Lesley Farmer
California State University
Lesley.Farmer@csulb.edu

Teachers' Perceptions of Students' News Literacy

Abstract

People need to consciously and critically analyze and evaluate mass media messages, especially in the light of increasing fake news; they need to be news literate. The logical time to start teaching such literacy is in K-12 educational settings so that all individuals have the opportunity to learn and practice news literacy. To concretely ascertain California middle and high school students' level of news literacy, their teacher librarians were surveyed. Not only did the respondents indicate a need for news literacy instruction, but they also indicated that little curriculum attention was given to that need. Moreover, teacher librarians and classroom teachers need training on news literacy. Fake news is a wake-up call to educators and the community at large to gain competency in critically analyzing fake news in particular, and information in general.

Keywords: fake news, school libraries, California, news literacy, media literacy

Introduction

As recent American Presidential races made abundantly clear, news might not be as true as it appears. News literacy constitutes one aspect of mass media: reporting on current events of public interest. With the ubiquitousness of news, individuals need to consciously and critically analyze and evaluate the news and only then decide how to respond. Otherwise, they will not make reasoned decisions, and they will suffer the consequences of their assumptions or ignorance. They must be news literate.

While news literacy is a lifelong skill, the logical time to start teaching such literacy is in K-12 educational settings so that all people have the opportunity to learn and practice news literacy. The age to begin such instruction varies, with some asserting that students as young as kindergarteners can analyze news (Share, 2015).

This study investigated the needs for K-12 students to be news literate, and their current level of skills, as perceived by in-service teacher librarians. The findings inform the development of news media literacy curriculum that can be implemented by K-12 teacher librarians and other educators.

Literature Review

A literature review revealed trends in the production and consumption of news. The following themes emerged: changes in the news, fake news, literacy, news literacy education, and students' news information behavior.

Changes in the News

The issue of news literacy has become critical nowadays. A recent *Atlantic* article suggests several reasons why (Thompson, 2016). People have put less trust in mainstream news outlets and other public institutions as they have dramatized or hidden certain perspectives. As news media outlets increasingly communicate their messages to narrow target audiences, thanks to hundreds of cable channels, which are less regulated than the handful of "free" basic channels, people can stay in their information "comfort zones" and "filter bubble" and not consider different points of view. This filter bubble is increasingly easy to stay within as the advent of social media enables more people to add to the news universe – with less vetting, editorial control, or monitoring. Furthermore, with less gatekeeping combined with low overhead costs and instant broadcasting ability, social media gives mainstream news outlets a competitive run for their money. Timelines become more critical, and partisanship can attract a greater audience, thus jeopardizing traditional news verification and in-depth analysis. The result is an overwhelming amount of news to contend with – and less control on its quality.

Fake News

This daunting situation is further exacerbated by the increasing frequency and sophistication of fake news. In its basic form, fake news is deliberate, publicly published disinformation/hoax/lie purported to be real news, published by established mass media or social media. News may be faked by lies, doctored content (e.g., photo editing, misleading statistics), content that is misleading or taken out of context, counterfeit sources, and false attribution. Fake news is considered as one type of misleading news, which may be created for several reasons: to misinform, for fun, out of passion or strong belief, to gain power or influence, or to get richer.

Fake news, per se, is not a new phenomenon. With language comes truth and lies. News, then, reflects both possibilities. With each "new" mass media format -- be it the printing press, radio, television or the Internet -- has come fake news. Stories of exotic travels have been fabricated for centuries. The stock exchange has suffered because of fake news. The Jews have often been the victims of fake news. The critical difference about contemporary fake news is its much expanded and timely distribution via the Internet, which then can lead to its greater influence. And fake news is unlikely to go away. Fake news has been the catalyst for political polarization and upheaval, the rise in diseases because of denial and vaccination scares, and killings. When people believe fake news, they are misinformed, and may make poor decisions (Berman, 2017). When people don't know what to believe, they may become frustrated, polarized, confused, fearful, distrustful, cynical, and withdrawn. None of this helps society.

So why do people believe in fake news – and pass it on? The same motivations that drive people to create fake news can apply to those who believe and share it. In other cases, people lack the background knowledge or logical skills to discern the veracity of the information. However, part of the reason for believing fake news lies in the human brain (Sharot, 2017). News is easier to accept if it confirms a person's existing knowledge base. If the news differs from one's current experience, but it is what one *wants* to believe, then it is more likely to be accepted. For instance, if people hear that poverty will end in ten years, most of them would probably like to believe that news. The opposite is equally true; if it is bad news or news that contradicts strongly held beliefs, then it is likely to be discounted, even if sound evidence is behind it. Furthermore, especially with the increasingly narrow casting of news, people can listen to news outlets that just reinforce existing beliefs so that they do not have to be exposed to opposing points of view – or their favorite news outlet will give convincing arguments against unpleasant news. For instance, far-right news commentators dismissed the seriousness of COVID-19. This phenomenon is called a filter bubble.

Additionally, as people like to share news, they are more likely to share news that confirms their pre-existing beliefs. Social media enables them to broadcast that news, fake or real, more widely and quickly than ever before. While such sharing tends to be sent to friends (e.g., Facebook likes), that news might also be sent to opponents to counter their arguments. Unfortunately, in most cases, that stance will probably be discounted because it does not reinforce their own pre-existing world view. Sharot (2017) suggested that to counter fake news, people can first acknowledge and respect the person who has a different point of view, and not attack the belief system. Then they can reframe that fake news such that common ground or goals can be found in order to improve the situation. It should be noted that it takes both parties to be respectful; otherwise, it is better to walk away than to engage in an emotional fight.

Elements of News Literacy

News literacy involves accessing, understanding, evaluating, and interpreting news messages. It may be considered a subset of media literacy. What then is media literacy? In the United States, media literacy focuses on the idea of mass media: its purposeful means and end of production. Media in this context refers to information developed by the mass media, including social media, done for profit/influence/power as its main objective. In that respect, mass media can include periodicals as well as broadcasts, film and video. Mass media often incorporates image, sound and action. Especially because mass media has an agenda, the audience needs to be aware of their purposes, and decide how to respond.

The Center for Media Literacy (2015) developed core concepts related to media messages; students need to consider the process by which the message is made, the message's content and framework, and the intent of the message. The Center further asserts that media have embedded values and perspectives, and are experienced uniquely by each person. Within that framework,

news is particularly salient because there is often a perception that news is accurate and trustworthy, an assumption that has been challenged. Media literacy fits well under the umbrella of information literacy, and news provides a concrete basis for discernment.

In advocating for media literacy education, the National Association for Media Literacy Education (2007) identified six core principles for such education: active inquiry and critical thinking about media, need to address all forms of media, reinforcement of lifelong skills, development of civic engagement, media as part of culture and a socialization agent, and individual construction of meaning from media messages.

In her book on media literacy, Hobbs (2021) recommended that news literacy educators should start with current news that interests learners. Close reading should be introduced to enable learners to understand and analyze/critique. Learners should discuss news using critical questions. Learners should know how news is constructed and link it with analysis. Learners should work with a variety of media, and connect their school experience with community issues.

Several news literacy curricula exist, although their integration and use within existing K-12 education is uneven. Here is a sampling:

- http://drc.centerfornewsliteracy.org/course-pack
- https://cor.stanford.edu/curriculum/
- http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/
- https://firstdraftnews.org/free-online-course-on-identifying-misinformation/
- https://www.coursera.org/learn/news-literacy
- https://www.newseumed.org/

Students' News Information Behavior

Youth are likely to get most of their news online or through social commentary television (e.g., The Daily Show) rather than mainstream news outlets, and over two-thirds of teenagers participate at least monthly in social causes (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, today's youth have a growing distrust in mainstream politics, and are the least likely generation to exercise their voting rights. Many youth are dissatisfied with conventional politics and government; they do not like negative campaigns, and think that most politicians ignore them (Pelevin et al., 2018).

These predispositions do not aid in youth's discernment of fake news. More fundamentally, even though teens tend to feel comfortable in the mass media world, they often have poor evaluation skills. Furthermore, youth tend to generalize the quality of new sources rather than compare and prefer specific sites based on relative authority (Eysenbach, 2008). A 2016 research study by

Stanford faculty focused on students' news-literacy tasks, and found that middle and high school students, and even some in college, have trouble distinguishing which online resources are credible. The researchers stated a strong need for a curriculum focused on developing students' civic online reasoning.

Statement of the Research Problem

Less known is the news literacy of middle and high school students in California. To that end, the author investigated the current level of middle and high school students' news literacy, identified student news literacy skills, and current efforts to improve students' new literacy. The findings inform the development of a news media curriculum for middle and high school teacher librarians and other teachers to incorporate into their existing curriculum to help their students improve their news media literacy.

Based on the literature, the research questions were:

- What is the status of news literacy of students as perceived by practicing California teacher librarians?
- What news literacy competencies are needed by middle and high school students as perceived by practicing California teacher librarians?
- What curriculum can help middle and high school students gain news literacy?

This study contributes to the field in that it informs teacher librarians about news literacy, and provides them with a curriculum to help middle and high school students learn news literacy concepts and skills.

Methodology

A survey was used to collect perception information. The instrument itself is based on Stanford's validated questionnaire, and was adapted editorially to address an adult audience rather than students. The initial survey was pilot-tested with a district teacher librarian, and was modified very slightly for clarification. While the questionnaire could have been directed to K-12 students, IRB approval as well as district and parental approval would have been much more difficult to obtain. Additionally, the correct answers to the questionnaire are publicly available so some students might avail themselves of those answers.

The population to survey, K-12 teacher librarians, was chosen because they work with all students and faculty across the curriculum. More than any other school staff person, teacher librarians are likely to know students' assignments, information behaviors, and the resources that students consult. In observing students' behaviors and working with the school community, teacher librarians are likely to be the most knowledgeable about students' news literacy and academic efforts to teach news literacy. One district's teacher librarians served as a district-specific population because the district's library services have a positive reputation

within the state. A California-wide effort was made to compare responses and determine possible generality.

Subjects were recruited via email through the district library services listserv and through CalibK12 (calibk12@googlegroups.com), which is an online email-based Google group that serves as a discussion forum for California teacher librarians. Users of this Google group do not have to belong to any organization. The following steps were taken:

1. Prepare script for email.
2. Email request to take survey (including survey URL http://tinyURL.com/TLFakeNews) via calibk12@googlegroups.com.
3. If interested in taking the survey, subjects copy-and-paste the survey URL into their Internet browser, and open the survey.
4. Subjects read the informed consent statement about the survey, and indicate their agreement by clicking YES, which then opens the survey.
5. Participants complete the 15-question survey, which asks them to define fake news, their perceptions about students' knowledge about fake news, and their perceptions about fake news' incorporation into their school's curriculum. The survey takes participants about ten minutes to complete.
6. The subjects submit their survey online.
7. The subjects were not contacted afterwards.

Findings

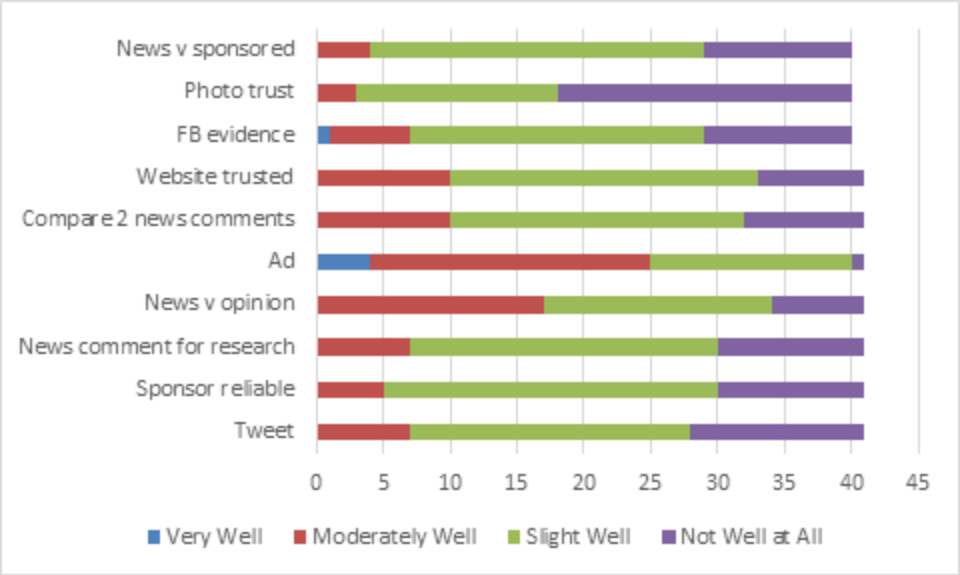
Forty-one school librarians completed the survey: 2 in elementary schools, 2 in K-8 schools, 15 in middle schools, and 22 in high schools. Of the 41 respondents, 31 worked in one school district because they were given the survey in the first round. The rest of the respondents worked in other school districts in California. The number of respondents lessens the probability that a significant difference would exist between the responses from the one district and the rest of the state; indeed, they were in sync.

The definitions of fake news by the respondents did not differ significantly by school level or district. About half of the teacher librarian respondents' definition of fake news aligned with the study's definition. Another third defined fake news as misleading news. Six defined fake news as being unverified news, two defined fake news as deceptive news, and two stated that they had not heard of the term until Donald Trump became high profile.

Interestingly, the respondents' perceptions of students' degree of news literacy (see Figure 1) did not differ significantly between levels (i.e., elementary, middle school, high school).

Figure 1

Respondents' perceptions of students' degree of news literacy



The ratings were given points along a Likert scale as follows: not well at all = 1, slightly well = 2, moderately well = 3, and very well = 4. The ratings for each item were averaged for the 41 respondents. While a Likert scale is ordinal, not scalar, the averages can determine relative rankings for students' degree of news literacy, which were as follows:

2.7 Identifying ads
2.2 Distinguishing between news and opinion
2.0 Comparing news comments
2.0 Identifying trusted websites
1.9 Considering the relative strength of evidence of Facebook postings
1.9 Determining suitability of a news comment for research
1.8 Distinguishing news versus sponsored content
1.8 Explaining why sponsored content might not be reliable
1.8 Determining the trustworthiness of a tweet
1.5 Determining the trustworthiness of a photograph

Respondents listed a number of fake news-related competencies that they thought students should achieve. They are listed here in rank order (by number of mentions).

- Evaluate sources (14)
- Differentiate between true and fake news (10)
- Determine the reliability and accuracy of sources (7)
- Read and think critically (7)

- Identify reliable sources (e.g., subscription databases) (4)
- Identify the author/creator of a sources (3)
- Distinguish between fact and opinion (3)
- Identify bias (2)
- Identify sponsored sources (2)
- Single mentions were: information literacy, citing sources accurately, identify edited/faked photos, how news is created, history of fake news, consequences of fake news, journalism.

Respondents listed a number of fake news-related lessons that they offered, here listed in rank order by frequency of mention.

- Evaluating websites (14)
- Identifying reliable sources (including differentiating between open search engines and subscription databases) (7)
- Differentiating fact from opinion (4)
- Focusing specifically on fake news (lecture, web evaluation, gallery walk) (4)
- Using databases (2)

Identifying sponsored sites and addressing digital citizenship were each mentioned once. Seven librarians provided no lessons. One librarian did one-on-one coaching on fake news. In one case, the librarian did a lesson in response to a teacher's request, and at another site teachers did not ask for fake news lessons.

When asked if a fake news curriculum existed at their sites, four librarians stated that they developed a curriculum and used it independently, one elementary school had a curriculum, in one high school half of the freshmen received a fake news curriculum, and in one middle school site the teachers generated a curriculum without collaborating with the librarian. The other 34 librarians stated that no such curriculum existed.

Discussion

The survey revealed the status of K-12 students' news literacy and their need for news literacy instruction, as perceived by California teacher librarians.

All of the teacher librarian respondents knew about fake news, with about half of them articulating the full description of fake news. The remaining respondents identified partial aspects of fake news: being misleading or deceitful, missing verifying resources, aiming to sell or otherwise influence. One respondent listed almost all of the types of misleading information that EAVI (2017) addressed. For students to identify fake news, their teachers, including teacher librarians, need to be clear about the definition of fake news.

Overall, teacher librarian respondents thought that their school's students performed "slightly well" relative to news literacy. Respondents stated that students were best at distinguishing ads and least proficient at trusting photographs. The relative ranking of the news literacy skills revealed that students were more proficient in distinguishing between types of news than they were in determining the relative trustworthiness and quality of news content. The former entails comparing features between two sub-formats, while the latter requires analyzing the content within a source, which is a more nuanced process. The fact that trusting photographs was the least proficient area also points out the need for visual literacy, a set of skills that are seldom addressed systematically in academic curriculum (Silverman & Piedmont, 2016). Photography also falls under the umbrella of media literacy, which is another neglected curricular area.

Analysis of the news literacy competencies identified by the librarian respondents reveals traditional information literacy skills: critical thinking; evaluating sources, including determining accuracy, reliability, authorship, and bias; identifying reliable sources such as databases; distinguishing between fact and opinion. Two respondents mentioned two skills that focus on fake news: differentiating between true and fake news, and identifying sponsored sources (although the latter applies to other types of information). Since this question was posed after the respondents answered the questions about students' skills, the respondents were probably leveraging that information. Sadly, visual and media literacies were each mentioned only once. While a case can be made that information literacy includes visual and media literacies, the fact that evaluating websites was often mentioned (and can just as easily be labelled merely as information literacy) illustrates the need for greater awareness and competency on the part of teacher librarians as well as classroom teachers.

Similarly, the questions about students' news literacy informed the respondents' list of fake news-related lessons that they offered. Nevertheless, those lessons are typical generic information literacy lessons: evaluating websites, identifying reliable sources including databases, and differentiating fact from opinion. Two respondents explicitly mentioned focusing on fake news by lecturing, evaluating fake news websites, and doing a gallery walk of fake news examples. Teacher librarians can link fake news instruction with information literacy, they can incorporate fake news as examples for information literacy instruction, and they can use fake news as a "hook" to garner students' attention, then teach news literacy and generalize it to media and information literacy.

It should be noted that seven teacher librarians did not provide fake-related lessons. The survey did not ask the respondents to state reasons for not providing such kinds of lessons. It is possible that the teacher librarians did not address fake news, it could be that the respondents did not link their existing lessons to a possible fake news context, or it is sadly possible that the teacher librarians did not give lessons. Furthermore, the respondents seldom mentioned that they offered lessons in response to a classroom teacher's request.

News literacy is seldom incorporated into K-12 curriculum, let alone fake news. Seven teacher librarians stated that they offered a fake news curriculum, four of whom developed and implemented it independently. One respondent said that half of the school's freshmen received fake news curriculum, but the developer and instructor were not specified. In only one case did classroom teachers develop and implement a fake news curriculum, and the effort was done without collaborating with the teacher librarian. The survey did not ask the respondents to detail the curriculum, so the scope and sequence were not ascertained. Nevertheless, it seems apparent that, while educators see a need for students to identify fake news and become news literate, the respondents are not hearing that cry. Instead, teacher librarians seem to spearhead such efforts, if at all.

Analysis of responses revealed a positive correlation between students' news competence and the provision of fake news-related lessons. Its significance could not be quantitatively determined, nor could a causal relationship be inferred. Perhaps those teacher librarians who taught such lessons saw evidence of students' news literacy, which might not be inferred without such instruction. Alternatively, teacher librarians who were aware of the need for fake news and addressed that need might be more conscious of students' learning in that area.

Implications and Conclusions

This exploratory study focused on California K-12 teacher librarians' perceptions of their schools' students' news literacy status and needs, and found out what efforts teacher librarians made in offering instruction about fake news. The study was limited in that the number of respondents was less than 50, with the majority working in a single district that is known for providing above-average library services. Nevertheless, these respondents' perceptions about students' news literacy echo the findings of the 2016 Stanford study. For example, less than ten percent of respondents thought that students could perform moderately well, and none thought students could do very well on trusting photos; in the Stanford study, less than twenty percent of students questioned the source of the tested post. Stanford students had difficulty evaluating tweets, just as the California respondents noted about their schools' students.

Possibly because news literacy is largely ignored in required curricula, it is not surprising that students' news literacy was about at the same degree of competency regardless of grade level. On the other hand, news impact on societal and daily decision-making highlights its need to be part of formal education. Reflecting that reality, teacher librarians expressed a need for explicit news literacy instruction, but generally identified generic information literacy skills. It also became apparent that explicit instruction in visual and media literacies are needed as well, as affirmed by Hobbs (2021) and Share (2015), among others. Students need to know how to access, interpret, evaluate, and respond to news in its various forms. They need to understand

how news and other mass media are produced, and the critical features of each medium. They should also be encouraged to participate in generating news.

Teacher librarians have unique skills to help students in this process because they work with all students and teachers across the curricula. Furthermore, as information professionals, teacher librarians evaluate and work with all kinds of information in various formats (Bryan, 2018). Therefore, teacher librarians should seek out opportunities across the school community to provide news media literacy tools to empower students. Furthermore, as a welcoming and neutral affinity space for both the consumption and production of media, the library also serves as a prime informal educational haven for media literacy. Nevertheless, many teacher librarians themselves need more specialized knowledge about news, media and visual literacies (Jacobson, 2017).

In short, fake news is a wake-up call to educators and the community at large to gain competency in critically analyzing fake news in particular, and information in general. Students need explicit instruction in critically analyzing news, visual messages, and mass media. However, educators themselves also need instruction in these literacies so they have the competence to integrate them into the curriculum. In that respect, once they have such expertise, teacher librarians are well positioned to leverage the hot topic of fake news to highlight the importance of information and media literacy, and incorporate it systematically into the school's curriculum so that students will be better prepared as informed citizens.

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