

## *College students' perspectives of bias in their news consumption habits*

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### ABSTRACT

This article builds off prior work on news consumption habits and perception of bias in the news by focusing on college students' self-generated definitions of bias, and the strategies they employ to guard against how their personal bias potentially affects what news they choose to believe and consume. Through interviews with undergraduate students, findings show that while participants acknowledged they had personal bias to a degree, the majority still defined bias as an external issue imposed on them by others than as an internal issue shaping their thoughts about the sources they consumed. Some students attempted to mitigate any perceived bias they had by reading multiple or opposite perspectives than their own, while others believed it enough to be "aware" of their bias and continue to consume news as they pleased. A few students didn't check their bias at all. Some saw bias as a positive under certain circumstances.

**Keywords:** *news, bias, media literacy, news consumption habits.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The ability to critically evaluate and identify trustworthy sources is an essential skill for navigating today's society (Anspach & Carlson, 2018; Powers, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018; Tully et al., 2020). News consumption and production habits have changed with the advent of social media and digital technology, yet those changes are more complex than a straightforward evolution from "analog" to "digital." People, especially youth, use social media and digital technology to access, disseminate, and curate content generally, yet trust in social media as a credible source of information remains relatively low (Huang et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2019, 2020; Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014). Though technology makes possible for news aggregators, apps, email newsletters, and more niche news alternatives to emerge, a reliance endures on traditional, mainstream news brands and organizations who had pre-digital existences, which continue to serve as the chief gatekeepers and arbitrators of what counts as "credible" news (American Press Institute 2014; Newman et al., 2020; Tandoc et al., 2018).

News habits and attitudes have political implications, as they influence how a citizenry may vote or perceive those of opposing ideological points-of-view, (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bakshy et al., 2015; Barberá, 2020; Bessi & Ferrara, 2016; Duca & Saving, 2017; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015). Dis/misinformation existed before the digital era and have been a longstanding media issue, but concerns about their impact on society have risen steadily in public consciousness over the past few years (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Gorbach, 2018; Greifeneder et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2019, 2020; Uberti, 2016). Yet youth and the public need to guard against dis/misinformation *and* reflect on their reasons for why and how *they* identify and decide on which sources to consume. They must furthermore recognize how their biases shape their judgement of source credibility.

Building off research on news consumers' perceptions of bias and the strategies they use to engage with the news (Craft et al., 2016; Edgerly, 2017; Tully et al., 2020), this study explores how college students define bias, how they think their personal bias affects their news consumption, and how they check (or don't) their bias when choosing sources. Understanding how young adults evaluate and share news is important (Leeder, 2019; Swart, 2021). Having students explain and critically reflect on the *why* behind their actions – and the trust they place in themselves about what they

do – is equally important for understanding their news consumption habits, especially given the wide variety of sources available to them across spaces and contexts today.

### Media literacy and the news

Now, more than ever, citizens are in critical need of media literacy skills when navigating information, especially in the context of social media platforms, where patterns of distribution are complex due to the news-sharing habits and algorithms at work (Tandoc et al., 2018 p. 2746).

"Media" has often been a catchall term for content, devices, platforms, organizations, software, and norms/practices, with variation for what's excluded or included dependent on specific definitions and lines of research (e.g., Jenkins, 2006; Manovich, 2002; Pavlik & McIntosh, 2014; Van Dijck, 2013). Media literacy has been framed as a mindset and/or skill to acquire. Media is a *construction* with a *point-of-view*, yet it can be and frequently is interpreted in a variety of ways due to the unique perspective an individual brings to any work they consume or produce (Center for Media Literacy, 2009; Considine & Haley, 1999; Hobbs & Frost, 2003). Youth and the public must be able to interrogate the subtle and overt messages built into media, but media literacy involves understanding how media both shapes us and how we shape it in turn (Considine et al., 2009; Van Dijck, 2013).

Prior studies have included focus groups with teenagers about how they defined and consumed news, as well as the sources they turned to generally (Craft et al., 2016; Tamboer et al., 2020). Other studies conducted interviews with young adults about their strategies for how to locate "credible" news information (Edgerly, 2017; Swartz, 2021). This study focuses on students' definitions of bias instead of the news more broadly, and it explicitly asked participants about their strategies for how to identify and contend with their personal biases as they engage with the news. Where former work was more concerned with how participants chose credible news, this study is more concerned with how students' understanding of bias affects their news consumption choices. Specifically, this study asks:

RQ1. How do college students define and understand bias?

RQ2. How do students think their own bias affects the way they consume news?

RQ3. How do they guard against and check (or don't) their bias in the news they consume?

Personal bias influences how people choose sources and interpret content, along with how they understand, trust, and remember information (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015; Lord et al., 1979; Nickerson, 1998). Consciously or subconsciously, people can choose and use content that reinforces already existing beliefs, sometimes making those beliefs extremer; they can also treat content in opposition to their perspective with greater skepticism, or still use oppositional information in ways that nevertheless reinforce strongly held beliefs (Kuhn, 1989; Lord et al., 1979; Nickerson, 1998; O’Sullivan & Durso, 1984). Youth and adults alike have also been shown to more readily recognize bias in other people than they do in themselves (Pronin et al., 2002, 2004; Wang & Jeon, 2020; West et al., 2012), although everyone is “other people” to someone else.

Tully, Vraga, and Smithson (2020) conducted 22 interviews with adults about their news consumption habits. Participants were provided with a guide of what counted as news media literacy, and then they were asked about their self-perceptions of how their personal bias shaped how they identified and checked bias in the news. This present study provided no initial guide to participants about how to define or think about the news or bias, taking a step back to ask them how they define bias on their own terms.

The former study also focused on how participants’ personal bias contributed to how they identified and checked bias in the news, whereas this study focuses on how students identify and check bias *within* themselves as it relates to their consumption of the news. This is a subtle yet key difference as the latter places the bias of consumer and producer on equal footing. Often in media literacy research, personal bias remains treated as an extension or step on the road to training students and the public on how to judge the bias of the sources they consume.

*Source* bias, if only implicitly, tends to be centered as the greater threat, with consumers potentially taking the attitude that their personal bias matters mostly for judging external credibility/sources. However, by centering consumer bias as equal to news producer bias, personal bias isn’t simply a means to learn better criticality toward sources; it’s to learn how to judge the bias inside oneself independent of a source’s position. Personal bias needs to be judged as a companion rather than extension or step on the path to source bias.

## News consumption patterns

In addition to understanding students’ thoughts around bias, it’s important to understand what sources they consume as well as why they decide to use and trust what sources they do. News consumption can be intentional, whereby users actively seek information, or incidental, where they are exposed to news content while engaging in other media activities (Boczkowski et al., 2017; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014; Tandoc et al., 2018). News consumers authenticate information through both internal *and* external processes where they initially rely on their own internal judgements about whether news content and sources are trustworthy, and then if not satisfied, they turn to external sources such as friends, family, social networks, and news organizations/institutional sources for verification and credibility assistance (Tandoc et al., 2018).

The modern news landscape increasingly demands that individuals wade through multiple and diverse sources and points-of-view (Barberá, 2020; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015), while increasingly asking them to pay for access to the news. This can be problematic as the everyday consumer is typically willing to pay for a single news subscription, if any, and would still prefer to spend discretionary income on entertainment subscriptions before news, if the consumer has to choose (Newman et al., 2019). This means that news access and exposure may be limited to what is free and/or the source(s) people can or will pay for, which means consumers must make choices on which sources to consume and why. It becomes imperative to therefore understand bias in relation to the *types* of news sources students choose – or are exposed to – which leads to a fourth research question:

RQ4. From where do college students get their news, and what types of sources do they consume and why?

Previous research exists on the types of news sources consumed, along with perceptions of news brands/organizations (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Huang et al., 2015; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Marchi, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2020; Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014; Tandoc et al., 2018). This study extends and complements work on *why* students consume certain types of sources over others (Craft et al., 2016), examining the intentional and incidental pathways that can emerge in how they arrive at the news sources they do (Head et al., 2018). Understanding this in conjunction with how students define and make sense

of bias will contribute to the broader literature around news, bias, and media literacy.

## METHODOLOGY

The data in this article comes from interviews with 23 college students, aged 18-22, who discussed their understanding of news, bias, source credibility, and their wider media habits. The interviews were semi-structured, conducted individually, and were between 45-60 minutes. They took place in the winter and spring of 2018.

Seventeen participations identified as women, five participants identified as men, and one participant identified as non-binary. All students attended the same private university in the Midwestern United States, but they came from eleven different U.S. states and two additional countries (China and India). Recruitment occurred through the university's email Listservs and social media pages. See Table 1 below for information about participants.

The 18-22 demographic are a useful population through which to explore attitudes and behavior norms around bias and the news. They are potential first-time voters in the U.S. whose engagement with news content may shape their stances and voting habits on various political and social issues. They are reasonably close to their K-12/secondary education years where they may have encountered lessons about sources, news, and media literacy, while now being exposed to higher education with the varying source practices of specific majors.

As mentioned previously, students 18-22 are furthermore heavy media consumers for a variety of content (Barberá, 2020; Huang et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2019, 2020; Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014) and are at a stage where they are making more decisions about what sources to consume on their own, as many are living away from their families.

This article doesn't encompass the entirety of questions asked in the interviews. Rather, it focuses on students' answers about 1) how they define bias, 2) how they think bias affects the way they consume news information, 3) how they check (or don't) their bias when it comes to the news, and 4) the types of news sources they consume.

*Limitations.* While a number of participants did refer to their political beliefs in their interviews, they were not explicitly asked to discuss this directly.

Table 1. *Information about participants*

Age	Gender-Pronouns	Region	Major	Year
18	She/her	California	Undecided	Freshman
18	She/her	Connecticut	Neuroscience	Freshman
19	She/her	Illinois	Social Policy	Freshman
20	She/her	Illinois	Spanish/ Anthropology	Sophomore
20	She/her	Shanghai	Communication Studies	Junior
20	She/her	Illinois	Communication Studies/ Legal Studies	Junior
21	He/him	Ohio	Music	Junior
21	She/her	Washington (state)	Biomedical Engineering	Junior
21	She/her	Texas	Computer Science/ Engineering	Junior
21	She/her	Illinois	Statistics/ Psychology	Junior
21	She/her	California	Psychology	Junior
21	He/him	Michigan	Social Policy	Junior
21	He/him	Illinois	Learning and Organizational Change	Junior
21	He/him	Illinois	Biological Sciences/ Psychology	Junior
21	He/him	India (didn't specify region)	Chemical Engineering	Senior
21	She/her	California	Social Policy	Senior
21	She/her	Pennsylvania	Learning Sciences	Senior
21	They/ them	New York	Theater/Gender Studies	Senior
21	She/her	Oklahoma	Industrial Engineering	Senior
21	She/her	New Jersey	Communication Studies	Senior
22	She/her	Illinois	Learning and Organizational Change	Senior
22	She/her	Pennsylvania	Journalism	Senior
22	She/her	New Jersey	Social Policy	Senior

Given how ideology, especially politically related ideology, plays a role in modern news consumption practices (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bakshy et al., 2015; Bessi & Ferrara, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2016), this would have been a helpful dimension to have. In a future iteration of this study, it would be worthwhile to understand how these types of questions operate within the context of political partisanship. Additionally, while a number of students did refer to their race/ethnicity in their interviews, data on every participants'

race/ethnicity was not systematically collected. Rich insights were still gleaned from this study, but demographic attributes can be a significant factor in how people respond to media and especially the news. Identity affiliations influence individuals' interpretation of information in multiple ways (Barton & McCully, 2005; Goldberg, 2013; Matthews, 2018, 2022; Royzman et al., 2003), and demographics shape whose voices and perspectives are represented, or not, in research (Matthews, 2020). It is important to ensure visibility to as many populations as possible, though this is not always feasible for various reasons.

*Analysis.* Following transcription of interviews, an iterative analysis occurred based on Glaser's grounded theory (1978, 1992). Transcripts of every interview were initially *open coded* in relation to how participants answered each research question, accompanied by the creation of memos that addressed developing codes and any trends that seemed to emerge in the data. After completion of open coding, the next step was to refine, compare, and combine the open codes into smaller groups of *selective codes*. Then, in conjunction with the memos, distilling these codes even further resulted in major *theoretical codes* for each question; transcripts were re-coded for just these codes, which were:

RQ1. How do college students define and understand bias?

The first major code under this question was for students who referred to bias as an *external process*, meaning that bias was something imposed on information sent out into the world. For example:

I guess what that actually means is when people have a message beyond the facts that they are trying to get across, or if they're trying to use the facts in a certain way to show a message.  
(21, She/her, Washington, Biomedical Engineering, Junior)

I would define it as a slanted perspective on a certain subject that is trying to persuade an audience to see a certain subject a certain way.  
(18, She/her, California, Undecided, Freshman)

Students' definitions in the external category linked bias to attempts at persuasion, convincing others of a particular point-of-view.

In contrast, the second major code was for students who explained bias as an *internal process* that affected the receiving and processing of news inside oneself. Bias was a way of being that pervaded how one viewed others' messages, instead of the attempt to persuade others to a view. For example:

Bias is, I guess is like pre-existing belief that you have in your mind that you use to approach from your own perspective, and that kind of influences how you see a lot of things.  
(20, She/her, Shanghai, Communication Studies, Junior)

I think... is like having some sort of pre-conceive notion before entering an analysis or processing of information.  
(21, He/him, India, Chemical Engineering, Senior)

If a student defined bias as an external *and* internal process, their response was coded as *both*, such as in the below example.

[...] Like a pre-judging of information before you consume it or produce news based on it.  
(21, They/them, New York, Theater/Gender Studies, Senior)

RQ2. How do students think their own bias affects the way they consume news?

These major codes focused on how students believed their bias influenced how they consumed news, such as:

- If bias influenced how readily they *believed or dismissed news*.
- Whether they saw bias as a positive in the sense that it allowed *specific experiences to be appreciated and represented* and/or *provided concreteness to abstract ideas*.
- If bias influenced what news students *chose* to consume in the first place (what headlines they clicked on, the topics they consumed or looked into).
- If bias created *visceral, physical responses* to the news.

RQ3. How do they guard against and check (or don't) their bias in the news they consume?

These codes applied to students' answers for how they checked their bias and/or sought to mitigate how their bias influenced their news consumption practices. The codes were:

- Students didn't check their bias but tried to *have an awareness/be mindful* of how it shaped their practices.
- They strove to *read multiple or opposite perspectives* to mitigate bias.
- They *embraced their bias*.
- They *didn't check their bias at all*, with no further explanation as to why, or because they had decided to *trust and simply believe the news source* they consumed was accurate and fair.
- They *generally relied on their own judgement* but might be inclined to look up other sources sometimes.

RQ4. From where do college students get their news, and what types of sources do they consume?

To answer this, students' responses were ultimately coded for 1) the *types* of sources used for *where and how* they accessed the news and 2) *specific platforms and organizations* they used within the news source category.

For types of news sources, sub-codes (which were part of the selective coding phase) were:

- Whether students accessed the news via *social media* online platforms (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook).
- Whether they accessed the news via an organization's *app* (e.g., *The Wall Street Journal* or *The New York Times*).
- If they received news *via email or newsletters* (e.g., Morning Brew or The Skimm).
- If they read directly from non-social media *online magazines and websites*, and not through email or an app (e.g., *Politico*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*).
- If they listened to *podcasts*.
- Whether they watched news via *TV*, which in this case referred to content, not necessarily the device. This code was for the consumption of material created and distributed as a "TV show," even if students watched it on their laptop or phone.
- *Word-of-mouth (WOM) and local offline*: This included news they heard in-person from their friends, family, teachers, or content they watched, read, or listened to from local news stations/radio/newspapers that they did not consume through a digital device.

Some organizations/publications could fall under multiple categories listed above due to the variety of ways they can be accessed (for example, *The New York Times* can be read online or via an app, The Skimm can be accessed as an emailed newsletter but also has app and podcast options. NPR has podcasts and an online website). Codes were applied based on how students accessed their source. If a participant read *The New York Times* via an app, it was coded under app usage, but if another participant read *The New York Times* online, it would be coded under online magazines and websites. Similarly, if a participant read The Skimm through their email in the newsletter format, it was coded under email/newsletter, but if another listened to The Skimm podcast, their source counted under podcast usage. Each source type mentioned per student received only one code, but the same source mentioned by another student could receive a different code.

In addition to the above codes, specific brands and organizations were also coded (Facebook or Instagram,

NPR or Hourglass, The Skimm or Morning Brew, CNN or *The New York Times*, etc.).

## RESULTS

### Students' definition of bias, how they think bias shapes their consumption of news

Most students (16) defined bias as an external process, while five saw the process as internal and two defined bias as both external/internal. The seven students who defined bias as either internal or external/internal were Journalism, Music, Theater/Gender Studies, Chemical Engineering, Communication Studies, Psychology, and Learning Sciences majors. Two were from Pennsylvania while the other five were from New York, California, Shanghai, India, and Ohio. Of the 23 total participants, 12 admitted that their bias shapes whether they believe/accept or challenge/remain skeptical of the information they consume.

[...] if someone posts something about a politician or celebrity that I like, that they did something, or they said something negative, I might be bias to think oh that source isn't credible.  
(21, He/him, Ohio, Music, Junior)

[...] if an article goes against my bias, I kind of tend to not want to read it, unless it's, I feel there are talking about both sides, like the side that I support too...I don't tend to really look out for things that are like opposite of what I usually read or like believe.  
(21, She/her, Texas, Computer Science/Engineering, Junior)

Participants' backgrounds were important to how they engaged with information, such as whether they had personal stakes or family connections to a topic.

I read opinions about immigration law, my parents are immigrants, and I think because I do have like a personal stake in that, it makes me a lot more emotionally invested...It's really easy for me to critique or to agree with people based on like where I see myself on the spectrum [of an issue].  
(20, She/her, Illinois, Anthropology/Spanish, Sophomore)

Eight students saw bias shaping what they chose to consume even before they accepted/rejected information, admitting personal relevance and preexisting opinions about a source influenced whether they would click on a headline.

I definitely want to like click on articles and read articles that more side with my bias, because it's more comfortable and just more pleasant to read articles that agree with what you already think about the world.  
(21, She/her, Washington, Biomedical Engineering, Junior)

I think I look for people with similar bias as me... I feel like the people who have those biases, their experiences are probably more in common with mine, so their needs are more in common with mine. So, if I want to know how the news is going to affect like me, my friends, my community, my family, I want to look for those people of similar life experience as I do.  
(21, They/them, New York, Theater/GS, Senior)

Two participants saw bias as more of a positive. One felt the use of it in writing allowed specific experiences and perspectives to “be represented,” whereas another student saw bias as a way to make abstract ideas concrete through the connection to her own life/what personally mattered to her.

Bias can be good sometimes - allowing bias in writing, it’s actually really important because you’re allowing specific experiences to be represented.  
(22, She/her, Pennsylvania, Journalism, Senior)

I think it can be helpful in some ways when I’m in a learning context in order to kind of make these abstract concepts that I’m learning about into something tangible and real in terms of a real life experience that I’ve had and applying it to that.  
(18, She/her, California, Undecided, Freshman)

One student said bias gives her visceral, physical reactions.

I’m getting to a point where sometimes I’ll see some things and immediately feel my chest tense up, which I probably think is some bias, but I don’t think it’s not well founded bias.  
(22, She/her, New Jersey, Social Policy, Senior)

Figure 1 displays a breakdown of how students saw bias influencing their news consumption practices.

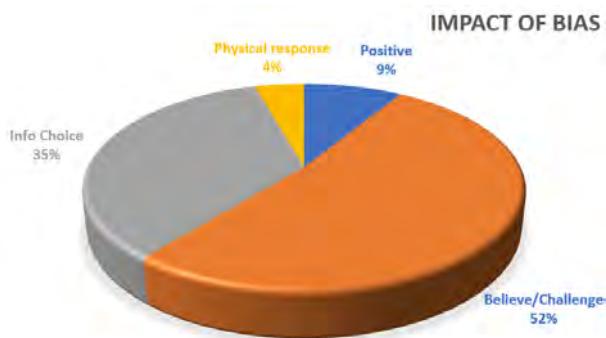


Figure 1. *Impact of bias*

## How students guard against and check (or don’t) their bias

Nine students said they attempted to check their bias by forcing themselves to consume or attempt to understand opposite/multiple perspectives on a topic.

There are times when I kind of have to tell myself ok, this is just the Wall Street Journal, you need to look at other sources as well, because they’re going to have a different take on this situation or something like that.  
(21, She/her, Oklahoma, Industrial Engineer, Senior)

I have to kind of push myself to read an article that I’m not necessarily, not interested in...if you read an article, you are like, I know nothing about this or about what’s going on or about this culture, you’re a little bit more inclined to read a little more intently and a little deeper, and I think that allows you to get a holistic picture.  
(21, She/her, Illinois, Statistics/Psychology, Junior)

Only two of the nine students who attempted to check their bias by consuming or trying to understand opposite/multiple perspectives were among the seven students who defined bias as an internal or both external/internal issue.

Four students said they simply don’t guard against and check their bias at all, with three of the four deciding to trust that those who produced the source vetted the information, and they can just believe what they consume. They know bias exists, and it is what it is, though as one student (18, She/her, Connecticut, Neuroscience, Freshman) acknowledged “I think that’s [her attitude] like probably a bad thing.” Another student admitted she should “cross-check” sources, but to do so was too “emotionally draining” for her.

I think it’s just like ok to have free reign bias...I think it’s like emotionally draining to have to like, I know, it’s good to like cross-check your sources... but I’m just like a one source type of person because I’m just trusting like the checkers to have done that already.  
(22, She/her, Illinois, Learning and Organizational Change, Senior)

Four additional participants had a similar attitude to the ones above, but they tried to be aware of their bias when consuming the news, even if they accepted bias was a part of the process.

I feel like a bit [of the] problem with people is that they don’t admit it or they’re like no, I’m not biased... so I guess just like confronting it and like knowing what they [one’s biases] are can help... why I am approaching this thing this way and this other topic this way.  
(21, She/her, California, Psychology, Junior)



I think it's important to try to be mindful, but also like - I think it's ok to read news with like your own biases in mind... it's natural for people to want process things and process current events or politics in a way that it makes sense to them.  
(21, She/her, Illinois, Statistics/Psychology, Junior)

Three other students embraced their biases, as they felt it enhanced their reading of the news or in the case of a journalism major below:

I lean into them [...] piece I reported was about women in Europe and as someone who has spent a lot of time in her life in Europe and who is a woman, it felt like I was able to write about it...I wouldn't feel comfortable writing a story about like the LGBTQ experience for people of color...if I was to try to write about those things that I didn't know, it would come across as inauthentic.  
(22, She/her, Pennsylvania, Journalism, Senior)

Three students said they mostly relied on their own judgments about their bias for the news, but they would maybe check more sources if a topic was of interest or they felt it was worthwhile, although this was not their general practice, as in the example below:

I think most of the time I will make my own judgment or if it's something that I think need a little bit more verification, I will go and like search for something else and to make sure that's actually true.  
(20, She/her, Shanghai, Communication Studies, Junior)

Figure 2 presents a breakdown of how students checked (or didn't) their bias.

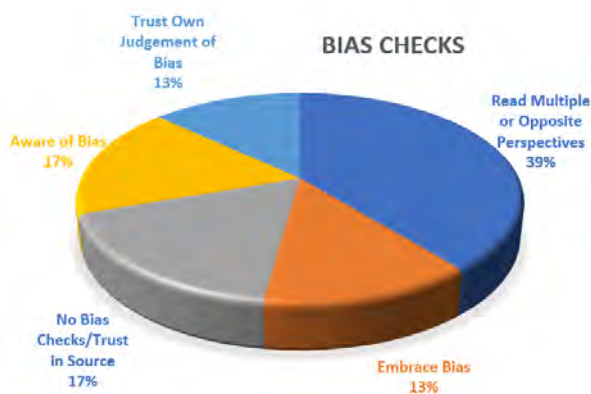


Figure 2. *Bias checks*<sup>1</sup>

Five of the seven students who defined bias as an internal or external/internal issue embraced their bias, trusted their judgment, or thought it enough to be aware of their bias.

<sup>1</sup> The percentages add up to 99% instead of 100% due to rounding issues. If the percentages included tenths, hundredths, thousandths values, etc., it would add up to 100%.

## News source types

Social media, apps, and email/newsletters were the most commonly referenced sources for news, although students valued them differently. However, one commonality that social media, apps, and email/newsletters had was their usefulness to students due to the fast and convenient access they granted to a variety of information. Tied to this was the ability to sort through headlines easily in a feed, email, or receive notifications on their phone.

Figure 3 provides a breakdown of news source types mentioned by students.

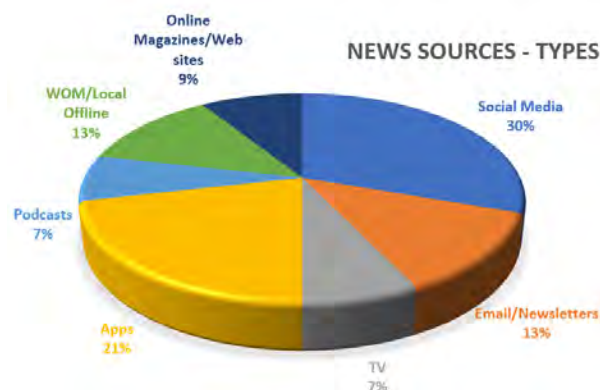


Figure 3. *News Sources - Types*

Of the 23 participants, 17 mentioned social media as part of their news consumption practices, despite that they had an overall low opinion of the quality and/or credibility to be found on these platforms. After social media came apps, with 12 participants stating they frequently used them, followed by seven participants who referenced email/newsletters. Note the percentages in Figure 3 are based on the total number of sources mentioned and *not* on how many participants mentioned a source type.

Another seven participants engaged in some type of offline source usage, with three participants saying word-of-mouth (WOM) from family, friends, and teachers was a major source of news, followed by four participants who watched, listened to, or read from non-digital sources such as the local TV station or radio. One student among these four read physical newspapers when she was at Starbucks. Word-of-mouth tended to be important for those students who didn't really engage in intentional news consumption; after they had heard



information from someone, they would now want to learn more. As one student remarked about her sources:

I usually get the news from friends... Like for example, my friends are talking about a specific event or something that's happening soon, I might read it [the news], just so I can learn more.

(21, She/her, Texas, Computer Science/Engineering, Junior)

Word-of-mouth (WOM) by family can also lead to adoption of sources. In the below example, a participant recalls about how she came to use *The Skimm* newsletter after an exchange with her sister.

[...] there was a big thing with the Supreme Court Justice dying, right that happen, right? [...] she [my sister] was like...you didn't hear about that, that's a joke... and I'm like how am I supposed to know... So then she was like, here, let me refer you and sign you up... that's how I started getting my news through *The Skimm*.

(20, She/her, Illinois, Anthropology/Spanish, Sophomore)

Four students regularly used podcasts. Another four students also used online websites/magazines. An additional four participants utilized TV as a source. A combination of sources for news was quite frequent among participants.

I generally subscribe to online email chains that provide me with general, business news. I have a CNN app on my phone that gives me, you know, updates and NPR podcast for news.

(21, He/him, India, Chemical Engineering, Senior)

I have a Wall Street Journal App on my phone, and then I get a notification every time they like post an article or something, and I also follow news sources on Facebook.

(21, She/her, Oklahoma, Industrial Engineering, Senior)

### News sources - Platforms and organizations

Facebook was the most cited platform for news by 17 different participants. Students did not typically use Facebook as a social media platform for their lives as a whole, but scrolling through feeds and posts by friends was a convenient means to access a range of articles, as the following two examples show.

So, my Facebook - I feel like the majority of my friends aren't like very active, nobody really posting or anything, so, really my news feed are kind of made up of like things that I've liked, and a lot of the things that I've liked, I guess... are like a lot of news sources.

(21, She/her, New Jersey, Communication Studies, Senior)

It's convenient. It's right on my phone or computer. It's easy. If I feel interested in something to research it further, as opposed to reading something in the newspaper and having to research that

via a different medium, I can just pull up another tab on my computer.

(18, She/her, California, Undecided, Freshman)

Similarly, *Morning Brew* and *The Skimm* (read by four and three students respectively) were useful for the ability to assemble and allow an easy scroll through headlines to inform participants about current events. A bonus for these sources was digestibility.

*Morning Brew* is a great one, because it's geared towards young people, you know, without much, you know, jargon, talking in layman terms about business news.

(21, He/him, Illinois, Learning and Organizational Change, Junior)

*The New York Times* was the second most referenced specific news source after Facebook, with 12 students using the publication. However, in contrast to Facebook, which was not highly regarded by participants for quality, many saw *The New York Times* as one of the more credible sources.

[...] a lot of my friends use *The New York Times*... from what I've heard is being one of the sources that is a little bit more, not necessarily neutral, but does a better job of getting more accurate news.

(21, She/her, Illinois, Statistics/Psychology, Junior)

Despite students' heavy engagement with social media, part of their trust for *The New York Times* and similar publications was because of its origins in print. As one student (21, She/her, California, Psychology, Junior) said, she tended to trust sources from a print publication "because I think it must have had some backing at some point," though the student acknowledges, "of course like some crazy publications have print." One student did express more criticality for *The New York Times* as compared to the rest of the participants, noting that even with its reputation, it has an amount of privilege and power that plays out in the way it represents the news.

There are circumstances in which like, you know, *The New York Times* kind of, as an organization, has its own set of privileges and has its own set of like powers...when I see something that kind of demonstrates those privileges and action that's when I'm more inclined to take a more critical eye.

(21, They/them, New York, Theater/Gender Studies, Senior)

Another mainstream brand referenced by four participants was CNN (including CNN International). Twitter was mentioned by three students, as was NPR. Figure 4 presents the most referenced news platforms and organizations. Like with Figure 3, the percentages

in Figure 4 are based on the total number of platforms/organizations mentioned and *not* on how many participants mentioned a platform/organization. No more than two participants mentioned Instagram, Google News, Snapchat, Politico, *Vogue*, or *The Wall Street Journal* as news sources.

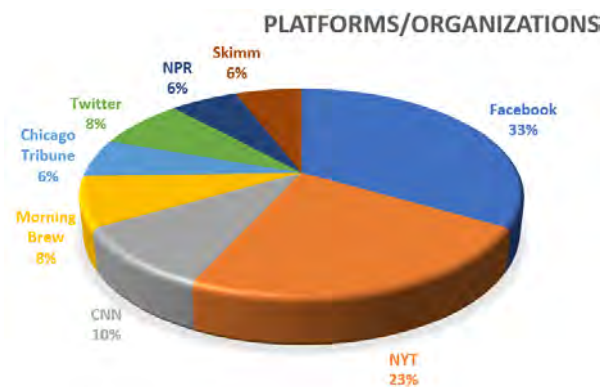


Figure 4. News sources - Platforms and organizations

## DISCUSSION

### Bias

This study highlighted differences in how participants defined and thought about bias as it related to the news. Research has shown that youth and adults more readily recognize bias in others than they do in themselves (Pronin et al., 2002, 2004; Wang & Jeon, 2020; West et al., 2012). On the one hand, participants in this study did recognize and acknowledge that they had personal bias, yet the majority still *defined* bias as an external issue in sources. However, participants overall thinking was complicated in multiple ways.

As mentioned earlier in this article, and in line with prior research (Kuhn, 1989; Lord et al., 1979; Nickerson, 1998; O’Sullivan & Durso, 1984), participants admitted they tended to prefer content that reinforced their beliefs while challenging, disregarding, or engaging in greater skepticism with oppositional content. Only nine of the 23 participants said they attempted to check their bias by looking at multiple sources/opposite perspectives. The other 14 participants 1) didn’t guard or check their bias at all, 2) thought it was enough to be aware they possessed bias and moved on, 3) relied on their own judgements, or 4) embraced their bias. Perhaps they might see *their* bias as a lesser concern than others’ bias.

Only two of the nine students who attempted to check their bias via multiple sources/points-of-view

were among the seven students who saw bias as an internal or external/internal process. One might think that if a person defined bias as an internal issue they would want to check their personal bias by engaging in multiple or divergent perspectives, but perhaps seeing bias as an internal issue does not equate to seeing bias as a *problematic* issue. Five of the seven students in the internal or external/internal definitional group claimed to 1) trust their own judgement, 2) be aware of their bias and move on, or 3) embrace their bias, but none of seven were in the don’t-check-or-guard-against-bias-at-all group. This suggests these participants do think about bias when using news sources, and their solutions to guarding against bias are internal, too.

Future research might involve interviews or a survey that specifically asks participants to rate their internal bias in comparison to how bias they believe the news is, and how trustworthy their evaluation of sources is in comparison to others’ internal views. Future research might also expand on the age range of participants to look at high school students or older adults for what differences may emerge in how they think about these issues, and where media literacy interventions might be the most useful. A larger sample should also attempt to gather a population with a wider and more balanced range of educational backgrounds to see if any patterns emerge based on academic and disciplinary training, along with collecting race/ethnicity and political ideology information. These additional dimensions to this work would be beneficial for practitioners and researchers to explore the interplay among identity, thoughts about bias, and news consumption practices.

Just as it is important to not always or automatically trust external sources, sometimes internal, personal judgments are not trustworthy either. People need to do more than merely acknowledge bias, although acknowledgement is a key first step to better criticality about bias. Media educators need to consider when awareness of bias/trust in personal judgment is enough and when it is not. This is why it’s important for media literacy education to look equally inward *and* outward, as too much focus in either direction can become problematic.

### Source usage

The diversity of sources participants engaged in reflects prior research (Heads et al., 2018) that shows students still rely on word-of-mouth (WOM), family, local news, and peers as sources for deciding what to learn more about and/or what to use. Students in this

study were heavy social media users, yet they had lower trust in social media as a credible source of information, which also aligned with prior research (Huang et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2019, 2020; Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014). Participants favored traditional, mainstream news sources, with *The New York Times* seen as among the most credible. However, it was noteworthy that one participant explicitly reflected that she viewed sources as more trustworthy if they *didn't* have a digital origin, highlighting that despite the pervasive use of social media and digital technology for news, brands pre-dating these carry with them a perception of having better “standards,” and thus being more trustworthy. The multiple references to Facebook also connect to noted trends in social media usage. While news and media consumers increasingly turn to other platforms and apps such as Instagram or TikTok for their activities, especially when it comes to social activism and civic engagement, Facebook remains one of the most widely used platforms for news, even if it is no longer the dominant platform for users’ daily lives (Newman et al., 2019).

Students’ explanations for their habits and attitudes shed further light on the above patterns. They selected news sources primarily based on prestige/reputation, convenience, and digestibility. None of these categories automatically equates to truthfulness or accuracy, yet there was an underlying and unacknowledged assumption by participants that their sources, at least those in the prestige/reputation category, were so. Perception was treated as a taken-for-granted reality. Besides the one student who critiqued the privilege and power *The New York Times* had, none of the other participants really challenged or considered whether the reputation the newspaper or similar mainstream brands had for accuracy and credibility was justified. That’s not to say such reputations aren’t justified, but that prestige sources tend to be what “everyone” has heard about and knows. Trust placed in these sources is to a degree the result of widespread socialization – because parents used it or friends use it now, or it is part of a Google or Apple aggregator.

When it came to social media, especially Facebook, convenience was perhaps the top motivating factor. Participants held low opinions for Facebook in particular, yet the accessibility of it on all their devices, the ability for them to scroll through lots of content (or the headlines/summaries of content), and not have to look at multiple websites unless they *wanted* to learn or read more, outweighed credibility issues. This highlights a tension that exists in that what is easy is not

necessarily what is best, yet convenience will often triumph, especially if the information sought is not of high importance or relevance to a consumer. The ability to be convenient and accessible is why many pre-digital, mainstream brands have been able to survive and thrive in the digital landscape, because they’ve combined reputation with apps, emails, social media, and websites that users can have on multiple devices.

Digestibility was also important. Aggregators and email newsletters such as *Morning Brew* or *The Skimm* helped participants manage information overload (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014) by not only curating content, but also presenting the news in plain language, or as one participant said, without “jargon, talking in layman terms.” There has been a perception among news consumers that brands and organizations are useful for breaking news or acquiring rapid, real-time information, but less so for *explaining* the news, especially in how or why events and issues are relevant to young adults’ daily lives (Huang et al., 2015; Marchi, 2012; Newman et al., 2019). This is where sources that “explain” carve out a place in users’ consumption habits, though there is a danger that the commentary or curation choices of these sources can distort an original article’s points (Anspach & Carlson, 2018).

### Final thoughts

External and internal points-of-view are in constant interaction, with each able to subsume the other depending on the circumstance and person. For a media literate citizenry, youth and the public need to be able to articulate how, when, and why they believe what they do if they want to make informed decisions about the news, as well as how they should and do respond to a world that constantly bombards them with information, dis/misinformation, and everything else between the two.

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