

Incoming Undergraduate Students Struggle to Accurately Evaluate Legitimacy of Online News

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Evidence Summary

Incoming Undergraduate Students Struggle to Accurately Evaluate Legitimacy of Online News

A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To determine how new undergraduate students access, share, and evaluate the credibility of digital news.

Design – Asynchronous online survey and activity.

Setting – A small private, liberal arts college in the southeastern United States of America.

Subjects – Participants included 511 incoming first-year college students.

Methods – Using the Moodle Learning Management System, incoming first-year students completed a mandatory questionnaire that included multiple choice, Likert scale, open-ended, and true/false questions related to news consumption. Two questions asked students to identify which news sources and social networking sites they have used recently, and the next two questions asked students to define fake news and rate the degree to which fake news impacts them personally and the degree to which it impacts society. The end of the survey presented students with screenshots of three news stories

and asked them to reflect on how they would evaluate the claim in the story, their confidence level in the claim, and whether or not they would share this news item on social media. The three items chosen represent certain situations that commonly cause confusion for news consumers: (a) a heading that does not match the text of the article, (b) a syndicated news story, and (c) an impostor URL and fake news story. Researchers coded the student responses using both preset and emergent codes.

Main Results – Eighty-two percent of students reported using at least one social media site to access political news in the previous seven days. Students reported believing that fake news is a worrying trend for society, with 86% labelling it either a “moderate” or “extreme” barrier to society’s ability to recognize accurate information. However, they expressed less concern about their own ability to navigate an information environment in which fake news is prevalent, with 51% agreeing that it has only somewhat of an effect on their own ability to effectively navigate digital information. Of the three news items presented to them, students expressed the least confidence (an average of 1.55/4) and least interest in sharing (12%) the first news item, in which the heading does not match the text. However, only 14% of respondents noted this mismatch. In evaluations of the second item, an AP news item on the Breitbart website, 35% of students noted the website on which the article was found, but fewer noted that the original source is the Associated Press. Student responses to the third article, a fake news item from a website masquerading as an NBC website, show that 37% of students believed the source to come from a legitimate NBC source. Only 7% of students recognized the unusual URL, and 24% of respondents indicated that they might share this news item on social media.

Conclusion – The study finds that impostor URLs and syndicated news items might confuse students into miscalculating the information before them, and that librarians and other instructors should raise awareness of these tactics.

Commentary

Project Information Literacy took on the subject of fake news in 2018. In a large scale survey across 11 U.S. colleges, they found that social networking sites were a prominent source of news for college students, and that 45% of respondents lacked confidence in distinguishing fake news from real news (Head et al., 2019). Some smaller scale studies have sought to determine how effective undergraduate students are at distinguishing fake news from real news. For example, in one study of 63 students, researchers found that students were able to correctly identify whether a news item was real or fake approximately 62% of the time (Leeder, 2019). Researchers have also looked into how and where students get their news (Zakharov et al., 2019).

This review analyzes the design and data analysis of this study using a checklist evaluation from the Center for Evidence Based Management. The authors present a broad research question, seeking to explore how incoming college students engage with news in an online environment. The questions they asked students are appropriate for this line of inquiry, but the topic remains too large to cover adequately with a single study. Nearly the entire incoming class completed the mandatory questionnaire, which provides an excellent opportunity to study the information behaviours of their student body, though they do not share details of their student demographics. Because students’ backgrounds may impact way they engage with news, this information would be useful for practitioners in other geographic areas.

The article is sparse on details about the authors’ coding processes. They provide a list of codes in the appendix and state that some codes were preset and others were emergent codes that came about during their coding process. It is not known whether the authors coded individually and later pooled their work or coded together. More information on the coding process would help others replicate such a study more easily. Those seeking to conduct a similar study could also benefit from

reflections on the process of choosing sample articles. The authors do not explain whether they sought potentially controversial articles or not, but students may have stronger reactions to hot-button topics than more benign ones, which could impact their evaluations.

The authors note several times that one significant weakness of their study was an inability to share actual links with students rather than screenshots of news items. This prevented students from engaging with the news item in its entirety (i.e., they could not follow links or fact-check information in other sources), meaning they were evaluating news stories in a manner that is possibly inconsistent with how they would evaluate such news items if they encountered them on their own. Observations in a more natural online news environment may yield different results.

The data here provides evidence to support adding information about news syndication and imposter URLs in news evaluation instruction, as these present points of confusion for some students. However, as the authors note, online news systems evolve quickly. It may be beneficial to repeat this study over multiple years to track how student abilities change over time.

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