come from a pretty liberal family so we make fun of Fox News.”

The majority of students said in interviews that their default tendency is to be trusting of news outlets, particularly those that are widely known. Students overwhelmingly responded that when a news source does something that makes them lose their trust, the feeling is specific to that news source—it doesn’t lead to widespread distrust of the news media.

Survey results found that students rated legacy news organizations as more credible than non-traditional sources such as blog and social media sites. Eighty-four percent of students gave national newspapers an above-average credibility rating, ahead of local newspa-

pers (70%), network television (70%), and national magazines (66%). In contrast, personal blogs and social media sites received a 1 or 2 on the credibility scale by about half of students. The top five sources that students surveyed deemed credible were The Washington Post, The New York Times, CNN, NPR, and NBC.

The preference for newspapers was also echoed during interviews. Students noted that newspapers have a long tradition of publishing compared to online sources, and that newspapers are held to a higher journalistic standard. They noted that blogs often lack editorial oversight and are prone to include ranting and slanted news coverage. And despite their routine of scouring Facebook and Twitter for information, many interviewees said they don't particularly trust social media. Journalism major Karl reported:

“I feel like you can write anything on these websites and there is no restriction on it.”

Researchers created composite average scores of students' ratings of different types of news media platforms, specifically print (national newspapers, local newspapers, national magazines), online (online magazines), broadcast (network television, local television, cable television, public television, public radio, private radio), and social media/blogs (organizational blogs, personal blogs, social media websites). The composite subscales had reliabilities in the expected range for the number of items (print: $\alpha=.71$; broadcast: $\alpha=.81$; social media/blogs: $\alpha=.69$). Students rated these news sources as similarly credible (Table 1).

Source type	Print	Online magazines	Broadcast
Print			
Online magazines	.53**		
Broadcast	.63**	.44**	
Social media and blogs	.27**	.32**	.44**

Table 1. Correlations in the credibility ratings of different types of sources .

Note: Correlations significant at the .01 level are marked **.

Reported time spent consuming news was significantly positively related to perceived credibility of the news media generally ($r=.21, p=.017$) and print sources specifically ($r=.17, p=.045$). Journalism/communication majors perceived the U.S. news media as more credible than other majors ($t(133)=3.06, p=.003$), and rated print sources ($t(131)=1.98, p=.05$) and online magazines ($t(131)=2.69, p=.008$) as more credible than did non-majors. Students who have taken at least one journalism class also provided higher credibility ratings for the news generally ($t(133)=2.78, p=.006$), print media ($t(133)=2.51, p=.013$) and online magazines ($t(133)=2.61, p=.01$) than students who had not taken a journalism class. Mean credibility ratings for all source types are presented in Table 2.

Source Type	Major		Taken a journalism course	
	Journalism/ Communication	Not Journalism/ Communication	Yes	No
News in general	5.20 (.96)	4.55 (1.04)**	5.08 (.94)	4.54 (1.06)**
Print	5.53 (.92)	5.15 (.90)*	5.54 (.85)	5.11 (.912)*
Online magazines	4.77 (.94)	4.17 (1.10)**	4.68 (.97)	4.14 (1.11)**
Broadcast	4.87 (.81)	4.67 (.99)	4.85 (.87)	4.66 (.99)
Social media and blogs	3.11 (1.04)	2.86 (.96)	3.06 (1.05)	2.86 (.95)

Table 2. Average credibility ratings across types of news media.

Note: All means out of 7 possible points. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. * denotes significance at the .05 level. ** denotes significance at the .01 level.

In order to understand whether academic major predicted ratings of general credibility when controlling for other factors, we regressed credibility rating on major while controlling for time spent on news. Even after controlling for time spent on news, major significantly predicted ratings of credibility ($\beta=.54, p=.018, R^2=.08$), suggesting that journalism/communication majors were more likely to rate the news media as more credible compared to their non-major counterparts with similar time spent on news.

Discussion

This mixed-methods study of college undergraduates, the target demographic for many news literacy courses, provides educators with nuanced data about students' engagement with news that may be useful in shaping pedagogical priorities. One important takeaway is that students rely heavily on people in their personal networks to identify and evaluate news, sometimes at the expense of making independent choices and judgments about the content they consume. College students have come of age in a networked environment where they are accustomed to finding links to stories and recommendations from a variety of sources on the web. With the glut of information available to them in the digital age, students appear to rely on friends, family, and others in their online networks to be news curators.

Coming across news shared by trusted people in one's personal network is not inherently problematic. But students in this study often outsourced not just the step of finding news but also the critical stage of evaluating news stories and sources. While students professed to care deeply about the credibility of news, they admitted to sometimes not taking the time to vet information or sources and instead relied on others to make the determinations for them. Our study appears to confirm previous research that students often compensate for uncertainty that comes with evaluating news by relying on "an authority they trust" (Francke, Sundin, and Limberg 2011, 691).

During interviews, rather than citing specific attributes of news outlets that made them credible, most students referenced what is best described as reputed credibility—the reputation that a source has earned over time as measured by audience size or name recognition. Results showed that students turned to and trusted the same types of sources that have long been at the center of the American news ecosystem. Students gave blogs and cable news low credibility ratings, and listed newspapers as their preferred and most trusted category of news source. This may be yet another indication of the importance of reputed credibility, as legacy news organizations such as The New York Times and The Washington Post (the two most credible news outlets, according to students) have had well over a century to burnish their brands. They are also the type of news sources—along with national magazines and network television—that students grew up seeing at home. Familiarity rather than personal experience with these sources seemed to drive students' responses.

These findings highlight the important role that news literacy can play in teaching students how to independently access, verify, and evaluate news—critical thinking skills that appear to be lacking among many of this study's participants. Several students explicitly mentioned that they wished they were better equipped to evaluate news but without such training fell back on others' judgments or on the reputation of the source in making quick credibility evaluations. Students tended to be trusting of news sources by default, in particular those that are "brand names." The role of news literacy education is teaching stu-

dents to be discerning news consumers rather than blindly trusting news reports—even those that come from the biggest names in journalism. Specific attention should be paid to helping students identify balanced news coverage and assess the accuracy of information—the two terms that survey respondents said were most associated with credible journalism.

Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow theory remains particularly useful to explain how students receive news and develop their views of specific news outlets and the news media in general. Students often appear at least one step removed from the direct consumption of news when putting trust in "opinion leaders"—primary mediators who pay close attention to news and influence others by passing on content with their interpretation. Tyler's comment that he has one friend who is a voracious news consumer and "keeps me informed" is a classic example of relying upon an opinion leader. In these cases, students understand the importance of following news but still may not actively engage in finding or evaluating news.

In the context of this study, opinion leaders may be friends, classmates, family, or teachers—anyone who, according to the primary socialization theory, teaches students normative behaviours and values (in this case what news to consume and how to evaluate news credibility). Beyond human opinion leaders, we suggest an extension of the term to include technological tools such as algorithms that drive news aggregators and online "most emailed" or "most read" lists. Our results suggest that students are willing to consume and trust whatever the crowd decides is the most interesting story, whatever Google or Facebook's algorithm features prominently, or whatever news sources Chrome or Firefox decides to include in its browser presets. Given students' high level of trust in technology to deliver relevant and credible news, news literacy educators may consider devoting time to explaining how digital media platforms use algorithms to personalize content to individual users and what this means for the news consumer.

The two-step flow theory highlights the influence of interpersonal networks in disseminating news and affecting the attitudes and beliefs of people in the network. Our findings suggest that students are highly influenced by interpersonal exchanges such as word-of-mouth communication. The vast majority of survey respondents said they enjoyed discussing news they consumed, and several students commented in interviews that they were motivated to follow news so they could know what their friends were reading and talking about. While students use social media to keep tabs on what news people in their personal networks are consuming and commenting on, they generally do not trust material posted there—particularly content written by users that does not include a link to a professional news source.

The main limitations of this study are the reliance on self-reported data, our use of a convenience sample, the oversampling of journalism/communication majors, and the lack of geographic diversity in our sample. This study is based on self-reporting on surveys and in interviews, which raises the possibility of students providing normative responses to the researchers about their news consumption habits, credibility evaluations, and views of the news media.

Obtaining a true probability sample was not feasible given the absence of a comprehensive list of undergraduates. While we attempted to reach out to students from across campus, those who opted to take the survey and sit for interviews may have been more engaged in news and interested in speaking about our topic than the general student population. Journalism students, while a minority of study participants, were still overrepresented as compared to the overall makeup of the university population. This self-selection process reduces the accuracy of our predictions toward the student population at a large U.S. university.

Time and resource limitations prevented us from seeking participants from other U.S. or international universities. Expanding the scope of our sample beyond one institution would have increased the diversity of participants and enabled us to claim more generalizability of results. Future studies may benefit from international collaboration in data collection. However, we believe this study's findings are useful for international scholars who seek to understand how their students access and assess news. The influence of personal networks and algorithmic recommendation engines is a worldwide phenomenon, aided by the ubiquity of social media and mobile technology. For instance, Facebook reports that approximately 83.5% of its daily active users are outside of the United States and Canada (Facebook 2015), and Twitter reports that 79% of all accounts are from users outside of the U.S (Twitter 2015).

Recent studies confirm the flattening effect of technology, showing that college students across the globe report similar levels of addiction to social media and mobile technology (Moeller, Powers, & Roberts 2012), and that young news consumers universally prefer online news to news on other platforms (Fletcher, Radcliffe, Levy, Nielsen & Newman 2014). The worldwide trend toward news consumption through social media, search engines, and on mobile devices illustrates the ease of tapping into personal networks and using technology to access news. While trust in the news media differs greatly by country, with the United States being among the least trusting populations (Fletcher, Radcliffe, Levy, Nielsen & Newman 2014), we would expect a comparative study to show that students do not differ greatly in the ways in which they evaluate credibility and form their views of the news media. Finally, our focus on a U.S.-based university can be seen as informative to international scholars within the larger framework of higher education. The modern American university has served as a global model for higher education and is seen as the most influential academic model worldwide (Altbach 1998; Palfreman 2008). While regional and national cultures may differ, critical thinking among students and engagement with news are universal concerns that this study helps to address.

Conclusion

This study provides fresh evidence that news literacy education's focus on helping students be discerning news consumers is necessary and in demand at the college level. Results showed that the vast majority of students think it is important to follow the news, although fewer actually closely followed the news in practice, in part because they did not see the relevance to their lives. Students overwhelmingly trusted others to access and assess news. Some said they wished they had the critical thinking skills necessary to make independent judgments about news, and others commented that exposure to news during college classes made them shrewder consumers. Non-journalism/communication majors, often the target of news literacy courses, were found to be less avid news consumers, less likely to pass along news, and less willing to pay for news. Given these findings, news literacy educators may wish to consider two pedagogical priorities: (1) Finding ways to motivate students to take a more proactive role in accessing news and to see the relevance of news to their lives; and (2) helping students independently evaluate the credibility of news sources so that they can be engaged, well-informed citizens.

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Finding consensus: a pilot survey in news literacy education

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings of a pilot study of news literacy programs in the United States in which respondents were surveyed about the concepts, pedagogy, and assessments used. It presents an ongoing lack of consensus in the field about not only what constitutes news literacy but also how news literacy is implemented in secondary and higher education classrooms. The research is framed within the context of contemporary scholarship on best educational practices and ongoing efforts to assess both news and media literacy education. The pilot survey, funded by the McCormick Foundation and the Poynter Institute, was administered to a small sample of news literacy educators across multiple grade levels. Respondents reflected on the structure and intent of their news literacy programming and were asked to consider the role of their programming as it relates to greater departmental or institutional goals. The study finds that while educators are using a mix of best practices in assessment, such as student portfolios, a lack of consensus still exists regarding other critical elements of news literacy education and implementation, including learning objectives, main concepts, and pedagogy. The researchers suggest scholars in the field must do more to articulate the role of news literacy education in the 21st century and provide clear direction on how to implement news literacy education in the classroom.

Introduction

News literacy is an expanding field in the United States, thanks in part to new educational standards at the primary and secondary levels that focus on informational and non-fiction texts. Sometimes placed under the umbrella of concomitant literacies such as digital and media literacy, news literacy is finding a foothold among educators and practitioners who seek to bridge news media's producer-consumer dichotomy.

In doing so, news literacy has been variously described as "the acquisition of 21st-cen-