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News Literacy Skills among Undergraduate Law Students in the Age of Infodemic

ABSTRACT

Objectives: The objective of this study is to identify the news literacy skills of law students, their ability to encounter fake news, as well as their news sharing behavior.

Research Methodology: A survey was conducted in two public sector universities of South Punjab i.e. The Islamia University of Bahawalpur and the Bahauddin Zakariya University of Multan. The population of the study comprised of undergraduate law students of the participating universities. The three-part questionnaire was used to collect the data on demographic information, perceived news literacy skills, and news sharing behavior. The collected data were analyzed using a statistical package for social sciences (SPSS version 24). The data was presented in frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation.

Findings: The findings of the study showed that the majority of the respondents often get information from social media. They never consulted a librarian as a source for information seeking relating to news. The majority of the respondents sometimes encountered a fake news story on social media. They check the authenticity of a news story sometimes. Their ability to recognize the fake news was quite low. The major motives behind sharing the news include changing the views of their friends/followers, being the first to share the news with others, and just for a fun or as a prank.

Conclusion: The findings of the study concluded low perceived news literacy skills among undergraduate law students. The study recommends organizing news literacy instructions programs for undergraduate students.

Keywords: Law, fake news, news literacy skills, undergraduate law students.

Introduction

The term “News” can be defined in several ways. Kershner (2005) defines the news as being an account of a recent, interesting, and significant event. The news is an account of events that significantly affect people (Richardson 2007), and Jamieson and Campbell (1997) define news as a dramatic account of something novel or deviant. These above discussed are simple and basic definitions of News by different scholars but MacManus (1992) described the news from a different perspective that the news is also a unique commodity, for while it is sold to audiences, news audiences are subsequently sold to advertiser’s, making it vulnerable to market forces.

Andrea (2016) stated that the word fake is often used interchangeably with words such as copy, forgery, counterfeit, and inauthentic. Tandoc (2018) described the fake news with six types of definitions i.e. news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda. He also finds that there has been increased interest in the concept of propaganda due to its relevance to political events in recent years. Propaganda refers to the news stories which are created by the political entities to influence the public perceptions with the real motive to take benefit for a public figure, any political organization or government.

In the 21st century, “Fake News” proliferated in all segments of society and was used in different fields for ulterior motives. Abbasi, (2010) detected fake news websites and described them as spoof sites, which imitate existing websites along with concocted sites, which are deceptive websites attempting to appear as unique, legitimate, and commercial. Similarly (Zhang, 2010) identified the fake online reviews as deceptive reviews provided to mislead and deceive the consumers in their purchase decision making, often by a reviewer with little or no experience with the products or services being reviewed.

The question arises why people spread fake news. There are many reasons to spread fake news which mostly included economic, political, and social reasons. Some people spread fake news to gain political benefits, some used fake news to get economic benefits and many use fake news to spread specific propaganda. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) underlined the two main motives behind the production of fake news i.e. financial and ideological. Financial benefits are obtained because fake and outrageous news go viral easily and provide content producers with clicks that are convertible to advertisement revenue. Ideological benefits are obtained as fake news providers produce fake news to promote particular ideas or people that they favor, often by discrediting others.

News literacy or fake news identification is very important for law students as they need this skill for their successful professional legal career. Media literacy can be defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide 1993; Livingstone 2008). Kruger and Dunning (1999) discovered that most people are confident that they know more than they do. They showed during their research that people who know relatively little about a subject are overconfident about their level of expertise in it. The same is true for the law students who are often overconfident about their legal acumen and knowledge and hence can be easily dodged by the fake news.

It is of paramount importance to educate the law students during their studies so that they improved news literacy will help them in their professional careers. Building a curriculum to serve college students is very important in producing a useful workforce for employers. It is also very important to tie information literacy to the world outside academia and beyond college. Students need to know the importance of information literacy skills in their future success (Omoth, 2017).

Information literacy along with news literacy is a very important aspect of legal education. Callister (2003) discovered that the state and decline of law student research skills have been an underlying cause of deterioration in legal education.

In Pakistan, the legal profession is in a developing phase and there is no real check and balance on the fake news. Hence it is important to understand and discover the news literacy skills of Law students.

Literature Review

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) explored the fake news and their impact on the election results. Barthel, Mitchell, and Holcomb (2016) looked at the implications of fake news in terms of confusing readers. They find out that fake news can confuse even educated readers. According to Buzz Feed Survey (2016), it was found that 75 percent of American adults are fooled by the fake news headline. It shows the influence and effect of fake news on the citizens of a developed country.

In the recent past, Fake News became very important and many studies are conducted on the topic to understand the phenomenon and to highlight its importance in today's Global Village. Many world leaders and important personalities expressed their concerns about the Fake News and News Literacy. Leaders like Barack Obama and Pope Francis (head of the Roman Catholic Church) have shown serious concerns over the spread of fake news (Gradiner and Eddy 2016).

Fake News and News Literacy can even disturb world peace and has the potential to cause any catastrophe or accidental war. Although the majority of times many readers just ignore the fake news yet there are some cases when consumption of fake news leads to concrete actions. On 23 December 2016, the Defence Minister of Pakistan tweeted a menacing response to a false report that Israel had threatened Pakistan with Nuclear weapons (Goldman 2016). This example shows the seriousness and potential of fake news in the power politics of the world.

Social media is spreading at a phenomenal pace in the modern world. With its reach, its importance is increasing around the world and social media is now the biggest platform for the dissemination of news as well as fake news. Hermida (2011) and Jewitt (2009) discovered the important and active role of social media during their study and concluded that users can post information, photos, videos, and narratives about all types of events they witness first-hand while using their social media accounts.

The usage and importance of social media are increasing in all fields including journalism and law. Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton (2011) concluded that the journalist has increased their presence on social media due to its growing importance. Initially, they considered it as another platform to promote their news stories but now they are using it for breaking news and to interact with their audiences (Tandoc and Vos, 2016).

Aim of Study and Research Questions

This study is conducted to examine the news literacy skills of undergraduate law students. The main objectives of this study were;

- To identify the different news sources for law students
- To identify how often law students came across the fake news stories on social media

- To analyze the ability of law students to recognize the fake news
- To identify how often law students check for the authenticity of any news
- To examine the news sharing behavior of law students
- To point out the motives of law students behind sharing news items on social media

Research Methodology

This quantitative study was conducted with a survey design. The study was conducted in two public sector universities of South Punjab i.e. The Islamia University of Bahawalpur and the Bahauddin Zakariya University of Multan. The population of the study comprised of undergraduate law students of the participating universities. The questionnaire for this study was adopted from a study conducted by (Ameen and Naeem, 2018) after obtaining permission from the researchers. The questionnaire has three parts. The first part includes demographic information such as gender and age. The second part of the questionnaire includes questions relating to perceived news literacy skills, and the third part of the questionnaire contains questions on the news sharing behavior of the participants. The questionnaire was pre-tested by two experts in the field of law. The recommended changes by the experts were incorporated into the questionnaire. These changes were related to the face validity and content validity of the questionnaire. The purpose of pre-testing was to make it in-lined with the context of this study and according to the requirements of the undergraduate law students. The questionnaire was also pilot tested among the 20 respondents. In total 500 questionnaires were distributed among the participants through convenient sampling, 320 (64%) questionnaires were received. The faculty members in the participating institution served as study facilitator. Their role was to lend support from their departments to get the questionnaire filled from the participants.

The collected questionnaires were analyzed using a statistical package for social sciences (SPSS version 24). The data was presented in frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation.

Findings

In our cohort, the majority 239 (82.4%) of the respondents were male and the majority 174 (60%) of them were from the Islamia University of Bahawalpur (Table 1)

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Respondents

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	239	82.4%
Female	51	17.6%
University		
IUB	174	60.0%
BZU	116	40.0%

The respondents were asked eight statements relating to their frequency of getting information from different news sources. Of the 8 statements, only 01 statement received a mean value of around 4, which mean that majority of the respondents often get information from social media. They sometimes get information from electronic (Mean=3.39, SD=.826) or print (Mean=2.98, SD=.930) information sources. However, only 01 statement received a mean value around 1, which means that they never get information from a librarian (Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency of getting information from different news sources

Statements	Valid	Mean	Std. Deviation
How often do you get information from social media	290	3.81	.982
How often do you get information from electronic	290	3.39	.826
How often do you get information from print	290	2.98	.930
How often do you get information from Friends/Relatives	290	2.29	.772
How often do you get information from Teacher	290	1.99	.785
How often do you get information from News Feed	290	1.97	.797
How often do you get information from Blogs	290	1.82	.779
How often do you get information from Librarian	290	1.33	.571

Scale: 1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Always

Respondents were asked questions about their frequency of encountering fake news stories on social media. The respondents reported that they often encounter news stories related to politics & government on social media which are partially fake (Mean 3.61, SD=.641). However, they encounter fake news stories on politics & government which are completely fake (Mean 3.21, SD=.868) (Table 3).

Table 3. Encountering a fake news story on social media

Statements	Valid	Mean	Std. Deviation
How often do you come across news stories about politics & government on social media, you think partially fake	290	3.61	.641
How often do you come across news stories about politics & government on social media, you think completely fake	290	3.21	.868

Scale: 1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Always

The respondents were asked a set of 08 statements relating to their perceived ability to recognize fake news. All the statements received a mean value of around 3, which shows that majority of the respondents were ‘somewhat agree’ with these statements (Table 3) e.g., ‘I have the ability to interpret news messages’ (Mean 3.24, SD=.830), ‘I can compare news across different media

sources to determine its trustworthiness (Mean=3.18, SD=.914), ‘I have the ability to get the needed news from the media’ (Mean=3.17, SD= 1.014) (Table 4).

Table 4. Perceived ability to recognize fake news

Statements	Valid	Mean	Std. Deviation
I have the ability to interpret news messages	290	3.24	.830
I can compare news across different media sources to determine its trustworthiness	290	3.18	.914
I have the ability to get the needed news from the media	290	3.17	1.014
I am aware of my own biases and beliefs while reading and interpreting news stories	290	3.14	.873
I have the ability to recognize fake news	290	3.12	.693
I am aware of the fact that the intentions of a source may influence news content	290	2.99	.880
I am sensitive about the role of positive and negative effects of news contents on individuals thinking	290	2.98	1.143
I am good at catching up with the changes in the agenda of media	290	2.96	.978

Scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Somewhat Agree, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree

The respondents were asked a set of 08 statements relating to their frequently about checking the authenticity of a news story. Of the 08 statement, 07 statements received a mean value of around 3, indicating that the majority of the respondents sometimes check that how many times the news was shared/retweeted/ viewed (Mean=3.39, SD=1.204) ‘they check whether the news content is doubtful’ (Mean 3.27, SD=1.097), they check the credibility of the news sources’ (Mean 3.18, SD=1.079). However, 01 statement received a mean value of around 2, indicating that the majority of the respondents check the URL to see the origin of the source (Table 5).

Table 5. How frequently do you check the authenticity of a news story?

Statements	Valid	Mean	Std. Deviation
I see how many times the news was shared/retweeted/viewed	290	3.39	1.204
I check whether the news content is doubtful	290	3.27	1.097
I check the credibility of the news sources	290	3.18	1.079
I check the timing of the news i.e. current or outdated	290	3.18	1.036
I read what other sources are saying about the news story	290	3.05	1.053
I share with others to seek their opinion about the news	290	2.94	.902
I determine the objectivity of the news sources	290	2.86	1.015
I check the URL to see the origin of the source	290	2.15	.901

Scale: 1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Always

Table 6. Frequency of sharing news items on social media

Respondents were asked about their frequency of sharing news items on social media. The majority of respondents stated they often share an interesting news story on social media without thinking about its trustworthiness (Mean=3.44, SD=1.042). Some respondents also stated that they rarely share a news story on social media while knowing about its fakeness (Mean=2.33, SD=1.138) (Table 6).

Statements	Valid	Mean	Std. Deviation
How often do you share an interesting news story on social media without thinking about its trustworthiness	290	3.44	1.042
How often it happens that news you shared on social media was proved fake later on	290	3.10	1.071
How often do you share a news story on social media while knowing its fakeness	290	2.33	1.138

Scale: 1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Always

The respondents were asked a set of 18 statements about their motivation behind sharing news items on social media. These statements were given on three subsections (a) the intention behind sharing news, (b) information sharing gratification, and (c) entertainment gratification (Table 7). The intention behind sharing news items on social media was to be first to share the news with others (Mean 3.69, SD= 1.075).

All the 07 statements in the information sharing gratification received a mean value of around 4, indicating that information sharing gratification was the main motivation behind sharing news items on social media e.g., ‘to express myself freely’ (Mean=4.11, SD=.914), to help change the views of my friends/followers (Mean=3.95, SD=.841), ‘it might be useful to others’ (Mean=3.67, SD=.897), etc (Table 7). Similarly, the majority of the respondents also indicated that they share news on social media just for fun (or as a prank) (Mean 3.81, SD. 866), to entertain friends and followers (Mean 3.46, SD=.908).

Discussion

The findings of our study showed that the majority of the respondents often get information from social media. On the other hand, they never consulted a librarian as a source for information seeking relating to news. These findings are comparable with the findings of other studies (Preston, 2019; Ameen and Naeem, 2020; and Guess *et al.*, 2019) that reported that the use of social media channels for sharing news was higher than the other channels.

The findings of this study also showed that the majority of respondents often encountered fake news stories on social media which are partially fake and sometimes to a completely fake news stories. The ability to recognize fake news among the undergraduate law

Table 7. The motivation behind sharing news items on social media

Statements	Valid	Mean	Std. Deviation
The intention behind sharing news			
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to be first to share the news with others	290	3.69	1.075
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to confuse people	290	2.45	1.094
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to deceive people	290	2.33	.927
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to oppose a cause, political or religious	290	2.32	1.118
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to advance a vested interest or agenda	290	2.31	1.029
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to trigger people for taking some action	290	2.28	.943
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to support a cause, political or religious	290	2.27	1.071
Information sharing gratification			
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to express myself freely	290	4.11	.914
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to help change the views of my friends/followers	290	3.95	.841
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is that it might be useful to others	290	3.67	.897
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is that it helps me define my online presence	290	3.64	1.077
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to let my friends know about something I think they should know	290	3.63	.899
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to share practical knowledge with others	290	3.57	.947
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is that it gives me a break from what I am currently doing	290	3.53	1.079
Entertainment gratification			
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is just for fun (or as a prank)	290	3.81	.866
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to entertain my friends/followers	290	3.46	.908
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is to provoke responses or debates from others	290	3.41	.942
The intention behind sharing news item on social media is that sharing all kind of news makes me happy	290	3.20	.886

Scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Somewhat Agree, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree

students was quite low. On the other hand, they sometimes check the authenticity of a news story.

Our findings also indicated that the majority of the respondents sometimes share news stories on social media. The major motives behind sharing news stories include: to express themselves freely, to change the views of their friends/followers, to be the first to share the news with others, and just for a fun or as a prank.

Social media has become an emerging source of fake news stories. A recent study indicated that 619 out of 1225 fake news stories were shared on social media relating to coronavirus from January 1, to April 30 (Naeem, Bhatti, Khan, 2020). The majority of the respondents from our study also reported the frequent use of social media for seeking information relating to news. On the other hand, they demonstrated low news literacy skills, as well as their frequency to checking the authenticity of a news story sometimes may lead them to flag news as true which is fake.

The study also carries some important practical implications in terms of improving the news literacy skills of undergraduate law students. There is a need to introduce them to the news literacy instructions. These instructions can be given through hands-on workshop, or through a seminar, or offering them an essential course on news literacy with credits. The other implication is for librarians of the participating institutions. Considering the low news literacy skills, they have a role in hand to launch a news literacy instruction program for undergraduate students. As a result of these interventions, the students will not just be able to distinguish between the true and fabricated news, but it will also prevent them to spread the news without checking its authenticity. Several guidelines have been developed for spotting a fake news. International Federation for Library Association (2016) has developed eight steps guideline on how to spot fake news.

In the age of post-truth, it becomes essential to train the youth particularly university students about the skills needed to cope with the Infodemic of misleading information.

Conclusion

The findings of the study concluded that the majority of undergraduate law students prefer social media over other sources of information such as friends, relatives, teachers, or a librarian. It also concluded that the majority of undergraduate law students encounter fake news stories on social media and they have very limited capability to recognize it. The major motives behind sharing news stories were to express themselves freely, to change the views of their friends/followers, to be the first to share the news with others, and just for a fun or as a prank. There is a need to introduce undergraduate law students to the news literacy instructions. These instructions can be given through hands-on workshop, or through a seminar, or offering them an essential course on news literacy with credits.

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