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Information consumption among University of Zambia Students in the buildup to the 2021 Zambia General Elections

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Abstract

This study assessed the information behavior and information literacy skills of individuals during the 2021 General Election in Zambia. Similar studies have been conducted in the past in the United States of America and Europe whose results revealed that information literacy and civic engagement are related and extremely important to the political process. Using the SCONUL seven pillars of information literacy (2011), this study adopted qualitative research methods to interview fifteen (15) students of Library and Information Science and Records Management to determine their information behavior and information literacy skills during the 2021 Zambia General Election. Findings revealed that information encountering was the dominant behavior compared to information seeking. It was also discovered that students favored social media as a source of information rather than traditional news outlets such as radio, newspapers and television. Students expressed strong awareness of media biases from the different sources and practiced information avoidance or disregarding. Based on the SCONUL seven pillars of information literacy, LIS and Records Management students were found to have strong evidence of identifying, managing, evaluating and presenting skills pillars. In conclusion, information literacy is important in ensuring effective participation in civic matters and there is need for further research in this area.

Keywords: Information Literacy, Information Literacy Skills, Library and Information Science, Elections, Zambia

INTRODUCTION

The importance of information literacy (IL) has arguably become more critical today than ever, as the concept of “information society”, information obesity or overload and open government in which access to information is widespread (Herakova, Bonnet and Congdon, 2017). IL has received universal acknowledgement and the seven pillars of information literacy have been embraced by professions such librarians, teachers, records managers and

digital curators to mention only a few (SCONUL seven pillars, 2011). Alexander (2011:9) points to the relationship between information literacy and political literacy and claims that information literacy “allows [students] not only to perform better academically, but also empower them to become better citizens who form opinions and make decisions based on appropriate and quality information”.

Information literacy is “an umbrella term which encompasses concepts such as digital, visual and media literacies, academic literacy, information handling, information skills, data curation and data management” (SCONUL seven pillars, 2011:3). The Association of College and Research Libraries (2015: n.p) defines IL as “the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning”. Information literate people therefore are those who are “able to recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information” (The American Library Association (ALA) (1989). Such people “demonstrate an awareness of how they gather, use, manage, synthesise and create information and data in an ethical manner and will have the information skills to do so effectively (SONUL seven pillars 2011). Information literacy is the center piece of lifelong learning because it “empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use, and create information to achieve their personal, social, occupational, and educational goals” (Jacobs and Berg, 2011: 383).

A critical aspect in the information society and global world is being able to effectively participate in civic affairs. According to the United States Institute of Peace (2010) civic participation is “a condition in which every citizen has the means to actively engage in the public sphere, including political processes. Many have commented that to effectively participate in the public sphere and political processes one must have the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to assume the “office of citizen” and operate in a democratic dispensation (Martens and Hobbs, 2015; Herakova, Bonnet and Congdon, 2017). In this regard, IL skills and the pillars presented in the SCONUL seven pillars (2011) make one of the vital skills for effective citizen engagement in civic affairs. IL skills in everyday life has over the years gained impetus across professionals and is now being applied beyond academic spaces into social life such as politics (Partridge, Bruce, and Tilly, 2008; Julien and Michels, 2004).

Information literacy in everyday life has become more important than ever because of the predominance of the 'information society'. An information society is one in which the economy is heavily influenced by use, creation, distribution, and integration of information, and information is a significant feature of the political and cultural activities. With developments in information and communication technologies (ICT), many countries have adopted and increasingly use ICTs, as such they are evolving into information societies. In the literature, many agree that being information literate has liberating effects on individuals (Partridge, Bruce, and Tilly, 2008; Martens and Hobbs, 2015; Herakova, Bonnet and Congdon, 2017). In terms of access to news alone, technological changes have exponentially increased its availability. Research shows an exponential rise in the use of social media for political purposes (Garret, 2019). Additionally, Williamson, Qayyum, Hider and Liu (2012:3) observed that along with traditional media sources such as newspapers, radio, and television, "a wide range of online media, providing a plethora of dynamic and free news sites, has been added". This has thus forced traditional news sources to create online pages for the provision of online versions of their news. With ICT changes, users have the freedom of navigating from one news site to another simply by clicking a button. The widespread development of social networking technologies has made information sharing easy and it has become a major part of the developing information society. As such, users require skills to effectively participate in the information society.

An election is the process used for the selection of civic leaders to represent citizens in a democratic system. Voters select their representatives and the representatives are held accountable through elections. Those who perform or fail to perform are either reelected or voted out. According to Gibbins (2020) elections are critically important in strengthening "the stability and legitimacy of the political community". Elections are also a tool for social and political integration. Further elections are critical in a democratic dispensation because they provide citizens with an opportunity to express themselves by belonging to a political party or belief system. Elections therefore serve as a means of self-actualization because they confirm "the worth and dignity of individual citizens as human beings" when they are able to elect or remove leaders. Zambia holds General Elections every five years in which citizens select their political leaders including the President, Parliamentarians, Mayoral representatives and Councilors. According to Herakova, Bonnet and Congdon (2017) the need to pair public communication and civil discourse with information literacy is required now more than ever because we live in a post-truth era and a time where fake news stories are

flourishing. The electoral process is saturated with information overload, candidates push messages to electorates in a bid to win votes and fake news stories make a major part of the electoral processes. Thus to be able to engage effectively in civic affairs, electorates must be able to find, evaluate and use the information to make informed decisions.

Statement of the problem

Citizen engagement and empowerment are critical to the democratic process of any country. To effectively participate in civic affairs one has to possess the knowledge, skills and attitude to participate in the political space. Many have commented that information literate citizens are effective participants in the civic affairs of the country (Martens and Hobbs, 2015; Herakova, Bonnet and Congdon, 2017). However, not much research has been done to evaluate the IL skills of individuals in Zambia, particularly in relation to their civic participation. This research therefore assessed the information behavior and IL skills of individuals in Zambia in the buildup to the 2021 General Elections.

Objectives

The specific objectives of this study were:

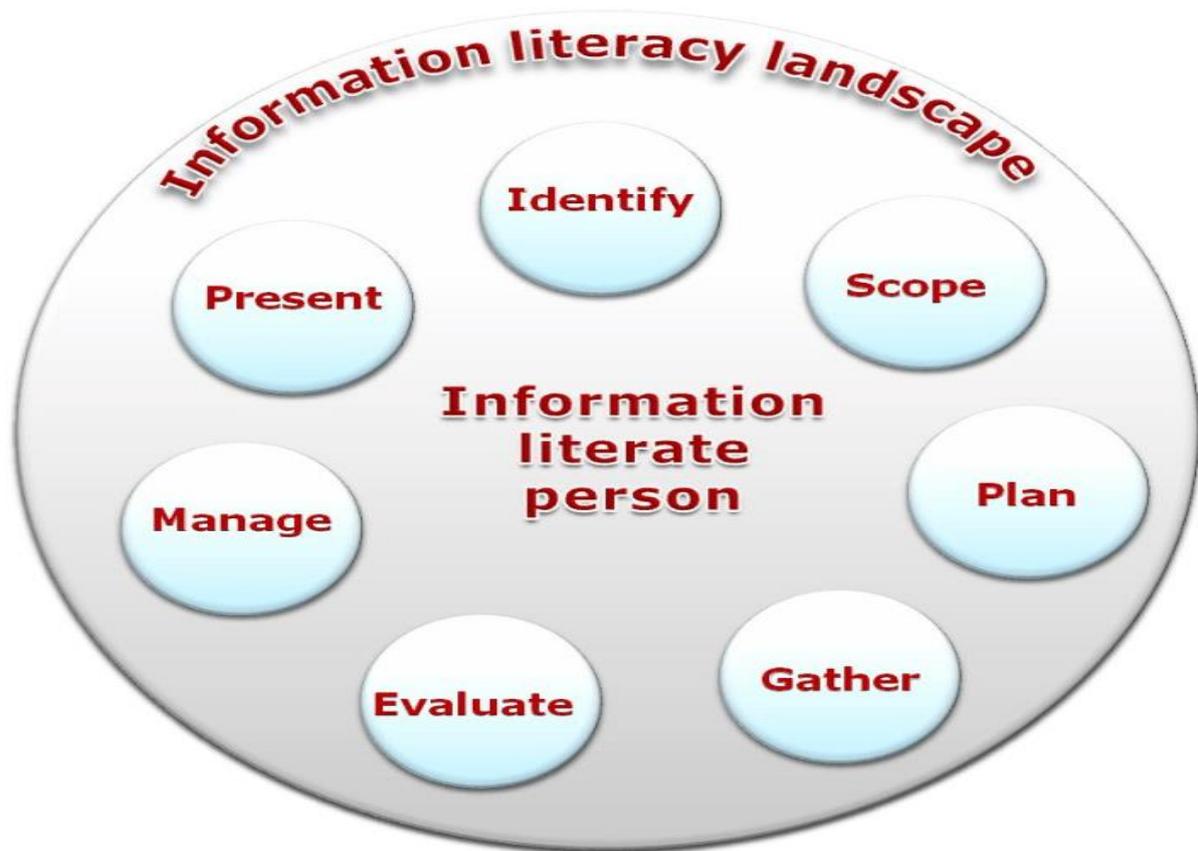
1. To determine students sources of information in the buildup to the elections
2. To assess students use of information during the elections
3. To evaluate students skills in applying IL skills during the elections

LITERATURE REVIEW

SCONUL SEVEN PILLARS OF IL

The SCONUL seven pillars of information literacy (2011) was developed by the SCONUL working group on Information Literacy in the UK in 1999 in which Seven Pillars of Information Skills model is introduced. In the early years of development, the model focused on IL in education but it is also being applied to individuals, business, and government agencies in the information society. The ability to identify a need for information; scope, through assessing knowledge gaps; plan, by developing strategies for dealing with information; gather, by locating the information; evaluate, by reviewing and comparing information; manage, through organizing the information; and presenting information, by communicating it appropriately, is important in navigating vast amounts of information, regardless of context. Figure 1 below shows the SOCUNUL seven pillars model.

Figure 1, SCONUL seven pillars of IL



The need for IL skills can never be overemphasized at a time when many societies are becoming information societies. Even more important, IL skills are critical at the time of elections are being conducted. During elections, many political players are actively disseminating information to try and garner the support of electorates. Further, government agencies such as electoral bodies are putting out information to educate citizens about the voting process and their role in an election. This makes IL skills very important as they ensure that electorates make informed decision and actively participate in civic affairs. According to Mihailidis and Thevenin (2013: 1617) the ability to effectively engage with the media is seen as vital route to “vibrant participatory democracy” in an information society. In fact an informed electorate is considered as a basis for a democratic process and election. It is during elections, and specifically during the general election such the one Zambia had on the 12th of August 2021, that campaigns heighten and all forms of the media are used to try and win the attention of voters. Political parties prepare and share the best of their messages to sell themselves and try to discredit their opponents. It is during such times that the IL skills are required in order to make informed decisions. Information literate people are able to make judgment, acquire quality information and discard useless or misleading information.

With an overwhelming flow of information to individuals, electorates need to be able to find the information they need, critique it, manage it and eventually use it to make decisions. However, with information coming rapidly and in varying formats, it becomes difficult to do so effectively. Individuals receive news from newspaper, face to face encounters with campaigners, radio messages, television shows, website sources and more frequent on social media. Each of these platforms presents different and conflicting views; some of the content is questionable. This scenario, where information is overloaded has been aptly described as “information obesity” where “finding information is not the challenge but discriminating, filtering it out, and managing it is difficult”. With information overload, quantity rises, but quality and balance drop” (Whitworth , 2009: xi).

Published research shows increasing research and application of IL beyond the academia (Underwood, 2002; Association of College and Research Libraries, (ACRL), 2015). Many are researching and applying IL in the health sector, business, politics and governance. Information literacy is thus seen as a critical agent in the development process as it empowers people to participate in civic affairs and to do so effectively (Cordell, 2013; Amusa, Bello, Omotoso and Osunrinade, 2016; Johanna, 2017). Information literacy is seen to be impactful in the way that it helps individuals and citizens to make informed decisions and actively participate in the democratic process. As a result, IL is seen globally as a game changer in society since access to quality information empowers and encourages citizen participation in civic matters (Lawal, 2019). Martens and Hobbs (2011) investigated media literacy and how it supports civic engagement in a digital age among 400 sampled American high school students. The aim of the study was to explore “the relationship between participation in a media literacy program, academic ability, frequency of Internet use, information-gathering motives, news and advertising analysis skills, and the intention towards civic engagement”. Results revealed that students who were involved in media literacy program possessed “higher levels of media knowledge, news analysis and advertising analysis skill than other students”.

Research also shows evidence of individuals struggling to judge whether the information they have received is accurate, correct and genuine or it is misleading and untrue (Thornton, 2012). This therefore brings the need to assess the skills of individuals in using information as it relates to the seven pillars proposed in the SCONUL seven pillars model. Further, need to look into the media’s advancing political information and presentation of political leaders

as well as political messages also need to be looked into in light of the SCONUL seven pillars of IL. For example, a 2011 study by researchers at the Stanford University showed that while students at various stages have the ability to use social media and navigate the Internet, they are however easily deceived when asked to determine if the information they have read online is reliable, misleading, or patently false. The study therefore concluded that “overall, young people’s ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: bleak” (Stanford History Education Group, 2016: 1). It because of conclusions such as the one above (bleak) that many emphasize the need to teach information literacy skills to students in institutions of higher learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study was qualitative in nature and used qualitative research methods to collect and analyze data. Semi-structured interviews were adopted with fifteen (15) 3rd and 4th year students pursuing LIS and RAM. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. In the days following the General Elections each participant was interviewed in a semi-structured format and asked questions about their use of information around the General Elections, with reference to the extent to which they incorporated skills from the SCONUL seven pillars. Sampling of participants was done using purposive and convenience sampling. This means that individuals were chosen from the population of LIS and RAM students on the basis that they matched certain criteria and were easily accessible to the researcher (Waltermaurer, 2008). First the participants had to be in either 3rd or 4th year at this stage the participants are senior students attended much of the LIS curriculum. Secondly, the participants had to be eligible to vote in the 2021 Election, and lastly they had to be available for the interview. In terms of analysis, thematic analysis was used to analyses the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed before being analyzed. The findings were then compared to IL approaches outlined in the SCONUL seven pillars.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A total of 15 students from the LIS Department at the University of Zambia were recruited and invited to participate in the interview. Out of the 15 students, 7 were female while 8 were male. The students were drawn from the LIS Bachelor’s degree and Records Management programs. Five students were in 3rd year and 10 were in fourth year. The following section highlights themes which emerged from the interviews.

Information seeking and encountering

Participants were asked to explain whether they seek for information or prefer to encounter the information during the elections. Findings revealed that encountering was the dominant form of information use for the majority of the interviewees. The participants overwhelmingly reported that they did not necessarily seek for political information to help them decide on whom to vote for, instead they more or less encountered information.

Further, the medium on which the interviewees encountered the information was Social media platforms. For Participants 1 (P1), (P8) and (P4) for example, encountering was considered the main form of information behavior throughout the 2021 General Elections:

If I came across something and thought that it might be interesting to investigate, then I started to actually look for specific information. But any seeking came out of encounters with information.

“Information comes to me, rather than me looking for it. There is a lot of information that Facebook pages upload”. (P8)

I didn't seek. I just felt like there was enough being thrown at me so I didn't need to seek it. (P4)

This finding reveals that participant's behavior during the election involved encountering information. Also interesting is that some of participants report that they did nothing about the information they encountered. However, others encountered the information and went further to seek additional information on the issues encountered.

Despite the majority of participants stating that they encountered political information rather than seeking, some also practiced information seeking. For example participants 2 (P2) and participant (P5) specifically stated that they were seeking information to inform their decision.

Personally I look for information by listening to various TV and Radio programs, I read newspapers and find the information I want about the candidates (P2).

I specifically followed Facebook pages of media houses in Zambia so that I get their perspectives on the different issues in Zambia (P5).

This also shows aspects of information literacy skills as participants actively sought information to use in making decisions during the elections. In the SCONUL seven pillars,

information literate people have the skills of being able to recognize that they need information and this eventually leads them to seek information.

Preferred source of information

The first objective of this study was to determine LIS students preferred sources of information during the general elections. The findings revealed that participants used various media platforms where they either encountered or sought information. The most preferred social media platforms were Facebook and Twitter. Participants preferred social media because it was the quickest source as most of the political parties had their own pages on Facebook and Twitter; thus making it easier to use them. Two participants had the following to say:

I prefer to use social media, political party pages are there, it's easy and bigger platform where you also have comments and are able to see what other people are saying. (P3)

Even traditional sources like Daily mail, the Mast, Mwebantu and ZNBC have pages on social media. So when you are on Social Media the news follows you. (P9)

Various scholars have reported increased use of Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, as a source of political information. Going by the Gather Pillar, IL individuals have the skill of being able to collect information from various sources rather than relying on only one source. Therefore the seemingly heavy reliance on single source (social media) could imply that students lack information literacy or it could be attributed to the flexibility of social media sharing and using information. When gathering information, it is pertinent for IL people to use a range of retrieval tools and resources effectively (SCONUL, 2011). The finding shows a growing trend of electorates using Social Media for political purposes. Garrett (2019) in a study of “social media’s contribution to political misperceptions in U.S.A Presidential elections” also found increased use of social media for political purposes even though he found little impact on misperception towards the presidential candidate. Saad and Zainab (2009) in a study of computer science and information technology undergraduate students also observed increased reliance on the internet as a source of information.

Evaluation of Information and Media criticism

Information skills are evaluated based on the ability to evaluate not only the information but the sources as well. Regarding evaluation and critiquing of the information which participants

either sought or encountered. Results revealed a clear presence of information literacy skills as participants exhibited skills to judge the sources of news with an eye on media biases. To illustrate this point, Percipient 11 stated the following:

I try to get information from various sources because I know that there are biases out there. ZNBC was pro government while Diamond TV and the Mast newspaper were supporting the opposition... I therefore don't just look at one source; I look for the issues on various sources to ensure that I get a balanced view.

Another interesting finding with regards to evaluating and critiquing media biases was that the majority of participants used different sources such as reading news from the private media houses such as the Zambia Daily Mail, Daily Nation, and the Mast newspapers in order to get balanced perspective on a number of political issues. Similarly, when sourcing or encountering information on social media. Participants opted to check similar views on different media outlets. Participants 4 and 8 explained this as follows:

What I do personally is to look at what others are reporting on a particular issue. For example, when one of the candidates was accused of being part of the Privatization scandal, I did not just follow one source. I looked Mwebantu, Khoswe, Daily Nation, The Mast and others so that I have a balanced view (P6)

Within Facebook I follow different pages, that I have a balanced perspective (P4)

Further, the research shows that participants were critical of the information which they received through leaflets and on social media pages of the political parties. The participants ignored most of the leaflets given to them or encountered via leaflets or which appeared on social media pages as they considered unreliable and uninformative. For example P3 described their reaction to receiving flyers:

I disregarded some sources particularly leaflets because I found them simplistic. I found it difficult to read leaflets because they lack depth, I would rather engage in a conversation, do a question or watch a debate TV or YouTube.

In the same way, P2 noted the presumed bias of leaflets from political parties:

Flyers are coming for the direct source so in my opinion they are more inclined to tell you a one sided story. Whereas the news would look at both sides, depending on the

website. In terms of the posters there was literally no information on them, just big coloured posters that I couldn't avoid looking at as I was driving along.

This suggests a strong ability to evaluate information sources, showing an ability to apply the Evaluate pillar from SCONUL (2011). Similar findings were reported by Saad and Zainab (2009:29) in Malaysia where students applied evaluated the information they had gathered by comparing the information they had obtained from several sources. It was evident in this study that students evaluated their sources before using it.

Use of information

When finding about the use of information, findings revealed use of information to help decide about whom to vote for. Participant 12 (P12) for instance had this say:

This election is quite interesting and tense, I look at the information that is out there on social media pages, newspapers and radio stations to see who really is the best candidate.

It was also observed from the interviews that some participants used the information they encountered to find more information, which reveals aspects of 'chaining'. In the academic context 'citation chaining' involves researchers searching and following bibliographic references backward and forward in order to gather relevant resources. Participant 1 for example reported on the usefulness of the internet in enabling chaining as follows:

One thing I like is being able to follow a news item online on Website so that I can read read and find more information about the issue.

Other participants stated that chaining was done when they accessed information from social media. Within social media they followed other sources showing similar information in order to get different perspectives on the same issues. For example P6 had the following to say:

I usually follow other links with social media to read in-depth about an issue or to see what others are saying. In fact, social media makes it easy to follow news...

An aspect of citation chaining was observed where participants cycled forward and backward in the search for what is relevant to them. Much of the research about chaining is linked to citation or 'bibliographical reference chaining' in academics (Cribbin, 2011). Evidence of chaining among participants on social media platforms could be a sign of information literacy skills as it relates to the gather and evaluate pillars in the SCONUL seven pillars.

Another popular finding from participants was sharing of information with friends and colleagues on social media. P4 highlighted how sharing information was part of being an engaged citizen, increasing understanding and avoiding bias:

I would discuss information with friends just to get other people's views on it and to compare with my own views, to see another side of the issue.

Information sharing relates to the present and manage pillars in the SCONUL seven pillars (2011). Being able to effectively communicate information with others and so help them to search, manage and use information in their own way is a sign of information literacy. Malik and Mahmood (2021) in a study about “social media use and information sharing behavior of university students” noted that social media is a tool for connecting and maintaining relationships, showcasing their creativity and becoming more knowledgeable the world. 67% of the students indicated that they frequently use social media for various purposes including academic information, personal information, academic information fun and entertainment and religious information. The study revealed that students rarely shared political information on their social media pages but used it for sharing fun and entertainment followed by religious and academic information.

Yet another interesting outcome from the research relates to the disregarding or ignoring of some of the information students encountered or searched in the election period. This phenomenon is known as “information avoidance”. It is either done consciously or unconsciously. A good number of participants indicated that they ignored information for different reasons but mainly because of suspected bias. For instance, participants lamented the biased news that came from national television service (ZNBC) and from private media and thus avoided watching the main news because it either favored the ruling party or the opposition party. Below are some of the statements made:

Personally, some of the postings by party pages and news outlets I out rightly ignored because I know they are biased and often times pushing their own agenda (P7).

For me, disregard a lot of the information which was being put forward about the opposition leader's [President Hakainde Hichilema] involvement in privatization because I knew it was false (P11)

I gored PF [Patriotic Front] adverts on ZNBC about infrastructure development because I knew what was obtaining on the ground. People were living poverty and the economy was bad (P9).

This result suggests the presence of well-developed media literacy skills among participants. Avoidance or disregarding information and/or information sources which participants deemed irrelevant can be compared to the Evaluation Pillar in the SCONUL seven Pillars (2011). An IL individual understands among other things the landscape of information, and is able to evaluate the genuineness of the source and messages being presented.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the information consumption of LIS students in the buildup to the 2021 general elections. There is growing literature on information behavior and information literacy in everyday life, however, information literacy and information use during election campaigns is not well document in Africa and particularly Zambia. A number of themes relating to the General Elections information consumption emerged and these include the usual behavior in information use as well as strong elements of media criticism, and avoidance or disregarding of sources due to biases. It was revealed in this research information encountering was more dominant than seeking during this year's general election. Social media emerged as a major platform on which students used the information and particular Facebook stood out as a preferred platform. It was further discovered that information chaining was being practiced by students on social media as they reported moving from one source to another within the social media platform. Very little use of traditional news sources was observed and participate attributed this behavior to the pages which traditional sources such as ZNBC and Daily Mail have opened. It was clear from this study that a number of SCONUL's seven pillars (2011) were present in the information behavior of the participants. It was evident that LIS students possessed the skills to identify, manage, evaluate and present information.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Make every day IL training mandatory to Zambian citizens in order to ensure meaningful participation in civic affairs
2. Introduce or enhance teaching of IL skills in all Higher Education Intuitions in Zambia

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