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Search Habits, Strategies, and Criteria to Filter the Online News and News Outlets of the College Students: Basis for Media and Information Literacy Program

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	With the unprecedented spread of counterfeit content on the Internet, students need to develop strategies and criteria to filter and select appropriately from the vast array of information available to them. Hence, five hundred forty-three (543) college students were selected and studied using a quantitative-correlation research design with the aid of survey forms to explore their search habits, strategies, and criteria when seeking out online news and engaging with news outlets. Specifically, the researcher sought to determine the online news habits and the frequently searched news of the students; the strategies and criteria they use to filter and evaluate the online news and news outlets' credibility; and test the significant difference between the responses in each college along news search habits and frequently searched online news, strategies to filter online news, criteria to evaluate news credibility, and criteria to evaluate new outlets credibility. Results revealed that students' search habits and frequently searched online news depend on the topics that interest them. They preferred reading online news articles from search engines like Google, Facebook, and others. The major strategy to filter online news is to look for trending and viral topics. Trustworthiness and familiarity with news outlets are the main criteria the students use to evaluate the news and news outlet credibility. Lastly, using the F-Test Two-way ANOVA, showed that responses from each college and the online news search activities and strategies in filtering news and news outlets varied significantly. The findings contributed to an understanding of the ways and choices of the students when accessing and consuming online thus, serves as a foundation for designing a literacy initiative that promotes the students to be discerning, critical, and informed consumers in this dynamic digital information landscape. **Keywords:** Information literacy, online news, news outlets, search habits, trustworthiness, education

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital world, technology is deeply infused into every aspect and activity of our lives. Even the ways we access and consume news and information have been rapidly transformed by the Internet and digital media. We also rely heavily on online sources. The abundance of online content at the click of our fingertips poses a clear threat and a challenge for a different set of literacy skills to process, discern, and distinguish credible and reliable information amidst mis/disinformation, clickbait, and fake news

Literacy in media is the ability to search and evaluate internet sites and information, manage the flow of abundant information from a variety of sources, communicate through social media, and use digital images to create meaning [1]. As active consumers of online news, college students need to equip themselves with effective literacy skills, dubbed as 21st-century skills, to filter through the multitude of news outlets available to them. However, very few students have developed these skills and can hardly evaluate the links on a search engine [2] According to the report of Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 59.9 percent of the 5184 Filipinos have low literacy levels [3] which means that more than 1.2 million students are struggling with comprehension and are particularly challenged by the reams of information they must peruse and pick [4]. Due to limited literacy skills, young people easily believe what they hear and see especially online which explains the proliferation of disinformation. In 2016, researchers at Stanford

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University assessed 7,804 students across the on their competence to analyze online media and reported that "young people's ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: bleak" (p. 4). The researchers found that students are "easily duped" and unprepared to distinguish between news and advertising or to judge the reliability of a website [5]

In an era where literacy is a cornerstone of educated citizenship and with the increasing prevalence of counterfeit online news and content, it is particularly important for students to be discerning and critical in gauging and selecting online news and evaluating the quality and credibility of the information they encounter from various online platforms [6]. To this matter, it is of paramount importance to embrace the pedagogy of media literacy as an essential part of education. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Too many educational institutions undervalue the significance of media literacy as a crucial dimension of the knowledge, skills, and awareness necessary for the 21st century. Teachers should guide students to challenge status quo practices and dominant ideologies that support malicious propaganda such as sexism, political division, and all forms of oppression and exploitation [7]

The processing of reading online news, content, and texts is radically different from comprehending printed matter [8]. Students must engage in an inquiry-based process [9]. They need to be able to pose the right questions, choose a viable search engine, evaluate the results of the search, synthesize and evaluate the findings, and then interpret their results [10]. If the student is a struggling reader with a poor reading rate, the reams of information that they need to skim and interpret become overwhelming [11]. Another challenge facing students when they engage in the processing of digital content is deciding which link to follow and evaluating whether information on that site is valid [12]. One of the drawbacks of the Internet is that anyone can publish false information. If adolescent readers are unaware of this danger or unable to evaluate sources of information, they will not be able to adequately address complex problems [13]

Hence, this study embarks on an exploration of the search habits, strategies, and criteria employed by college students when seeking online news and interacting with news outlets. This also contributes to a deeper understanding of their ways and choices when engaging with online information, and ultimately, serves as a foundation for designing a literacy initiative that promotes the students to be discerning and informed consumers in this dynamic digital landscape.

Extant research on literacy has had little emphasis on students' practices, preferences, and influences shaping the ways they access and consume online news. Most of the research focused on understanding and evaluating media messages and texts. Also, there has been largely an ignoring of what strategies and criteria the students used to filter the vast information they are exposed to from different online sites and pages. It is at this gap that this study determined to bridge. This study hoped to contribute to making media literacy more visible in the academic world and to add to strengthening the research and knowledge base in the field of literacy in the local context, particularly in the Bicol region.

OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to shed light on the search habits, strategies, and criteria that college students employ when seeking out online news and engaging with news outlets. Specifically, the researcher sought to determine the online news habits and the frequently searched news of the students; the strategies and criteria the students use to filter and evaluate the online news and news outlets' credibility; and test the significant difference between the responses in each college along news search habits and frequently searched online news, strategies to filter online news, criteria to evaluate news credibility, and criteria to evaluate new outlets.

METHODS

Research Method

The study utilized a quantitative-descriptive correlational method to describe and correlate the variables as its name suggests. This research design helped the researchers assess the significant differences between the variables. It describes and contributes to the investigation of the significant differences among the responses of therespondents in each college department in Camarines Sur Polytechnic Colleges in terms of news search habits and frequently searched online news, strategies to filter online news, criteria to evaluate news' credibility, and

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criteria to evaluate news outlets' credibility.

Respondents of the Study

A sample population of 543 respondents were selected from the five colleges of a polytechnic institution upon satisfying the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Data Gathering Instrument, Procedure, and Analysis.

The data were collected during the second semester of school year 2022-2023 via a Google form questionnaire, accessed by the students through their school-based accounts. The researcher requested the assistance of the teachers and colleagues to send the questionnaire to different group chats of the students. The questionnaire was prepared for a diverse pool of respondents who are: at least second-year level who have already taken their Purposive Communication subject, and who had little exposure to news literacy instruction. The majority of questions were adapted from the study of Powers [14] which was retrieved from the internet. Since it was based on a foreign source, it underwent several revisions to simplify its content and to fit the context of CSPC students. The questionnaire was used in this study corresponding to the questions in the specific problem.

Before the administration of the questionnaire, the said instrument was evaluated and validated by the four (4) experts in the field to ensure that the needed data would be elicited by the instrument. A set of criteria were provided for each question. The validators suggested attaching, together with the draft questions, the definition of terms, and the synthesis of related literature and studies. After validation, it was subjected to a dry run to improve its content validity and at the same time identify the factors that might affect the reliable accomplishment of the instrument by the respondents. The results of the dry run provided the basis for the final revision of the instrument.

In the data analysis, survey data were classified and tabulated systematically according to the different variables included in the study. All the data gathered were presented quantitatively. The statistical tools used were the percentage technique, weighted mean, Five-Point Rating Scale, and F-Test (two-way ANOVA). The F-Test (two-way ANOVA) was used to evaluate the significant differences and conclude the hypotheses.

By definition, an F-test is another parametric test that is used to compare the means of three or more independent sample groups. It is also known as the "Analysis of Variance" (ANOVA), and two-way analysis of variance is one of its three kinds. During the computations, after every f-computed value, the researchers compare it to the f-tabular value at the 0.05 level of significance with a specific degree of freedom in each research question they chose to investigate, and they confirm whether their given null hypothesis is rejected or accepted in favor of the research hypothesis, hence the conclusion for the statement of the problem. The use of the chosen statistical tool leads to finding out whether there are significant differences among the responses of students coming from the different college departments, such as in News search habits and frequently searched online news; Strategies to filter online news; Criteria to evaluate news' credibility; and Criteria to evaluate news outlets' credibility. Thus, answering the statement of the problem given with the results of the tested hypothesis.

The parameter used for the conclusions made is the f-tabular value, specifically used for the f-test parametric tool. The distribution table is used to find the critical values such as for (a) 2.341828, (b) 2.353809, (c) 2.309201, and (d) 2.341828, these were then compared to the study's f-computed values and proceeded to confirm the research hypothesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To provide a better understanding of the study, the data were presented in tabular form followed by a textual presentation. The analysis of the data serves as a baseline in coming up with the conclusion and recommendations of the study.

Table 1 shows the weighted mean of the students' responses about online news search habits and frequently searched online news.

Table 1: Distribution of the respondents according to their news search habits and frequently searched online news

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News search habits and frequently searched online news	GRAND MEAN	Rank
I spend more than 1 hour searching news online	3.40 SA	7
I like to actively search for news thru social media	3.51 SA	3
I like to search for news thru Google search or other search engines.	3.59 SA	1
I like to receive news from other people or friends.	3.08 A	11
I like to rely on feeds or notifications to send or to update me about the news	3.25 A	9
I like to share interesting news stories with others using their social media accounts	3.50 SA	4
I typically have a clear idea of what I'm looking for when I search for news	3.52 SA	2
I typically browse for news without having a clear idea of what I'm looking for	3.10 A	10
I only follow news about specific topics that really interests me	3.44 SA	6
I like coming across news about topics and issues I have not thought about very much before	3.38 SA	8
I come across news at least once a day while doing other things, such as checking emails or scrolling my social media account.	3.46 SA	5
I search without specific news in mind	2.95 A	12

The above table indicated the top five news search habits and frequently searched online news which the students of CSPC strongly agree with are the following: 1) They search for news thru Google search and other search engines available with a GM of 3.59 and verbally interpreted as Strongly Agree; 2) They have typically a clear idea of what they are looking for when they search for news online, 3.52 GM, Strongly agree; 3) They like to actively search for news thru social media, 3.51, SA; 4) They like to share interesting news stories with others using their social media accounts, 3.50 SA; and 5) They come across news at least once a day while doing other things, such as checking emails or scrolling their social media account, 3.46, SA.

On the end of the spectrum, the three news search habits that showed that respondents are somewhat agreed only and ranked at the bottom four are the following: 1) They search without specific news in mind, 2.95 grand mean, and verbally interpreted as Agree; 2) They like to receive news from other people or friends, with 3.08 grand mean, A; 3). They typically browse for news without having a clear idea of what they are looking for, 3.10, A; and 4) They rely on feeds or notifications to send or update them about the news.

The above findings implied that most of the students are engaged in a habit of searching online news daily. Further, the most common online news search habits practiced by the students are searching topics that they are interested in, searching news through Google or other search engines, and sharing interesting news stories with other people. The results support the study conducted by Smith [9] that Google is one of the most commonly used search engines because of its fast access, the information that is contained in it is updated regularly, and links are provided to other websites. The results also support the study conducted by Lee [10] that media use habits are heavily influenced by the media and imply that habits dictate the news consumption of the public in traditional media and on the Internet.

It is worth noting that while observations reflect general trends among students, individual preferences and habits may vary. Additionally, the impact of personalized algorithms, filter bubbles, and echo chambers can influence the types of news students encounter and the perspectives they are exposed to online. Understanding these habits can help educators create strategies to effectively reach and engage students in the online news landscape.

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Table 2 illustrates the respondents' strategies for filtering online news.

Table 2: Distribution of the Respondents According to their Strategies to Filter Online News

Strategies to Filter Online News	GRAND MEAN	Rank
Considered trending or viral topics/ news	3.70 SA	1
Considered news outlet when presented with options by a portal side.	3.41 SA	6
Headline drove decision of what ideas to consider.	3.50 SA	4
Visuals (photos/ graphics/ videos) drive my decision of what news items to consider.	3.60 SA	2
Friends recommendation	3.53 SA	3
Went to landing page/specific section of the site.	3.39 SA	7
Surveyed options on the page before making a decision.	3.35 SA	8
Social currency in peer group.	2.90 A	10
Considered item summarization/digest.	3.29 SA	9
Considered news only from mainstream or popular media outlet.	3.45 SA	5

Based on Table 2, the top five strongly agreed among the list of strategies used by CSPC students to filter or screen online news are as follows: 1) They consider what is trending or viral topics/ news of the day with 3.70 grand mean; 2) The visuals (photos/ graphics/ videos) drive them to decide what news items to consider, 3.60 GM; 3) Their friends' recommendations help also to what news to consider or to believe 3.53; 4) Headlines drive the decision of what ideas to consider or entertain, 3.50 GM; and 5) They consider news only from mainstream or popular media outlets, 3.45 GM. Meanwhile, the only strategy indicating that they "agreed" is the statement that social currency in the peer group with 2.90 grand mean.

The results show that students highly prioritize the popularity and visual appeal of news content when filtering what to read. It is important to recognize that these strategies can have limitations and biases. Relying solely on what is trending, visual appeal, friends' recommendations, or popular media outlets may not always guarantee accuracy, objectivity, or comprehensive news coverage. Critical thinking, media literacy, and diversifying news sources are essential for students to develop a well-rounded understanding of current events and avoid potential misinformation or bias. Educating students on evaluating news sources, fact-checking, and recognizing different perspectives can empower them to be discerning consumers of online news.

According to the study of McGrew et al. (2017), students often evaluate online information based on appearance rather than credibility. For example, the presence of visuals or professional layouts can mislead them. Further, Wineburg & McGrew (2016) found that students rarely question who is behind the information or why it was created, which matches the trend in your data where deeper content filtering is not the primary strategy

Table 3 lays down the results of responses on the criteria used by the respondents to evaluate the credibility of the online news. criteria used and which are strongly agreed by the students of CSPC, to wit: 1) trustworthiness and familiarity of news outlet, with a grand mean of 3.91; 2) Usability of information, 3.84 GM; 3) Content of headline, 3.80; 4) Authoritativeness if sources cited, 3.78; and 5) existence of contribution and graphics such as videos and/or pictures.

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Table 3: Distribution of the respondents according to their criteria to evaluate online news credibility

Strategies to Filter Online News	GRAND MEAN	Rank
Trustworthiness and familiarity of news outlet	3.91 SA	1
Familiar journalist	3.72 SA	6
Content of headline	3.80 SA	3
Authoritativeness of sources cited	3.78 SA	4
Authoritativeness of content producer	3.74 SA	6
Factuality/opinions	3.72 SA	6
Depth of reporting	3.67 SA	
Existence of contribution and graphics such as videos or pictures	3.76 SA	5
Usability of information	3.84 SA	2
Pleasant visual appearance	3.69 SA	8
Checked multiple sources for comparison	3.76 SA	5
Clicked through links in news item	3.57 SA	9

It is important to note that while these criteria can serve as guidelines for evaluating news credibility, they should be applied collectively, rather than in isolation. Evaluating news requires critical thinking, media literacy, and the ability to analyze multiple facets of a news article. By considering these criteria together, readers can make more informed judgments about the credibility, accuracy, and reliability of the news they consume.

The table indicates the strategies used by the respondents in filtering online news. The leading five strategies that garnered strong agreement from the students are 1) authoritative sources of topics, 3.82; 2) perceived accuracy of the information, 3.78; perceived fairness/ balance/ lack of bias, 3.77; 4) quality of writing, 3.75; and 5) site domain (i.e. .com., edu., gov).

The findings in Table 3 suggest that while students have a general understanding of credibility markers like source trustworthiness and usability, there is still room for improvement in critical digital literacy, especially in terms of verification strategies. These insights can be foundational in developing educational interventions or a critical model learning framework that promotes fact-checking, lateral reading, and deeper analysis of online information.

The results imply that education students tend to rely heavily on surface-level credibility indicators such as the trustworthiness of the news outlet, familiar journalists, and headline content, rather than engaging in deeper evaluative practices like cross-referencing sources or verifying links. While this suggests a basic awareness of credibility markers, it also highlights a critical gap in digital literacy and critical thinking skills.

While these criteria can be useful in evaluating the credibility of news outlets, it is important to approach the evaluation process with critical thinking and media literacy. No single criterion can provide a complete assessment of credibility, and a holistic evaluation is necessary. It is better to consider multiple sources, cross-reference information, and be aware of potential biases or conflicts of interest. Developing strong media literacy skills allows individuals to navigate the complex media landscape and make informed judgments about the credibility of news outlets.

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The study supported McGrew et al. (2018), who advocated for the use of lateral reading, where readers verify claims by leaving the site and checking other sources – a skill not commonly used by students.

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