

Perceived Literacy on News Media: A Study on Educated Youth

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Abstract

As Kerala society and its culture becomes increasingly permeated with media messages and images, it is high time to move towards media literacy as a way to educate young people about the role of media in their lives. The youth are supposed to become critical media consumers as well as citizens who actively participate in democracy/society. Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of forms. News media literacy is a subset of the broader field of media literacy. It refers to the perceived news media literacy skills which help a person to analyse news critically and knowledgeably. Adopting News Media Literacy Scale developed by Seth Ashley, Adam Maksl and Stephanie Craft, this paper is an attempt to assess the News Media Literacy of Kerala students. The study focuses on five basic principles for critical analysis of media messages giving emphasis and awareness on constructed media messages, representations of reality with embedded values and points of view, messages constructed on unique set of rules, creating meanings based on personal experience and individual interpretations, and politically and economically driven media.

Keywords

news media literacy, media education, media literacy, youth and media, media exposure

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Introduction

Literacy is referred to the ability to read and write text. Today's generation replaced the text based discourse with the image. In modern times, people absorb most of the information from various media like radio, television, news papers, magazines and internet. When it comes to media, students are the mass consumers. Majority of them have got Internet access in their homes, and most of them use it daily for everything from sending instant messages or chatting, playing online games to researching academic projects.

Today's students are 'digital born' and apparently use the versatile media and they spend little time to analyze the messages they're bombarded with every day. The information in these sources may be manipulated, incomplete, biased or downright false. There is lack of critical reading of media, and the limited opportunities for learning media production skills. Media Literacy is becoming an essential skill in today's world. It is a set of skills that anyone can learn. Just as *literacy* is the ability to read and write, *media literacy* refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media messages of all kinds. And *news media literacy*, a subset of media literacy, refers to the ability to access news disseminated through various media and by different media organizations, analytically, critically and knowledgeably.

News media literate individuals are better able to decipher the complex messages they receive from television, radio, newspapers, and the Internet. Media literacy skills can help one understand not only the surface content of media messages but the deeper and often more important meanings beneath the surface. Media literacy education seeks to give media consumer greater freedom by teaching them to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media (media literacy project.org). People are more vulnerable to being manipulated and misled from the truth, news media literacy is necessary for people to take their positions as citizens, especially in a democratic country like India.

Media literacy

Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy (Center for media literacy).

Ofcom (2004) defines media literacy as, the ability to access understand and create communications in a variety of contexts. According to Burton (2005), it is the ability to read and understand the visual, aural and digital messages and having the skills to understand and interact with the media analytically, critically and knowledgeably. Melissa (n.d.) defines media literacy as the ability to understand mass communication, such as interpreting its message and analyzing its functions.

In a media-saturated society, the definition of literacy, which traditionally focused on reading and writing text, must be expanded to include the full range of media (Daley, 2003). Media literacy is a “fundamental competency for literate citizens”. Media literacy is the ability to access, enjoy, interpret, analyze, produce, and evaluate messages in all varieties and combinations of print, visual, and digital formats (Jenkins, 2003).

News media literacy

News literacy is "the ability to critically evaluate, interpret and process as well as participate in news media and journalistic content in order to participate as active citizens in democratic society" (www.newsliteracy.org).

News media literacy is a subset of the broader field of media literacy. It refers to the perceived news media literacy skills which help a person to analyse news critically and knowledgeably. News media literate is capable of identifying the news values like impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, conflict, and human interest. S/he also acquainted with the guiding principles of news like truth, loyalty to citizens, verification, independence, relevance, comprehensive & proportionate presentation and application of personal conscience. If we're not news media literate, we can't understand what the news media are doing for us and to us.

For Art Silverblatt (2001), there are eight elements of media literacy. The researchers redefined and modified those elements as elements of news media literacy as follows:

- A critical thinking skill enabling audience members to develop independent judgments about news media content
- An understanding of the process of news making
- An awareness of the impact of news on the individual and society
- Strategies for analyzing and discussing mediated news
- The ability to enjoy, understand, and appreciate news media content
- Development of effective and responsible production skills
- An understanding of the ethical and moral obligations of journalists/news persons
- An understanding of news as a text that provides insight into our culture and our lives in the present

Being able to 'read the media', to compare media content and media messengers, is a prerequisite for determining the reliability and credibility of the information at hand. At the heart of news literacy is the combination of the critical reception and critical production of news media content (Varis, 2010). In short, news media literacy is a critical thinking skill enabling readers/audience to develop independent judgments about news media content with an understanding about the news production process and news persons' ethical and moral obligations to the society it influences.

Review of literature

Lian Huay Lim and Ying Leng Theng in their study (2011) *Are Youths Today Media Literate? A Singapore Study on Youth's Awareness and Perceived Confidence in Media Literacy Skills*, tries to investigate the youth's perceived media literacy skills and their confidence in these skills. Singapore youth especially secondary school students (13-16 years old) were the focus of the study. The paper aims to investigate their levels of awareness and perceived confidence in relation to media literacy skills. The paper focused to identify and understand knowledge gap in their media literacy skills and make suggestions to address the gap in education. The study found students were more bare new media as an entertainment and communication choice (Lian Huay Lim & Ying Leng Theng, 2011).

Kamaruzaman Jusoff et al (2009) in their study titled *Television and Media Literacy in Young Children: Issues and Effects in Early Childhood* attempt to find out the issue of television exposure to young children and the effect of promoting media literacy. Study reveals television affects child development of various areas. The Study found that television exposure could affect the language and cognitive development of young children. And it leads to behavior problem, attention disorder aggression and obesity (Kamaruzaman Jusoff, 2009).

Media literacy education is not practiced uniformly at all educational level. Hans Schmidt (2012) in his study *Media Literacy Education at the University Level* tries to find out To what extent do students perceive being exposed to course content related to media literacy within high school and college?. Study revealed students are more bared to more course content related to media use and creation in high school, but more course content related to media analysis in college (Schmidt, 2012).

The research paper, *The Influence of Media on Formal and Informal Education*, by Maria Claudia Cuc (2014) focuses on practical applicative dimension through which the media is the one that develops new interests, leisure time skills, offers new options for entertainment and culture for the sphere of preoccupations of school children. With excessive consumption of media messages are substituted cultural activities with a valued content, and there are disturbed the learning activities of learners. It was found an increasingly availability of the respondents to answer favorable to the development of media competences among learners, allowing them the assimilation of values of socio-cultural society and filtering information in the effort of selection, processing and interpretation of media messages (Cuc, 2013).

Tibor Koltay (2011) observes in his study entitled *The media and the literacies: media literacy, information literacy, digital literacy*, that media literacy is important for all citizens who intentionally or without knowing it, consume media, the presence of which has become wider and more diverse with the new digital technologies and the growing participation of laypersons. Media

literacy thus has to find its role both in primary, secondary and higher education either on its own, or presumably – with more likeliness – as part of some kind of multiple or multimodal literacy (Koltay, 2011).

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What is the role of education in making a student ‘news media literate’?

Research Question 2: What is the relation between ‘news media exposure’ and ‘news media literacy’?

Research Question 3: Are Kerala students aware about the elements of ‘news media literacy’?

Methodology

Graduate and Post Graduate students in Kerala constituted the population of the study. Researchers adopted survey method and questionnaire was used as the tool.

The researchers adopted the News Media Literacy Scale developed by Seth Ashley, Adam Maksl and Stephanie Craft. The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions along with demographic variables. And the study surveyed 131 graduate and post graduate students from six universities in Kerala.

Microsoft Excel Office and SPSS were used for data entry and data analysis respectively.

Questionnaire

News Media Literacy helps a person to receive and evaluate the news critically that comes through different news media on the basis of guiding principles of news. Adulterations of guiding principles of news that might happen in the media field are described in the following (concerned statements used in the survey are given in brackets):

- Loyalty to citizens/readers moves way to loyalty to media organization/owner (The owner of a media company influences the content that is produced).
- Prominence and proximity paves way to audience preference (News organizations choose stories based on what will attract the biggest audience).
- Independence from power to political linearity: (Individuals can find news sources that reflect their own political values).
- Comprehensive and proportionate coverage to selective coverage and exposure (People pay more attention to news that fits with their beliefs than news that doesn't)

- Multi source verification to single source verification (Two people might see the same news sources and get different information from it).
- Application of personal conscience to application of personal bias (Individuals are influenced by personal bias whether they realize it or not).
- Personal conscience to Personal preference/bias: When taking pictures, photographers decide what is most important
- Content-led news designing to audience's attraction-led news designing: news is designed to attract audience's attention.
- Prominence of news to availability of news story and related data (A news story that has good pictures is more likely to show up in the news).
- Truth based factual presentation to dramatic news presentation (News makes more dramatic than they really are).
- Reality based representation to opinionated representation (lighting is used to make certain people in the news look good or bad).
- Passive mediation to active technically biased news dissemination (Production techniques can be used to influence a viewer's perception).
- News for news sake to news for money sake (News coverage of a political candidate will influence people's opinions).
- News value equality to Conflict centred news value distribution (a story about conflict is more likely to be featured prominently).

The survey was conducted among graduate and post graduate students from different colleges and university campuses from six universities in Kerala: Central University of Kerala, Kasaragod, Kannur University, University of Calicut, Cochin University of Science and Technology, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam and University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram. The researchers gathered and analysed 131 responses of students from different colleges and university campuses of the above six universities in Kerala.

A simple majority of the sample (51.9%) are females and males constitute 48.1% of the sample. Among the surveyed, Post Graduate students forms the majority (58%) and the rest (42%) are graduate students.

Media exposure

Most of the students (93.89%) tend to read at least one newspaper a day irrespective of their gender and education. It is noticeable that a rare minority of the sample (06.11%) do not read even a newspaper a day.

Rare minority of students (10.69) do not watch even a single news channel a day. Majority of students (76.34%) watch at least two news channels a day.

A good number of students (42.75%) do not visit news websites at all.

Media exposure and gender

There is a significant difference between male and female samples in the case of newspaper exposure. Most students who read three or more newspapers a day are male (90.9%). Majority of male students (60.32%) read two or more newspapers a day whereas majority of female students (63.24) read one newspaper a day.

Simple majority of male students (52.38%) tend to watch three or more news channels a day whereas simple majority of female students (52.94%) watch one or two news channels a day.

Majority of male students (71.43%) visit news websites while majority of female students (55.88) do not visit the news websites. Among those students who visit two or more news websites males constitute the majority (70.45%).

Media exposure and education

Majority of PG students (56.58%) read two or more newspapers a day whereas majority of Graduates (69.09) read one newspaper a day. Most students who read three or more newspapers a day are Post Graduates (86.36%).The more the education of the students the more is their tendency to exposure to newspapers.

Majority of both Graduates (54.54%) and Post Graduates (59.21%) visit news websites. Majority of students who visit two or more news websites are Post Graduates (72.72%).

Statement wise analysis

The owner of a media company influences the content that is produced

Majority of students (82.4) agree with the statement that the owner of a media company influences the content produced.

News organizations choose stories based on what will attract the biggest audience

Most of the students believe that (86.3%) news organizations choose stories based on what will attract the biggest audience.

Individuals can find news sources that reflect their own political values

Majority of students (77.9) agree with the notion that news reporters can find news sources that reflect their own political values.

People pay more attention to news that fits with their beliefs than news that doesn't

Simple majority of students (67.9) agree with the statement that people pay more attention to news that fits with their beliefs than news that doesn't. A notable minority (12.2%) disagree with the same.

Two people might see the same news sources and get different information from it

Majority of students (69.5%) say that two people might see the same news sources and get different information from it. A significant minority (16.1%) disagree with the same.

Individuals are influenced by personal bias whether they realize it or not

A significant majority of students (70.2%) opine that individuals are influenced by personal bias whether they realize it or not.

News is designed to attract audience's attention

Most of the respondents (88.5%) agree with the point that news is designed to attract audience's attention

News makes more dramatic than they really are

Majority of students (77.1%) opine that news make the events more dramatic than they really are.

News coverage of a political candidate will influence people's opinions

A lot of students (78.6) are with the opinion that news coverage of a political candidate will influence people's opinions.

When taking pictures, photographers decide what is most important

Photographers' power in deciding what to be highlighted when taking pictures is a convincing fact for a vast majority of students (82.4%).

A news story that has good pictures is more likely to show up in the news

Majority of the students (77.9) think that news stories having good pictures are more likely to show up in the news.

A story about conflict is more likely to be featured prominently

A significant minority of students (26%) kept neutrality over the statement that a story about conflict is more likely to be featured prominently though majority (69.5%) disagree with the same.

Lighting is used to make certain people in the news look good or bad

Simple majority of students (65.6%) held the view that lighting is used to make certain people in the news look good or bad.

Production techniques can be used to influence a viewer's perception

The statement that production techniques can be used to influence a viewer's perception is upheld by a great majority of students (80.2%).

News paper media literacy

There are a few students (6.11%) in Kerala, as per this survey, who do not read newspapers every day.

Table 1: Perceived personal bias of newspaper readers

Level of agreement	Number of news papers read a day				Total
	None	One	Two	Three or more	
Strongly agree	3	29	6	8	46
Agree	2	22	17	5	46
Neither agree nor disagree	3	12	13	2	30
Disagree	0	1	0	2	3
Strongly disagree	0	1	0	5	6
Total	8	65	36	22	131

None of the newspaper non-readers disagree with the statement that individuals are influenced by personal bias whether they realize it or not. But a few of the newspaper reading students (6.87%) disagreed with it. The less is the newspaper exposure the more the students held the view that individuals are influenced by personal bias (Pearson Chi-Square: 0.00).

Majority of newspaper reading students (69.47%) find that two people might see the same news sources and get different information from it whereas non-newspaper reading students are not neutral and equal number of them either agree or disagree with the statement.

All the newspaper non-readers (100%) and most of the newspaper readers (87.8%) say that the news is designed to attract audience's attention. But a few of the readers (4.88%) disagree with the statement and some (7.32%) stay as neutral. Among 3.08% of students reading one newspaper, 5.56% of students reading two newspapers, and 9.09% of students reading three or more newspapers disagreed with the statement. The more the exposure to newspapers the less the readers agreed that news is designed to attract audience's attention (Pearson Chi-Square: 0.033).

Majority of the respondents (78.63%) agree with the statement that the news coverage of a political candidate will influence people's opinions. Interestingly, more non-readers (75%) agree with the statement than those who read one newspaper a day. Students who read one news paper a day is less (66.67%) likely

to hold the respective view, in comparison with those who read two newspapers (81.54%) and those who read three or more newspapers (90.9%). There seen a gradual increase in the number of news paper reading students who hold the view that the news coverage of a political candidate will influence people's opinions (Pearson Chi-Square: 0.012).

Non-readers of newspaper (100%) have got no doubt on the statement that a news story that has good picture is more likely to show up in the news but a minority of readers (12.2%) disagreed and denied such a chance.

The statement that a story about conflict is likely to be featured prominently, is agreed by majority of the respondents (69.47%). And a very few of the students (4.58%) belonging to readers category disagreed with the same. About one fourth of total students (25.95%) remained neutral regarding the prominence given to conflict in news stories. Mixed response can be related to the knowledge that conflict is considered as an element of news.

News channel media literacy

Only a rare minority of students (10.69%) stay away from viewing news media channels every day.

Table 2: Production techniques used to influence audience' perception

Levels of agreement	Number of news channels watched a day				Total
	None	One	Two	Three or more	
Strongly agree	4	5	17	23	49
Agree	7	7	13	29	56
Neither agree nor disagree	2	1	4	6	13
Disagree	0	0	4	3	7
Strongly disagree	1	4	1	0	6
Total	14	17	39	61	131

The table shows that 70.59% of one news channel viewers, 76.92% of two news channel viewers and 85.25% of three or more news channel viewers agree with the statement that production techniques can be used to influence a viewer's perception. Interestingly 78.57% of non-viewers also hold the same view. The more news channels they visit, the more the students hold the idea that production techniques can be used to influence viewers' perception (Pearson Chi-Square: 0.028).

Other statements in the questionnaire and news channel media exposure have no significant relation and so they are not analysed at present.

News website media literacy

More than a half of the students (57.25%) took part in survey find time to visit at least one news media website a day.

Table 3: Selective news website exposure of the student visitors

Level of agreement	Number of news websites visited a day				Total
	None	One	Two	Three or more	
Strongly agree	28	7	3	14	52
Agree	18	10	3	6	37
Neither agree nor disagree	3	11	5	7	26
Disagree	4	2	1	1	8
Strongly disagree	3	1	0	4	8
Total	56	31	12	32	131

For majority of students (67.94%), both those who visit and those who do not visit news websites hold the opinion that people pay more attention to news that fits with their beliefs than news that doesn't except the disagreement of a few (12.21%). News website exposure is thus dependent on personal beliefs and preferences of the users.

More news website non-visitors (78.57%) agree with the view that two people might see the same news sources and get different information from it, than that of news website visitors (62.67%). Among 78.57% of non visitors, 64.52% of one news website visitors, 62.5% of two news website visitors and 58.33% of three or more news website visitors agreed with the statement. The less the news website visits the more the students held the view (Pearson Chi-Square: 0.014).

More news website visitors (9.33%) disagree with the statement that individuals are influenced by personal bias whether they realize it or not, than non-visitors (3.5%). Among 51.61% of students visiting one news website, 66.66% students visiting two news websites and 65.63% of students visiting three or more news websites agree with the statement. The more the news website visiting the more the students hold the personal bias view (Pearson Chi-Square: 0.013).

While most of the website non-visiting students (82.14%) think that news are made more dramatic than they really are, comparatively, less website visiting students (73.33%) agree with the statement.

The statement that a story about conflict is more likely to be featured prominently is backed by majority of the students (69.47%). Very few of the students (4.58%) had an opposite opinion. News website non-visitors (76.79%) along with lone web site visitors (77.42%) showed more interest in stating the

conflict prominence in news. When simple majority of visitors of two news websites (66.67%) agreed with the statement only half of the visitors of three or more news websites (50%) held the same opinion. Half of the latter group remained neutral in the survey. It is noted that the more the number of students who visited more news websites likely not to agree with the statement that a story about conflict is more likely to be featured prominently (Pearson Chi-Square: 0.044).

Radio news media literacy

About half of the students (48.09) do not use radio as a medium to gather news. But the rest do.

Table 4: Perceived personal bias vs. Radio stations listened

Levels of agreement	Number of radio news stations listened				Total
	None	One	Two	Three or more	
Strongly agree	20	17	6	3	46
Agree	23	14	5	4	46
Neither agree nor disagree	17	6	5	2	30
Disagree	2	0	0	1	3
Strongly disagree	1	0	3	2	6
Total	63	37	19	12	131

Majority of radio news listeners (72.06%) and non-listeners (68.25%) agree with the statement that the individuals are influenced by personal bias whether they realize it or not. Radio listeners who listened to more stations are more likely to agree with the statement that the individuals are influenced by personal bias.

None of the radio news listeners agree with the statement that a story about conflict is more likely to be featured prominently. But a few non-listeners of radio news (9.52) disagreed with the statement.

Radio listeners who listened to more stations are more likely to agree with the statement that the individuals are influenced by personal bias.

Rest of the statements were not matters of concern among radio news listeners.

News media literacy and education

Table 5: News story selection based on audience' preference

Levels of agreement	Education		Total
	Graduation	Post Graduation	
Strongly agree	18	59	77
Agree	24	12	36
Neither agree nor disagree	9	3	12
Disagree	3	1	4
Strongly disagree	1	1	2
Total	55	76	131

Majority of graduates (76.36%) and most of the Post Graduates (93.42%) agree with the notion that news organizations choose stories based on what will attract the biggest audience. The higher the education the higher the level of agreement with the statement that news organizations choose stories based on what will attract the biggest audience (32.72% of graduates and 77.63% of Post Graduates strongly agreed with the given statement). The more the level of education the more the students agreed with the statement that news organizations choose stories based on what will attract the biggest audience (Pearson Chi-Square: 0.000).

Students in general (77.86%) agree with the notion that a news story that has good pictures is more likely to show up in the news. There is a gradual increase in holding the view in accordance with the education of the sample. Majority of graduates (76.36%) and most of the Post Graduates (93.42%) are having the same view. Among the total sample, 32.72% of graduates and 77.63% of Post Graduates strongly agreed with the given statement. The higher the education the higher the level of agreement with the statement that news organizations choose stories that has good pictures is more likely to show up in the news (Pearson Chi-Square: 0.015).

Major findings

- The more the education of the students the more is their tendency to exposure to newspapers.
- The less is the newspaper exposure the more the students held the view that individuals are influenced by personal bias
- The more the exposure to newspapers the less the readers agreed that news is designed to attract audience's attention
- There seen a gradual increase in the number of news paper reading students who hold the view that the news coverage of a political candidate will influence people's opinions
- The more news channels they visit, the more the students hold the idea that production techniques can be used to influence viewers' perception
- News website exposure is thus dependent on personal beliefs and preferences of the users.

- The less the news website visits the more the students held the view that two people might see the same news sources and get different information from it
- The more the news website visiting the more the students hold the personal bias view.
- It is noted that the more the number of students who visited more news websites likely not to agree with the statement that a story about conflict is more likely to be featured prominently.
- Radio listeners who listened to more stations are more likely to agree with the statement that the individuals are influenced by personal bias.
- The more the level of education the more the students agreed with the statement that news organizations choose stories based on what will attract the biggest audience
- The higher the education the higher the level of agreement with the statement that news organizations choose stories that has good pictures is more likely to show up in the news

Conclusion

The present study is an attempt to throw light upon the news media literacy of graduate and post graduate students in Kerala evaluating the responses made on the five point news media literacy scale developed by Seth Ashley, Adam Maksl and Stephanie Craft.

Students in Kerala, in general, are news media literate in a sense that they are having a number of news media literacy skills. Most of the students in Kerala access news media either in print or in audio/video format. Majority of them are having their own opinion regarding the news media content. Thus they seem to have the capacity to evaluate the news media content.

News media literacy of Kerala students is based on their exposure to the news media content available in various formats. They are not formally educated on news media literacy but acquired some of such skills to be called as news media literate students.

Kerala students access various news media content and are aware about some of the influencing factors of those contents like ownership, personal bias, audience attraction, technical bias, single source dependency and so on.

Kerala students are news media literate, but in a limited sense, as far as this study is concerned. Government and the society have to take initiatives to impart media literacy to the students as they are born into an ocean of media messages.

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