

## Across the great divide: How today's college students engage with news

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### Abstract

This paper reports results from a mixed-methods study about how college students engage with news when questions of credibility and “fake news” abound in the U.S. Findings are based on 5,844 online survey responses, one open-ended survey question (N=1,252), and 37 follow-up telephone interviews with students enrolled at 11 U.S. colleges and universities. More than two-thirds of respondents had received news from at least five pathways to news during the previous week; often their news came from discussions with peers, posts on social media platforms, online newspaper sites, discussions with professors, or news feeds. The classroom was an influential incubator for news habits; discussions of news provided relevant connections to curricular content as well as guidance for navigating a complex and crowded online media landscape. Respondents majoring in the arts and humanities, social sciences, and business administration were far more likely to get news from their professors than were students in computer science or engineering. The interplay between unmediated and mediated pathways to news underscored the value of the socialness of news; discussions with peers, parents, and professors helped students identify which stories they might follow and trust. Opportunities and strategies are identified for preparing students to gather and evaluate credible news sources, first as students and then as lifelong learners, based on the assumption that instructors discussing news in class can demonstrate intentionally, or unintentionally, that familiarity with news is a social practice and a form of civic engagement.

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### Introduction

In a 2016 tweet, Donald Trump co-opted the phrase “fake news” to discredit negative news coverage about his campaign (Krugman, 2016; Lakoff, 2017; Ross and Rivers, 2018) [1]. Trump’s appropriation of the term shifted the national conversation and catalyzed the distrust of mainstream news media that right-wing media personalities had cultivated since the 1990s (Benkler, et al., 2018). The outcome has been a phenomenon many national polls have substantiated: More Americans than ever have lost trust in the traditional news media (Swift, 2016).

Looking across some of these surveys, findings strongly suggest that media distrust has affected the country in profound ways. One poll, for instance, found that more than two-fifths of the survey respondents gave “fake news” and “alternative facts” (45 percent) and inaccuracy and bias (42 percent) as reasons they no longer believed the mainstream press (Gallup/Knight Foundation Survey, 2018). Distrust of news is partisan in nature. A poll on public perceptions about journalism found that 42 percent of Republicans believed that the press has partisan bias while only 10 percent of Democrats in the sample did (Columbia Journalism Review, 2019).

Media distrust is also generational. Surveys show younger adults are less trusting than older news consumers, and more likely to get their news online (Jones, 2018; Knight, 2018). In 2018, when we conducted our study about college students and media trust, more than a third (36 percent) of undergraduates responding to our survey said the threat of “fake news” had made them distrust the credibility of any news” (Head, et al., 2018).

Moreover, results from our study indicated almost half (45 percent) of the sample lacked confidence in distinguishing “real news” from “fake news,” and only 14 percent said they were “very confident” in their ability to detect “fake news.” As one student in the study put it, “It is really hard to know what is real in today’s society; there are a lot of news sources and it is difficult to trust any of them” [2].

It is not coincidental that the topic of news literacy has been gaining traction beyond the confines of journalism, communication, or media studies majors at U.S. colleges and universities (Atkins, 2017, 2016; Gooblar, 2018). As the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign looms large, something important is at stake — preparing college students and young voters with the information skills they need to assess news quality and credibility of the information found online and in print as the threats of “fake news,” propaganda, and bias multiply and intensify.

Faculty and academic librarians often find themselves at the center of these campus-wide discussions about core competencies for news evaluation — and asking questions of their own. How do young people experience news today, and what role does the classroom play? How are students making sense of news encountered through search, social media, and mobile alerts in an endless stream driven by chance or algorithm? How can educators and librarians help students become more discriminating and confident consumers and sharers of news?

This paper presents findings from our Project Information Literacy (PIL) news engagement survey (Head, et al., 2018). We offer new insights about students' news seeking and assessment behaviors through the lens of their own experience. To date, no systematic investigation has examined the factors driving students' practices for engaging with news for academic purposes while asking how these habits may compare to students' personal and civic lives.

Our paper's most important contribution is the understanding it provides about the information practices and strategies students use to navigate the barrage of news they receive 24/7 from traditional and non-traditional sources and through discussion. Based on our empirical findings, we identify opportunities and strategies for educators and librarians seeking to help students become more literate and discerning news consumers.

## Literature review

While some critics have claimed young people in the U.S. do not pay attention to the daily news (Mellman, 2015; Poindexter, 2012; Patterson, 2007; Zerba, 2011), there is a growing body of empirical research studies that suggests otherwise.

One mixed-methods investigation of millennial news audiences (N=1,045) conducted by the American Press Institute (API) found the vast majority of their survey respondents said keeping up with the news is at least "somewhat" important to them (American Press Institute, 2015). Researchers found most young news consumers relied on a mix of strategies and pathways, including three to four social media channels, news curated by private networks and aggregators, and directly from news organizations.

Several other studies validate these findings: Younger audiences are more likely to find news through social media, chat apps, and news aggregators than through traditional channels (Edgerly, et al., 2018; Knight Foundation, 2016; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019). As a whole, these studies confirm that young people pay attention to the news, but not necessarily to traditional news organizations and their brands.

In 2009, Garrett studied a sample of adult readers (N=727) of partisan news sites and concluded an important factor leading to online engagement with political information was reinforcing existing opinions. Pariser (2011) has since raised concerns about the resultant "filter bubble" for those relying on algorithmically curated social sites. Multiple studies have since concluded that young people believe social media actually helps them access a diversity of perspectives, though most question the credibility of the information they access.

In one study based on focus groups with 52 teens and young adults (aged 14–24), participants said they encountered news through social connections, but also took personal responsibility for seeking out news from multiple perspectives, though were skeptical of its trustworthiness (Madden, et al., 2017).

Building on the qualitative findings from that small sample, a Pew survey (N=743) asked U.S. teens (aged 13 to 17) about their social media use (Anderson and Jiang, 2018). In that study, researchers found that 67 percent of the sample said social media helps them find different points of view, but only 37 percent said it helps them find trustworthy information.

Another survey (N=9,196) of trust in news concluded young people had less trust of news than other age groups, citing perceptions of bias, corrupting influence of owners, and spread of inaccurate information on the Internet (Gallup/Knight Foundation Survey, 2017).

Not all studies about generational trust in the news have been conclusive though. A Pew survey (N=3,000), conducted with U.S. respondents, found the youngest respondents (18–29 years of age) were more likely to fall into the "confident" category, with high trust in information sources, than those over 65, who were more likely to be "wary" having low trust (Horrigan, 2017).

Garrett (2019), in a three-wave panel survey of U.S. adults during the 2012 and 2016 elections with a sample ranging from 625 to 1,004 respondents, concluded that findings from the 1940s showing the limited effects of media on political attitudes are still relevant and apply in the era of social media.

A thread of related research has explored whether news is tied to civic and political participation, and is cultivated through social connections both online and in person. In-depth interviews with a small sample of 21 U.S. young adults from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds found family influence on news consumption holds regardless of whether the news is accessed in print or online (Edgerly, 2017).

A survey of young people in the U.S. between 18 and 24 (N=2,087) found 42 percent were most influenced by family members when learning about an upcoming election (CIRCLE, 2018). Data from a U.S. panel survey (N=1,037) showed that youth who grew up seeing their parents read news were likely to become long-term news consumers themselves (York and Scholl, 2015).

As a whole, both qualitative and quantitative findings suggest young people are clearly interested in news, and use multiple channels for getting a diversity of perspectives about civic issues and finding about the world around them.

What is missing from this line of research is the role of faculty and teachers in helping students navigate news. While programs in news literacy, media literacy, and information literacy address similar issues, they have different communities of practice, articulate different learning outcomes, and make different assumptions about what matters, which are far from being settled.

All of these programmatic efforts have made attempts to integrate an understanding of news into the classroom, and have gained traction since the 2016 U.S. presidential election and concerns over "fake news." News literacy, for instance, has focused on understanding journalism and appreciating its role in society (Fleming, 2014; Malik, et al., 2013; Schneider, 2007). Media literacy has argued for a more holistic and critical approach to all media, with an emphasis on creating media messages in a variety of forms (Hobbs, 2010; Huguet, et al., 2019; Kellner and Share, 2007; RobbGrieco, 2014).

Information literacy, largely promoted by librarians, has focused primarily on seeking, evaluating, and using information in an academic setting, though the "fake news" crisis has prompted calls for a greater emphasis on evaluating news sources (Agosto, 2018; Batchelor, 2017; Burkhardt, 2017; Cooke, 2017; Rush, 2018).

All of these approaches have struggled to reach students in a systematic way (Sullivan, 2018), though more journalism-focused attempts have been launched to combat misinformation across society than curricular ones (Schmidt, 2018; Journell, 2019).

### Knowledge gaps

While there is disagreement about how to best engage students in learning how to be critical consumers of news, there is high interest in both promoting news readership among young adults and building on existing literacy movements to address concerns about our post-truth society.

There is little research, however, on how students find, encounter, and use news for academic and personal purposes, and how these information practices may be related, if at all. This knowledge gap has serious implications, given the mission of many colleges and universities to help prepare students as lifelong learners and contributing members of a democracy. Empirical insights into news-related practices could better inform efforts by educators, librarians, and journalists to make students news literate across and through their lives.

The purpose of our research is to provide findings about students' news behaviors for course work and in their daily lives in order to address this key gap in the literature. To that end, we collected quantitative and qualitative data from a large sample of students enrolled at 11 U.S. colleges and universities.

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## Research questions

Our study goals were threefold: (1) to investigate how many college students engaged with news, and in what ways; (2) to explore how students' disciplinary focus affected their exposure to news in discussions with professors in and beyond the classroom; and, (3) to examine how students' news practices for fulfilling academic assignments were comparable to their habits for personal and civic lives.

Drawing on survey responses from 5,844 undergraduates, three questions guided the analysis presented in this paper:

1. What proportion of students in the study sample had engaged with news during the past week?
2. Were students majoring in certain fields more likely to have news as part of their academic curriculum than students majoring in others?
3. What differences exist between how students looked for news for fulfilling academic assignments and how they encountered news in their personal lives?

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## Methods

The research in this paper was conducted by Project Information Literacy (PIL), a national research institute that studies college students' information practices in the digital age. In this 12-month, multi-institutional study at 11 U.S. colleges and universities, news engagement was measured in terms of students' use of certain pathways to news, social media use for news and sharing habits, evaluation practices, and degrees of media trust.

Data were collected in two phases between October 2017 and October 2018 from (1) a large-scale online survey of U.S. college students (N=5,844) for measuring student behaviors and opinions that included qualitative data from one open-ended question about how students found news for academic compared with their personal purposes (N=1,252) [3]; and, (2) follow-up telephone interviews with a subset of the college survey sample (N=37) to gather qualitative data about students' experiences and thoughts.

This mixed-method study design had several advantages for our research. We were able to describe the characteristics — attitudes, past behaviors, and opinions — of a large population of surveyed students, while collecting more in-depth details about experiences with news with a small sample of follow-up interviews.

We described news to participants as "events happening all around the world," and noted that "news is more widely available to us than ever before." [4] We intentionally defined news broadly, ranging fully from hard to soft news, as defined by scholars. Hard news has been defined as "coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life;" soft news is "typically more sensational, more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news" (Patterson, 2000).

Our premise in designing and conducting the study was that "news" encompasses a wide spectrum, and then we sought to see how our survey respondents themselves defined and engaged with news. For our own uses (though not communicated to study participants), we defined "fake news" as patently untrue and made-up news created with the intention of deceiving others, often for monetary and/or political gain.

We realize that the phrase, "fake news" can be highly problematic. Nonetheless, we used the phrase in this study because the term is commonly used in public discourse and its wide usage affects the attitudes of news consumers, even if its definition is politically loaded and imprecise from a social scientific perspective. Despite growing public distrust of the media, we hold that engaging with news is fundamental in helping students understand the world, engage with social and learning communities, and participate in a democracy.

### Online student survey

Between 12 February 2018 and 21 April 2018, an online survey was administered to full-time undergraduates enrolled in the current term at 11 U.S. colleges and universities. At institutions with enrollments of more than 10,000 full-time students (and thus a larger number of graduates each year), a random subset sample of eligible respondents was used. In schools with fewer students, a voluntary sample was used.

The online survey instrument consisted of 20 questions and took respondents an average of 12 to 15 minutes to complete. Survey response categories were informed by exploratory focus groups we held with students in preparation for this study, and pilot testing [5].

A total of 5,844 undergraduates completed surveys from the 60,544 invitations that were sent, yielding a total response rate of 10 percent. The institutional sample was selected for its regional diversity, students' demographic variation, and whether a school was located in red or blue states, given the 2016 definition of these voting categories (Figure 1 and Table 1).



**Figure 1:** Institutional sample map.

College or University	Location	Type	Surveys returned
Belmont University	Nashville, TN	Private university	902
Brandeis University	Waltham, MA	Private university	749
California State University Maritime Academy	Vallejo, CA	Public university	230
DePaul University	Chicago, IL	Private university	528
John Tyler Community College	Chester, VA	Community college	355
Oklahoma State University	Stillwater, OK	Public university	469
Saint Mary's College of California	Moraga, CA	Private college	333
University of Alaska Anchorage	Anchorage, AK	Public university	351
University of Michigan	Ann Arbor, MI	Public university	919
University of Texas, Austin	Austin, TX	Public university	614
Wellesley College	Wellesley, MA	Private university	394

**Table 1:** Institutional sample.

Note: Larger version of Table 1 available [here](#).

This paper extends our prior research by presenting findings that glean deeper insights into students' academic and personal news habits. For this paper, data were analyzed from three of our 2018 news survey questions about (1) pathways of news students relied on, including their preferences for certain news topics and news brands; (2) how students reported getting news for fulfilling academic assignments compared to their personal use; and, (3) students' qualitative comments about the differences between their academic and personal news habits.

#### Online survey sample

The survey sample were undergraduates (first-year, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) majoring in a variety of disciplines. Participants were 18 years of age or older and registered as full-time students at one of the colleges or universities in the sample. The sample had roughly equal representation from first-year (28 percent), second-year (24 percent), third-year (23 percent), and fourth-year students (21 percent).

Nearly two-thirds of the sample (65 percent) was female, consistent with PIL's past studies. Respondents most commonly indicated arts and humanities as their major (22 percent) and the least common selection was mathematics. Half of the respondents — 50 percent — identified politically as liberal or very liberal, 26 percent as moderate, and 13 percent as conservative or very conservative (see [Table 2](#)).

Current Student Status	N	% of Sample
College first-year student	1166	28%
College sophomore or second-year student	1022	24%
College junior or third-year student	950	23%
College senior or fourth-year student	874	21%
College fifth-year student or beyond	150	4%
Other (e.g., exchange student)	43	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4211</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	1347	32%
Female	2774	65%
Transgender	25	1%
Prefer not to state	60	1%
Please fill in the blank	48	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4254</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Age</b>		
18-20 years old	2458	58%
21-22 years old	1231	29%
23-25 years old	219	5%
26 years old or older	314	7%
Prefer not to state	18	--
<b>Total</b>	<b>4240</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Major<sup>81</sup></b>		
Architecture and Engineering	448	9%
Arts and Humanities	1068	22%
Business Administration	656	13%
Computer Science	299	6%
Education	178	4%
General Education (includes undeclared)	159	3%
Mathematics	132	3%
Occupational Training (includes Nursing)	362	7%
Social and Behavioral Sciences	838	17%
Life and Physical Sciences	818	17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4958</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Political Affiliation</b>		
Very conservative	87	2%
Conservative	474	11%
Moderate	1112	26%
Liberal	1496	35%
Very liberal	625	15%
Prefer not to state	250	6%
Other	218	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4262</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 2:** Description of survey respondents.

Note: Larger version of Table 2 available [here](#).

#### Follow-up telephone interviews

Between 4 May 2018 and 15 June 2018, we conducted 37 telephone interviews with survey respondents, who had volunteered to participate in follow-up interviews. Each interview was 12 to 15 minutes long. We asked three questions of interviewees to collect qualitative data about the news gathering practices of students, including how they defined and detected “fake news.”

In this paper, we focus on our analysis of interviewees’ comments and write-in responses to an open-ended survey question about students’ self-described techniques for assessing news for academic purposes compared with news that they needed in their personal lives.

#### Methodological limitations

There are challenges associated with any research method. We took steps to avoid or minimize the challenges that we encountered. To enhance the reliability of this study’s results, the survey instrument was pilot-tested with 11 students matching our selection criteria but who were not eligible for the study sample. Based on the comments from the pilot test we made small revisions to the wording and layout of questions before administering the survey.

We shortened the amount of time it took to complete the online survey by improving the layout and flow of the survey and tightening the wording of survey questions. The script for the follow-up interviews was also pilot-tested with six students who were ineligible for the study sample but met its demographic qualifications. Based on their comments, we changed some of the wording to improve the clarity of the questions.

We fully acknowledge the limits of the range of participants represented in our survey, and problems with the generalizability of their experiences to the larger student population. The PIL survey sample, in particular, does not reflect the gender balance of college undergraduates nationwide. While sampling for a diverse set of colleges and universities, we cannot ensure diversity among respondents, and we realize that the Northwest and Midwest portions of the United States were underrepresented.

Furthermore, according to recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Education in 2017, an estimated 57 percent of college graduates was female. For males, the comparable figure is 43 percent (Marcus, 2017). In comparison, the survey sample for our study was 65 percent female and 32 percent male.

Another factor that may have influenced results was news that broke during the survey timeframe (12 February 2018 through 21 April 2018). Among the key stories were a shooting at an Alabama high school on 8 March, the death of world-renowned scientist, Stephen Hawking, on 13 March, the "March for Our Lives" on 23 March, teacher walkouts in Oklahoma, Colorado, and Arizona during April to protest low wages, and the "National Student Walkout" on 20 April to protest gun violence.

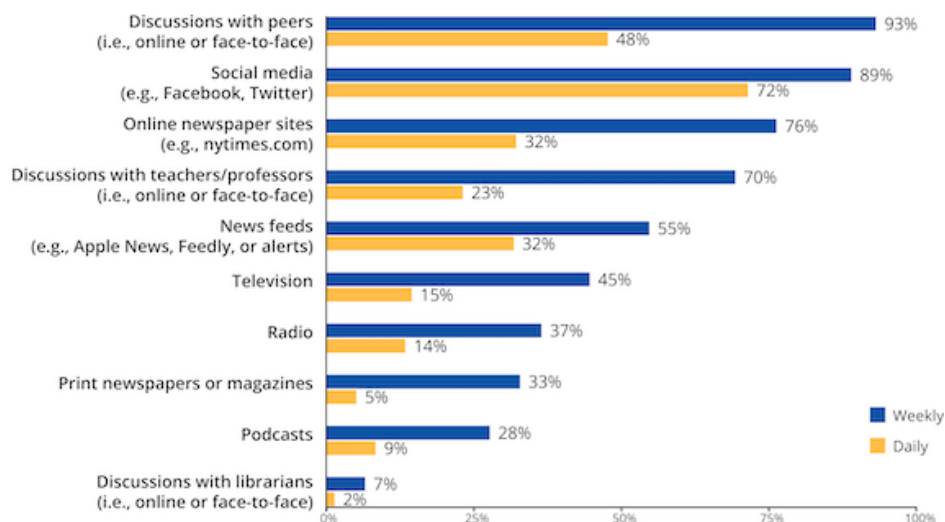
Stories such as these may have increased student engagement with the news for that time period, since survey respondents said they frequently followed news about schools and education, crime and public safety, and international issues. As such, the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population in our sample, or beyond. Instead of drawing conclusions about the population of college students at large, we have conducted an analytical study.

Further research is required to confirm our findings, especially in terms of generalizing to the full college population. However, the data we have collected, the response rates, and the data analysis applied and reported have shown consistent responses and fairly robust relationships and are informative about the respondents who did take the survey. As a whole, these data provide a holistic and sweeping snapshot of these students and their news-seeking behaviors, habits, and preferences. Likewise, these findings provide directions for further inquiry in qualitative and quantitative studies from a variety of disciplines.

## Results

Nearly every survey respondent (99.7 percent) had engaged with news in the past week [6]. News had arrived into these students' lives from a variety of online and off-line formats, such as a Facebook post, a conversation in a class, an online news site, or a mobile news feed from apps like Apple News [7].

The majority of respondents had news consumption habits that were multi-modal: More than two-thirds (67 percent) had received news from five of the pathways to news listed in Figure 2 [8].



**Figure 2:** How students received news in their lives.  
N=5,259 | Percentages are calculated per category based on the total number of respondents that provided an answer to the survey.

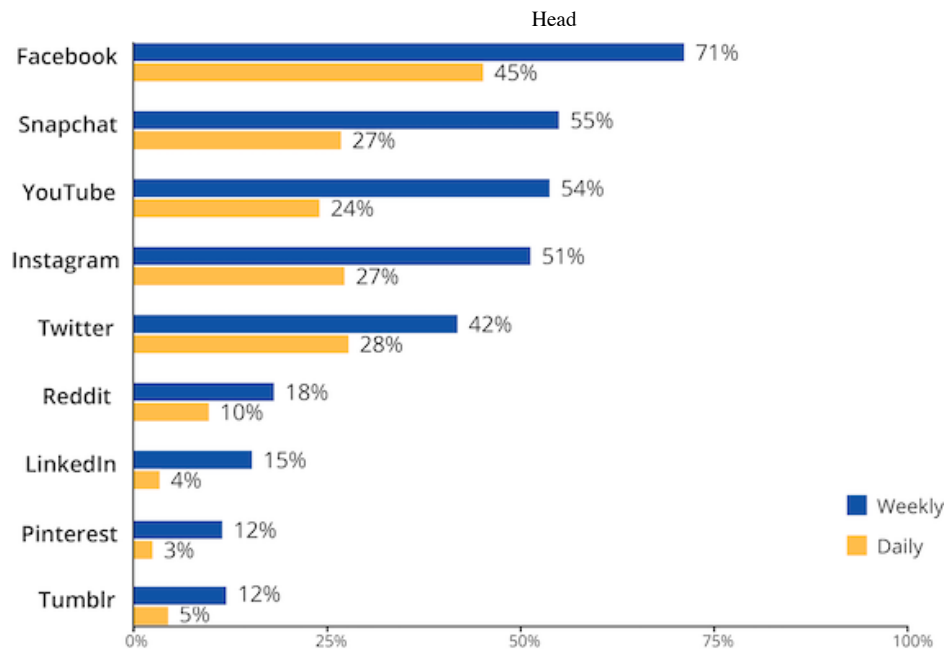
Most frequently, respondents got news during the past week through discussions with peers (93 percent) whether face-to-face or online via text, e-mail, or using direct messaging on social media. Many had also become aware of news stories in college classes; seven in 10 said that in the past week they had learned of news in their discussions with professors while only seven percent had gotten news from discussions with librarians.

Online news sites (76 percent) and news feeds (55 percent) also delivered news to a majority of students in the sample. Slightly more students had received news from online or face-to-face discussions with their peers (93 percent) than from social media (89 percent) in the past week. Drilling down beyond the general level, results from our Likert scale question item indicated that social media was the most frequent pathway to news on a daily basis.

When we asked how many times respondents had gotten news from social media each day, 50 percent found news from Internet giants like Facebook and YouTube several times a day, while comparatively fewer (23 percent) had received news from their peers throughout the day.

### News from social media platforms

As indicated in Figure 3, many students in our sample (71 percent) had gotten news from Facebook, the social media behemoth, during the past week, while almost half of the sample (45 percent) had gotten their news from it at least once a day. Other social media brands primarily featuring visual multimedia (still and moving images) also had some draw; at least half of the respondents cited YouTube (54 percent), Instagram (51 percent) or Snapchat (55 percent) as frequent pathways to news in the past week.



**Figure 3:** Social media brands as pathways to news.  
 N=4,799 | Percentages are calculated per category based on the total number of respondents that provided an answer to the survey.

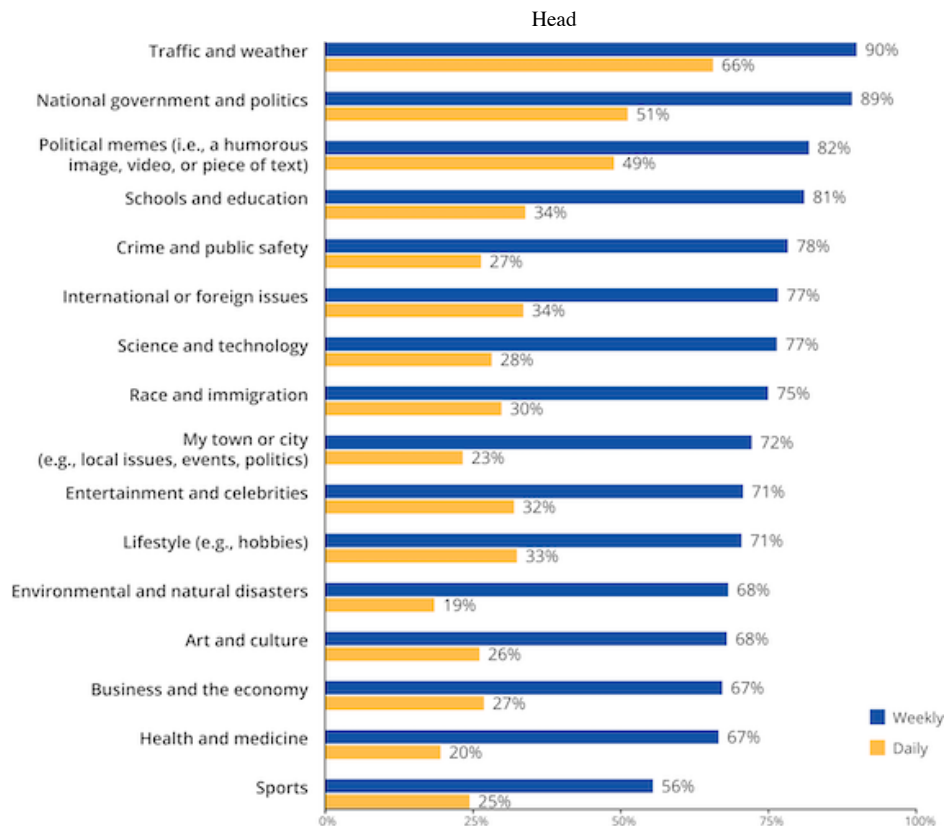
To a lesser degree, students had gotten headlines or links to news stories through Twitter (42 percent), while far fewer (28 percent) had received news on this platform on a daily basis. The majority of respondents were multi-social in their access to news on social media: Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) said they got news last week from three of the platforms listed in [Figure 3](#). A very small number of respondents (4 percent) had not received news from any one of the nine social media platforms listed during the preceding week.

#### Navigating the news torrent

Students, as a whole, were interested in following a range of news topics ([Figure 4](#)) [9]. More than anything, respondents had read updates about the traffic and weather (90 percent) during the preceding week, with two-thirds (66 percent) of the same students checking this information at least once a day.

Nearly as many respondents had followed news about national government and politics (89 percent), while more than half (51 percent) had checked on political news at least once a day. Roughly eight in 10 students took in political memes (82 percent), humorous images, videos, or text, because they appreciated the amplifying quality of satire about certain political events, which they considered “newsworthy.”





**Figure 4:** News topics students engaged with during the past week.  
N=5,259 | Percentages are calculated per category based on the total number of respondents that provided an answer to the survey.

Findings from our mixed-method study suggest students' experience news delivered to them in intertwined layers, sometimes with variations on the same story popping up in multiple pathways and platforms. One student, a social and behavioral sciences major, described this process in an interview:

News finds me through alerts on my phone and on social media. Like today, Trump announced he wasn't going to meet with Kim Jong-un and I got a lot of alerts about that. There was a CNN alert and once I opened Facebook it notified me too. Sometimes if I have time in the morning I'll watch CBS This Morning, and occasionally, I'll look at my Facebook updates. Today, I had at least five different posts about the same Trump story on Facebook. I also read the Washington Post and the New York Times and the Boston Globe, because it has news about local politics that I'm interested in.

Many of the students we interviewed admitted they struggled with compiling, evaluating, and interpreting news from the vast number of online sources available to them.

These challenges multiply when mainstream media sources are increasingly replaced with news posts on social media platforms that are often partisan and of questionable veracity. A junior majoring in life and physical sciences, summed it up, saying "I spend more time trying to find an unbiased site than I do reading the news I find."

Accordingly, survey respondents confirmed these qualitative comments. More than two-thirds of the survey sample — 68 percent said the sheer amount of news available to them was overwhelming. Another half (51 percent) agreed that it was difficult to identify the most important news stories on any given day [10].

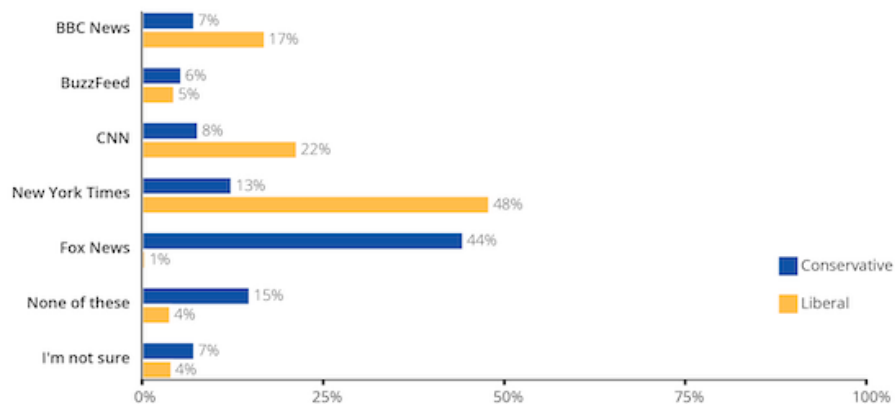
#### Influence of political affiliation

As documented by prior surveys conducted by national polling organizations, respondents in our sample with certain political affiliations were also deeply divided regarding their trust of news [11]. Respondents identifying as "very conservative" or "conservative" expressed lower levels of trust in news, regardless of the source, than did the "very liberal" or "liberal" respondents [12].

Students with conservative leanings were also less likely to trust news from professional journalists; 71 percent of the survey respondents who identified as conservative agreed that journalists deliberately inserted bias into their news stories with little interest in correcting their mistakes. Only 38 percent of students identifying as liberal agreed with the same statement [13].

Respondents appeared to prefer certain news brands over others, according to their political affiliations (Figure 5). If given just five choices for news about national and political news, "liberals," as seen in Figure 5, reportedly would choose the New York Times (48 percent) over Fox News (less than one percent) for their news coverage. At the same time, the smaller number of respondents identifying as conservatives would choose Fox News (44 percent) over the New York Times (13 percent).





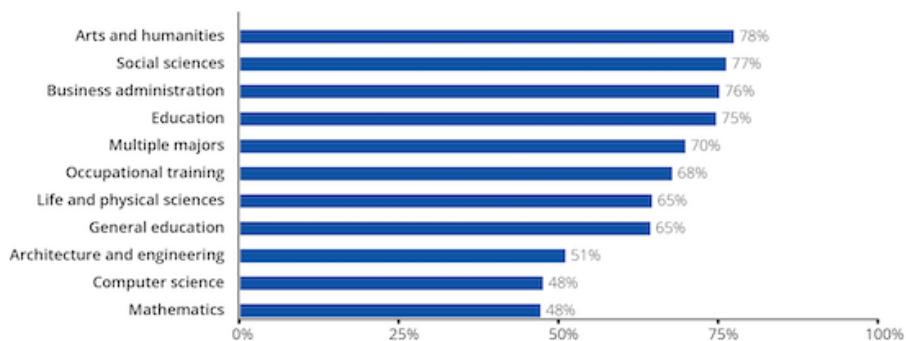
**Figure 5:** What news would conservative and liberal students choose?  
 N=2,680 | Responses for "liberal" and "very liberal" have been conflated into a new category for "liberal" (N= 2,120); and responses for "conservative" and "very conservative" have been conflated into a new category for "conservative" (N=560). Percentages are calculated per category, based on the total number of respondents that provided an answer.

News for academic vs. personal purposes

Two survey questions collected data from students about how their academic work was related to their personal news engagement behaviors. We looked at responses about discussions with instructors as a common pathway to news (see [Figure 1](#)) to examine the impact a student's major had on getting news from their instructors.

Findings from this analysis suggest a student's area of study was a telling factor in this teaching and learning equation. More than three-fourths of the respondents in our study majoring in either arts and humanities (78 percent) or social and behavioral sciences (77 percent) reportedly learned about news in online or face-to-face exchanges with their professors during the previous week ([Figure 6](#)).

In stark contrast, students majoring in STEM subjects, such as architecture/engineering (51 percent), computer science (48 percent) and mathematics (48 percent), were far less likely to discuss news as part of their exchanges with instructors in class, meetings, or in e-mail exchanges. As one interviewee in engineering explained, news had a small place in their classrooms or discussions with professors. Instead, instructors were more focused on solutions to textbook problem sets.



**Figure 6:** News discussions with instructors by discipline.  
 N=4,211 | Percentages are calculated per category based on the total number of respondents that provided an answer to the survey.

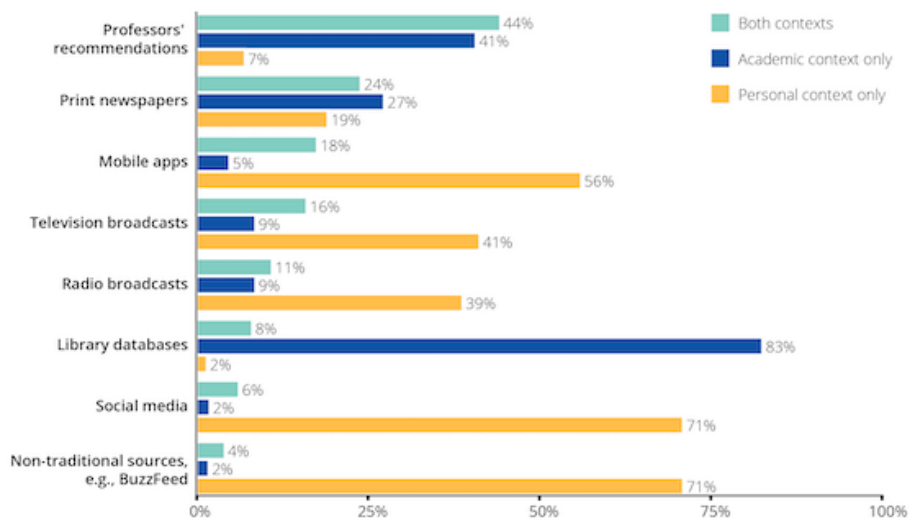
In a related survey question, we collected data about differences between how respondents acquired news for fulfilling academic assignment requirements and how they got news in their personal lives. Among the 4,237 students responding to this matrix question, most respondents relied on library online databases (83 percent) when they were looking for news they could use solely for fulfilling academic assignments.

To a lesser degree, their professors (41 percent) were a source for academic purposes.

Very few respondents used library databases (2 percent) in the context of their personal lives. Instead, they got news for personal purposes from social media platforms (71 percent), such as Facebook and YouTube, or non-traditional news sites, such as BuzzFeed (71 percent).

As indicated in [Figure 7](#), there was very little crossover about which sources students relied on for news within certain contexts. The rates of use were equivalent for only one news source: professors. That is, professors — and their recommendations for news sources — were

selected by 44 percent of respondents in both cases, for academic and personal use in students' lives. Some, but far fewer, had also used print newspapers (24 percent) or mobile apps (18 percent) in both of these contexts.



**Figure 7:** News for academic contexts vs. personal contexts.  
N=4,237 | Percentages are calculated per category based on the total number of respondents that provided an answer to the survey.

#### Summary of qualitative data

Responses to the open-ended survey question from 1,252 survey-takers and follow-up interviews with 37 respondents revealed qualitative details that helped explain survey respondents' news-seeking behaviors. Notably, the sources students used in their academic and personal lives varied, as did their underlying search behaviors.

When students in our study were seeking news they could use for fulfilling academic research requirements they searched library databases or news sites and engaged in query-based searching. In contrast, in their personal lives, students were much more likely to browse news to find a topic that might interest them. In the words of one social and behavioral science major:

When I just want an update on the world, I go to a news site and scroll around. When I'm fulfilling an academic assignment, I specifically search the news site or Google the topic. One is general, the other is very targeted to my academic needs.

There were other factors influencing students' news engagement behaviors. For course assignments, students said library databases were their go-to resource to meet professors' expectations for academic work, comply with prohibitions against using social media and mitigate concerns about the grade. There appeared to be a devolution of responsibility for evaluation to both professors and library databases.

Students trusted library databases to provide "approved" news for academic purposes, and restricted themselves to sources recommended by the professor. This confirms findings from earlier PIL studies showing that students preferred to begin research for assignments with course readings — materials "pre-approved" by their instructor (Head and Eisenberg, 2009).

While many students appeared to accept these proxies for evaluating content, only a few noted the implications for reducing the responsibility of students to develop their own judgement. Others highlighted the limitations of library databases in terms of sources, as well as factors related to the usability of the vendor interfaces.

In their personal lives, when grades were not on the line, students preferred social media and other non-traditional pathways for getting news, given their ease of use, more approachable language, and content that mapped more closely to personal interests. When there were far fewer finite restrictions and deadlines, some students told us they would dig deeper on their own using academic sources to find out more about something they first saw on a social media network.

Still others got their suggestions for news through discussions. As one engineering major put it, "I speak with professors for academic purposes regarding news and I generally speak with friends for more personal news." Comments like this one underscored the differences between how students ultimately evaluated sources they had selected to read or view.

Very few said they checked stories more carefully in their personal lives where their credibility with peers may have been at stake. Many more used rigorous techniques to check the credibility of news used to fulfill academic research assignments. As one first-year student said, "I put more time into searching for reputable sources when looking for class assignments, in my personal life there is too much news to fact check every single story I see, but I fact check the important ones — for school I fact-check everything."

In some cases, news that piqued students interest led them to apply academic news habits to personal news engagement. When a story intrigued them, students noted a variety of strategies for verifying information, including checking the original source, reading "laterally" or across news sources, and digging deeper into the facts and context in other sources. An arts and humanities major clarified this process:

I think looking for news for academic purposes has influenced or changed how I look at news for personal use. I've started looking at dates and sources much more, as well as recognize what sites tend to have biased news (for example: HuffPost vs. Breitbart). After doing assignments that require research, I've developed some methods of determining whether or not a source is credible before I believe it or share it online.

Most students in the study, however, described their news engagement behaviors for academic purposes vs. personal ones as being very different. Many had learned a battery of techniques they applied selectively as time permitted and situations demanded. Interest in a topic was often a spark that led to the application of a higher, more academic, level of scrutiny and investigation to news in their everyday contexts. But beyond their assignments, students consumed news passively, with many taking news they got in daily life “with a grain of salt.”

As a whole, looking at qualitative data from the survey write-in comments and interviews, it is clear that professors influence the way in which students develop strategies for engaging with the news that, in some cases, extends beyond academic assignments. Professors’ recommendations and prohibitions influenced student news choices, and could inhibit students from developing or applying their own evaluation strategies. Integrating news into the classrooms is inconsistent across subject disciplines, leading some, like the engineering students in our sample, to believe that the news is not important to their work in their discipline.

## Discussion

Most students, whether passively or actively engaging with news, lived in a world where news permeates nearly every aspect of their lives. The accelerated pace of the online news cycle combined with an influx of constantly changing national and international issues had led students we studied to read, view, or listen to more news than they had ever done before.

Surveys administered to young people at different times over seven years provide comparative insight about the increase of news consumption. When PIL conducted an earlier survey of 8,353 students at 25 U.S. colleges and universities in 2011, we found 79 percent had searched for news in the previous six months, more than any other kind of information (Head and Eisenberg, 2011).

In the present PIL study, conducted during a time of dramatic and tumultuous change to the news landscape, survey results from 5,844 students at 11 U.S. colleges and universities showed a giant leap in news consumption: Almost all respondents — 99.7 percent — had encountered news during the past week.

Similarly, a comparison with our present survey findings and a 2015 API study shows a large jump in news consumption among young people. When API asked a survey sample of people in their 20s whether they regularly followed news about national politics, more than two-fifths — 43 percent — reported that they did (American Press Institute, 2015). Three years later, 89 percent of the survey respondents in our 2018 news study said they had followed political news during the preceding week, more than double this earlier figure.

There are two explanations for these results that provide additional context for thinking about this study’s findings. First, we argue the increase in young people’s news consumption is in direct response to advances in networked technologies and a flood of news, both text and video, that streams onto their devices 24/7. As a first-year student in our study sample described commented, “It’s harder to not stay current than to stay current.”

Secondly, and related to the first explanation, there is also more political news — and opinion — to follow, process, evaluate, and reconcile today than there was only several years ago when API conducted their study of millennials’ news habits. Students in our study, who were technically members of “Generation Z” (and not the millennial cohort) [14], said the accelerated pace of the news cycle combined with an influx of constantly changing national and international issues had led them to read or view more news than they had ever done before.

The sentiment students in our study expressed about the torrent of political news is validated in recent research from the Shorenstein Center for Media Studies at Harvard University. When a media scholar analyzed the political coverage of Donald Trump’s first few months in office, he found television and print coverage of the new president accounted for 41 percent of all news stories — three times more than any previous U.S. president (Patterson, 2017) [15].

During the months when our 2018 survey was administered, we found many students were interested in some kinds of political stories, such as race and immigration (75 percent) — and so were many others in the rest of the country. A nationwide Gallup survey of adults found more Americans had identified “dissatisfaction with government/poor leadership,” “immigration/illegal aliens,” and “race relations/racism” as the most important problems facing the U.S. (Gallup, 2018).

While much of the news cycle during the data collection period was taken up by stories related to students’ lives and expressed concerns, such as gun violence, school shootings, and the fate of their fellow DACA students, the frequency of these kinds of stories is unlikely to decrease in the near future.

It is important to acknowledge that our findings tell us about certain news cycles, but little about how deeply students engage with news, and whether students read stories from beginning to end (except for data about reading stories that are shared on social media platforms) [16].

This is a limitation of our study, though it is an important topic beyond the scope of our research focus. The question of how deeply students read and engage with news presents an opportunity for future research. Such future efforts could build on Maryanne Wolf’s (2018) extensive research about the “reading brain” and “skimming news” rather than reading full stories.

### The social life of news

A significant finding from our research was the number of students getting the news through discussions, either online via text or e-mail or face-to-face. More respondents found what was going on in the world during the past week through conversations with peers or instructors than they did from online news sites, news feeds, and podcasts combined.

There was an interesting interplay between the news students got through their discussions with their peers and looking online for more information about a story. In this way, discussions acted as influential incubators that helped students filter the news. As one student, a social and behavioral sciences major, said, “with so many events happening across the world, the news that I end up reading is heavily influenced by what my peers are discussing.”

Other students said their parents had shaped the news stories they ended up taking an interest in and followed. For some, the home was where they first learned to critically assess the news. As a business major explained in an interview, “Some people just never learned how to read the news, so they see something alarming and they immediately believe it, without maybe thinking through the story or fact checking or asking questions about the credibility of the source — my parents taught me how to read the news.”

Still other students talked about taking a “deep dive” and going online to find out more about a news story that had been mentioned in a class discussion. In this sense, the classroom was another socially based source for news. Unexpectedly, almost three-quarters of the respondents reported that in the past week they became aware of news and current events through discussions with instructors or professors, either online or face-to-face.

Students said it was helpful when professors replaced in-class lesson plans with impromptu discussions about important breaking news that gave them context about world events, such as Kim Jong-un’s missile testing, the Alabama high school shooting, or the “March for Our Lives” student protest against gun violence. Others saw the value of conversations with professors to be as instructive about learning how to navigate today’s complex and crowded media landscape. As one first-year student told us in a follow-up interview:

I just recently found out that news can be fake. You really have to look for credible sources. Professors have taught me how

you have to read through the whole article, look at the source, see where your news is coming from before you make any assumptions; they enforce that, so I'm seeing it becoming more of a habit for me.

Within a larger context, our analysis has been influenced by media historian Mitchell Stephens, who wrote nearly 20 years ago before social media was developed, that "the frenzied, obsessive exchange of news is one of the oldest human activities" (Stephens, 2007). Taken together, there was an inherent socialness of the news among our study participants: Most students described a perceived value to discussing, debating, and exchanging news with people they trusted in their lives, i.e., friends, parents, and professors. Often these discussions were face-to-face and not online, according to our interviewees and the write-in comments.

We are not alone in our conclusions about the social value of news exchanges. According to Carey (1989), the news is a form of storytelling that brings people together and can bond them in a common narrative. News, Papacharissi (2015) claims, is how people come to feel their proximity to, or distance from, current events, and with social media, even become part of a developing story as a contributor.

As in our research, a study of U.K. students confirms that young people, not just adults, follow certain news stories where there is a strong emotional connection, such as stories about immigration, war and other things that make them feel socially and politically connected to the larger world (Carter, et al., 2009). In China, citizens forming political opinions have developed complex mediation methods, relying on networks of friends and crowd-sourced commentary from multiple social networks to assess news sources and navigate the "Great Firewall" that monitors Internet use and restricts information (Kou and Nardi, 2018).

And yet, as much as young people may want the news and engage with it as a social act, many have difficulty following and deciphering news that uses professional journalism formatting and packages news in ways that cater to older news consumers (Papacharissi, 2018). A German survey (N=1,800), for instance, found that young news consumers studied had difficulty recalling many of the details they had gotten from these kinds of traditional news stories or broadcasts (Donsbach, 2011).

Notably, the conversational exchanges about the news with peers, parents, and professors that we found in our study were an integral part of how students connected and, uniquely, how they became news literate while learning how to navigate online spaces for news. For the students we studied, accessing credible news stories is hard work; reading the news was rarely considered a leisurely pastime activity. Instead, engaging with the news required evaluating almost everything students heard or read for truth and objectivity, whether from a Facebook post a conversation with a friend, or a news tweet on their smartphones.

As a whole, staying informed and connecting with others to create common narrative, as Carey (1989) calls it, takes time and effort in the so-called "post-truth" era. Under these circumstances, discussing the news alleviated a lot of the work students put into choosing credible and reliable news sources from all of the rest of the news streaming toward them throughout the day.

From our findings, we concluded that discussions about the news with trusted peers, family members, or professors are an essential component of news engagement today. In fact, we argue that filtering news through mediated and unmediated sources may be more necessary than ever, given the questionable quality of news, and need for students to assemble, evaluate, and interpret news content as its delivered in the twenty-first century.

#### Issues with news in the classroom

While many educators and librarians recognize a need to make today's students more news literate, news often found its way into classrooms in uneven and unpredictable ways. According to participants' qualitative comments, some professors, especially those in the arts and humanities and social and behavioral sciences, incorporated the news into their discussions with students.

Other professors abstained from news discussions or relied on conventional information sources like textbooks or scholarly journal articles. In certain disciplines, such as computer science and mathematics, news was rarely addressed as part of their curriculum.

When news was discussed in class, some students that we interviewed said that references professors made to current events were random and unrelated to course content. This left students unsure of how they were expected to integrate news with curricular content.

Given these scenarios, we have concluded that colleges and universities may be failing to respond meaningfully to the media crisis. Moreover, some students in our study commented on the selective use of news sources by professors and their need to work with what they perceived as the professors' biases for news sources, given the political leanings of a source.

Other students reported that faculty were dismissive of news gathered from Facebook and other popular social media platforms, whether the original source was a mainstream outlet or not. Qualitative findings, such as these, help to explain the gulf between how students engage with news for academic purposes and in their personal lives. The two realms — academic and personal — making up college students' lives shared few commonalities as far as the resources used for getting news.

#### Key to faculty influence

It is notable that finding out about news from professors served both purposes — making the classroom an interesting crossroad between academia and daily life. Though professors may not be intentionally teaching news literacy, they may well be demonstrating that familiarity with news is a social practice and a form of civic engagement.

Students, we concluded, are less likely to gain that socialization through interactions with librarians, though there is evidence that many first-year students find librarians a helpful guide to academic expectations about finding and using information (Head, 2013). There are many reasons that students are more likely to learn about news from faculty in the disciplines than from librarians, including the length of time students spend in classrooms and the fact that faculty members wield the power of grades.

But it may also be that news is one form of information where faculty and students have more in common than when discussing disciplinary research. Faculty expertise in their field distances them from their students' experience when seeking scholarly sources.

For faculty, research is an ongoing social practice, a way of collectively building on previous work while debating new ideas with colleagues; students do not have the insider knowledge to discern which theories are on the ascendant, which journals are the most prestigious, or even how to mine a reference list to find connections among ideas.

Students have to turn to library databases — and to librarians — to find sources that are appropriate for an assignment because they do not possess the tacit knowledge their professors do (Fister, 2015; Simmons, 2005). They cannot approach developing trust in academic sources in the same way they might determine the validity of a news source encountered on social media.

Many students tend to outsource critical evaluation of scholarly sources to the format of the source: there's even a handy check box in the library database to sort relevant peer-reviewed sources from magazine and newspaper articles. Their professors have a much more nuanced means of judging sources based on deep knowledge and professional social circles.

Neither students nor faculty in the disciplines generally approach news from the perspective of deep insider knowledge; discussing news in the classroom provides a point of contact where students and their instructors can jointly negotiate meaning. Though students evaluate news sources they might use in an assignment differently than they would for personal use, it is in discussions of news encountered through various non-academic channels where the academic and the personal are most likely to merge.

Given both young adults and older news consumers obtain much of their news through social media and other non-traditional sources, bringing news from these everyday channels to the classroom would open opportunities for learning together. Research from the Stanford

History Education Group suggests both students and faculty have difficulty evaluating the validity of news encountered online (Stanford History Education Group, 2016; Wineburg and McGrew, 2018).

Discussions of current events in the classroom could productively include exploration of how news reaches us and how the facts reported in those sources can be verified. Using a relatively simple heuristic to quickly assess sources could be practiced in a course without sacrificing too much class time (Caulfield, 2017).

Our findings suggest faculty have great potential to use discussions about news to model critical inquiry as a lifelong practice as well as practical ways to ascertain the trustworthiness of news sources. And while faculty may feel ill-equipped to engage students in discussion about highly charged and controversial topics, learning how to have these conversations is itself a valuable learning opportunity.

When choices for news are abundant, and objective and professional news coverage is mixed with sketchy online content, learning how to critically evaluate news and information has a crucial place in today's classroom. In the words of one biology student in our study:

I like to follow technology and science studies and I can evaluate those types of news stories because I've been trained how to do it in statistics classes I've taken; other people would have a lot harder time identifying fake from real news.

We concluded from our findings that the integration of news into the classroom can lead students to develop critical reading and viewing habits that may be useful beyond academia. While acknowledging that this learning will not happen automatically, given the clear differences in how students found and engaged with news for personal and academic purposes, it may be worth developing instruction that explicitly transfers skills from one domain to the other. Classroom interactions may be a major factor in how students choose news sources, though this is complicated by the influence of political leanings; some students identified that these may be a source of conflict.

The pathways students depend on to obtain news, and that news takes to them are diverse and intertwined, embedded in academic and personal contexts, and constantly evolving in response to technological change. This study's results provide a clear snapshot of some of the factors educators and librarians need to consider in developing teaching and learning plans that work with students' skills and behavior patterns.

## Opportunities and strategies

There are limitations to our study, given its exploratory nature, the size of samples used, and the inherent issues of self-reported data. Nonetheless, our findings may be a good basis for identifying strategies for advancing news literacy efforts in the academy. In fact, our findings have led us to conclude that the individual classroom is a place where this work can begin and have an impact on navigating the complex online news landscape, if done well and for a clear reason.

Long before educators and librarians were concerned with preparing students to critically understand the news, educational psychologists Lev Vygotsky (1978) and John Keller (1987) promoted instructional design that motivates through relevance. Based on interviews and write-in comments from participants in our study, when instructors integrated news into a discussion that was relevant to a student's life, it had the potential to arouse attention, even conflict, and stimulate learning.

Some, though not all, of the students in our study said when they heard about news through these exchanges, they went online and dug deeper after class to learn more about a topic on their own. Others said their clicks were prompted by learning about civic issues that clearly affected and interested them, such as the fate of Planned Parenthood funding or the Flint water crisis. These findings show how young people use the interplay between online and off-line news sources to learn more deeply about news that sparks their interests.

Scholarly research about civic education from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) field points to the importance of sustained, deliberate integration of news content in the classroom (Thomas and Brower, 2017; Stroup, et al., 2013). Thomas and Brower, for instance, highlight the importance of discussion-based teaching about public issues. Drawing on student interviews conducted for their study, the authors concluded that instructors are influential forces helping to shape students' political interests, while advancing civic learning.

A deliberate integration of news into classroom discussions may seem to have a natural home in courses in general education or political science. And yet, there needs to be a broader approach, that extends across the entire curriculum if all — not some — students are to be better prepared with the information skills they need to assess news quality and credibility in our "post-truth times."

### Why discussing news in the classroom matters

Students in some subjects said that news is not accepted by their professors as valid information, or has no bearing on their discipline, or falls outside the hierarchy of "real" information sources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles. This denigration plays into the conditions that cultivate the general distrust of news. This contributes to the negative cycles affecting journalism today, reducing not only trust, but funding, appetite, and value for news.

It is particularly troubling to see the disconnect between science majors and the news at a time where the most pressing stories — climate change, nuclear weapons, pandemics, pollution, artificial intelligence — are science-based, and distrust of science has disastrous consequences (McIntyre, 2018). Developing the capacity to understand and evaluate science news has never been more critical; likewise, it has never been more important for scientists to help the public understand why science matters.

Discussing news across the curriculum has the potential to develop not just a better sense of what news to trust, but a disposition to believe academic knowledge and methods have real-world value. As we noted in our findings report from this study (Head, et al., 2018), the "Writing across the Curriculum" model may serve as an example for those looking at large-scale programs, but these take time and resources to initiate. This program encourages students to develop skills for writing for all their classes across the disciplinary spectrum, not just in their composition courses.

A "News across the Curriculum" program could similarly broaden student engagement with news across a range of discipline-related topics from business and history to biology and the arts. Students could build connections between their news practices and their academic work, while situating news in certain disciplines with a deeper understanding of current events. Several studies have shown the efficacy of such an approach for building critical thinking and disciplinary knowledge in the social sciences (Malcolm, 2006) and sciences (McClune and Jarman, 2012).

For educators and librarians looking for solutions they can use in next week's classes, it may be useful to start small, with a single question: how does this course intersect with the news? Here, we have identified related questions for developing news modules:

1. How do I talk about the news in class and what does that signal to/teach students?
2. What news habits do I model in class?
3. How does news intersect with my discipline?
4. What are my source requirements and prohibitions based on?
5. How does social media play a role in keeping up with current events?
6. What are the implications of using different paths to news in order to become informed citizens?
7. What do students/novices in the discipline need to know about how their area of study appears in the news?
8. How can students' existing news habits (lateral reading, following a spark of interest, sharing information with peers, checking more authoritative sources) be leveraged to develop deeper engagement with other types of information?

9. How can I model both warranted skepticism and reasons for trust in news media?
10. How will I approach such discussions when public attitudes toward news media are polarized?

Integrating news awareness into course content could be as basic as asking students what they are already seeing related to particular topics or to the discipline. Such discussions can help connect news to academic work, open up a wider variety of news sources to students (and perhaps their professors) and reveal the differences personal choices and commercial algorithms make to what students see.

Bringing news into the classroom can also alert students to what they are not seeing, raising questions around who is left out of the news they receive, what stories are prominent and which are ignored. Exercises where students are invited to fill these news gaps for themselves and their colleagues, searching out news sources with different perspectives, different foci, or from different countries, can help give students some agency in developing more active news engagement.

In some science courses, students compare news reports to original articles to see how audience and purpose change the way a story is told. In others they may monitor how the media treats particular issues related to a profession, an issue, a person or a group of people. Students can curate news in blogs or other online platforms, developing skills of analysis and synthesis as well as building habits of verification.

Faculty may not see where they can make space in crowded syllabi for discussing the news or may not feel they have the skills to lead discussions which may involve conflicting deeply-held opinions. Students, and others, may not have much practice in discussions that are not debates. And yet, these skills are needed more than ever today. Educators and librarians looking for a way forward in our "post-truth era" must leverage and build upon the knowledge and tactics students already have and help them refine and adapt their skills to different needs and emerging online media.

## Conclusion


This study investigated how college students from U.S. colleges and universities engaged with news at a time when the crowded news landscape is packed with accusations of bias, "fake news," propaganda, and sensationalism. Drawing on empirical findings from a sample of nearly 6,000 U.S. students, we studied how — and why — mediated and unmediated news helps students understand the world for academic and personal purposes.

A mixed-methods approach, consisting of a survey, responses to an open-ended survey question, and telephone interviews, was used to collect data from study participants during 2018. Our findings suggest that the news diet for many American college students today is an overwhelming and confusing stream of mediated and unmediated headlines, posts, alerts, tweets, visuals, and conversations that come to them in pieces throughout the day.

In particular, this study found:

1. College students are not newsless: Students in our study had news habits that were multi-modal: More than two-thirds of the survey respondents had received news during the past week from five pathways of news, i.e., discussions with peers, social media platforms, online newspaper sites, discussions with professors, or news feeds.
2. Facebook (still) reigns for news among social media networks: More students in the sample had gotten news from Facebook and Snapchat than Twitter or Reddit during the past week.
3. Students are selective about their news: Respondents had followed different news topics that they said had a direct impact on their lives, such as traffic and national politics and civic issues, crime and public safety, race and immigration, and environmental and natural disasters.
4. Political leanings relate to students' news choices: The small number of students in the sample identifying as "very conservative" or "conservative" expressed less trust in news, regardless of the source, than did the "very liberal" or "liberal" respondents; conservative respondents were more likely to choose Fox News over the New York Times, CNN, BuzzFeed, and BBC combined.
5. All classrooms are not created equal: Respondents majoring in either arts and humanities or social and behavioral sciences were far more likely to learn about news in online or face-to-face exchanges with their professors during the previous week than were students in engineering, computer science, or mathematics.
6. Professors are influential pathways to news for students: There was little crossover in how respondents engaged with news for fulfilling academic assignment requirements and for personal purposes in their everyday lives. One notable exception was more than two-fifths of the sample reported that professors, and their recommendations for news, served both purposes — academic and personal — in their lives.

Our findings suggest that mediated and unmediated discussions are essential to college students' engagement with news, even though some research has proclaimed that young people receive all of their news from social media networks, if they get any news at all. We found discussions about the news had an important sense-making function for students, guiding them on how to navigate the complex news landscape at a time of acute political polarization, a volatile media environment, and where poorer quality content and disinformation thrive.

In this paper, we have concluded that the social aspect of news is the key to advancing students' news literacy, especially in the classroom. Familiarity with news is a social practice and a form of civic engagement, and professors who integrate news into the classroom help prepare young adults for lifelong learning in a democracy. 

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## Notes

1. For more background about the origins of "fake news," including the entirely fictionalized news created in Macedonia, see Samantha Subramanian (2017), "Inside the Macedonian fake-news complex", and Mike Wendling (2018), "The (almost) complete history of 'fake news'".
2. Head, et al., 2018, p. 14.
3. There were 1,632 responses from survey respondents to open-ended question #12 that asked, "Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about how you get news when looking for course assignments vs. for use in your personal life?" When we cleaned the dataset, we removed 380 responses that were not useful to our analysis, including remarks such as "no," "not really," or "N/A."
4. This study defines traditional news outlets, such as the New York Times and the Washington Post, while examples of new media sites include Politico or BuzzFeed.
5. Students from Green River Community College (Washington State), Harvard University (Massachusetts), UCLA (California), University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and California State University participated in our exploratory focus groups during the spring and fall terms of 2017. In 2018, 11 students, who were not eligible for our sample since they were enrolled at different schools, were used to improve the wording and layout of the survey instrument.
6. As a note to readers of this article, the data presented in Figure 2, "How students get their news," Figure 3, "Social media networks as pathways to news," and Figure 4, "News topics students engaged with during the past week" appeared previously in PIL's "How students engage with news" report (Head, et al., 2018).
7. Authors of this paper acknowledge that the survey sample was self-selected and students who did not follow or care about the news may have decided not to take the survey.
8. We used the same phrase, "pathways to news" that was used by the American Press Institute (2015) in its report on millennials and news seeking, Pew Research Center's (2016) report. Similarly, the phrase is used in this report to avoid confusion with terms like "platforms" and "sources" to describe students' methods of getting news. Only five percent of the respondents had gotten news from two or fewer pathways to news in the preceding week.
9. The news topics listed in Figure 4 have been adopted and modified, with thanks, from the API study (American Press Institute, 2015).
10. The data provided in this paragraph is from Question 8 of the news engagement survey (Head, et al., 2018).
11. We acknowledge that many more of our respondents described themselves as either "liberal" (35 percent) or "very liberal" (49 percent) than called themselves "conservative" (11 percent) or "very conservative" (2 percent). The PIL survey sample did not reflect the political affiliation of Americans nationwide. According to a 2019 Gallup survey, conservatives continue to outnumber liberals, 35 percent to 26 percent (Saad, 2019), but it was more aligned with how Generation Z voted in the 2018 midterm elections with 67 percent casting their ballots for Democrats (Tyson, 2018).
12. Twenty-four percent of the "conservative" respondents "somewhat" to "strongly agreed" with the statement, "I do not trust the news no matter what the source is," while only eight percent of the "liberal" respondents agreed with the same statement. A Kruskal-Wallis Test revealed a statistically significant difference in trust across the different political affiliations ( $H(6)=276.39, p < .000$ ). The "very conservative" and "conservative" groups had higher overall levels of agreement with the statement according to a 5-point Likert scale ( $M = 2.38, SD = 1.2$ ) than those with "liberal" and "very liberal" political affiliations ( $M = 1.83, SD = .98$ ).
13. The data provided in this paragraph is from Question 9 of the news engagement survey (Head, et al., 2018).
14. Generation Z consists of young people born between 1995 and 2010, which means that the oldest are about 24. Millennials are young people born between 1980 and 1994, and the oldest are about 39-years-old.
15. In his 2017 paper, Thomas Patterson analyzed news reports in the print editions of the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post, the main newscasts of CBS, CNN, Fox News, and NBC, and three European news outlets. In addition to the unprecedented amount of coverage Trump received, a large majority was more negative than positive (Patterson, 2017).
16. Though we did not collect data about how thoroughly students "read" news stories for fulfilling academic assignment requirements or keeping up with news in their personal lives, we did collect data about sharing and depth of news readership. We found 59 percent of the survey sample said they read an entire news story before deciding whether they wanted to share the breaking news on a social media network (Head, et al., 2018, p. 21).

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