Checking What Students Know about Checking the News

MICHELLE CROFT, PHD, JD, AND RAEAL MOORE, PHD

Sharing information has never been easier than it is today. With the click of a button, people can quickly distribute content to and receive content from friends, family, and strangers using social media. But unfortunately, this content is not always accurate, and misinformation can spread quickly.[1] This is particularly important for students, who typically use social media as a primary source of information. In a previous study of student attitudes after the presidential election, 72% of students reported using social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) as a source for news related to the election.[2]

Although some inaccurate information or "fake news" can be easily identified, approximately one in four Americans surveyed by Pew Research in December 2016 reported that they had shared stories that they knew at the time or found out later were not true.[3] Students also have difficulty identifying whether a source is accurate.[4] For instance, a study from Stanford University found that middle school students were unable to distinguish native ads (i.e., paid advertisements designed to look like news stories) from real news articles.[5] The same study also found that high school students accept photographs as undoctored without trying to verify them and are unable to tell a real news story from a fake one on Facebook. The college students in the study did not suspect bias in tweets by an activist group and were unable to identify differences between mainstream and "fringe" news sources.

The purpose of the survey summarized in this brief was to gather more information about what sources high school students use to obtain news and what steps students take to judge the credibility of those sources.

Method

A sample of students who took the ACT test in February 2017 as part of a national administration were invited to participate in the survey. Students were asked to evaluate their awareness, and the accuracy, of a number of online primary and secondary news sources, and to identify the types of activities they took to evaluate the accuracy of the sources.[6] A total of 4,072 students responded to at least 80% of the survey items.[7]

Michelle Croft is a principal research associate in the Office of Public Affairs.

Raeal Moore is a senior research scientist specializing in survey methodological research and research on education best practices in P–12 schools.

Awareness of News Sources

Over 90% of the students who responded to the survey reported that they were aware of the traditional news outlets such as CNN, Fox News, and *The New York Times* (Figure 1). Nontraditional sources that are generally considered to have particular political biases—e.g., The Blaze, Natural News, and US Uncut[8]—were lesser known.

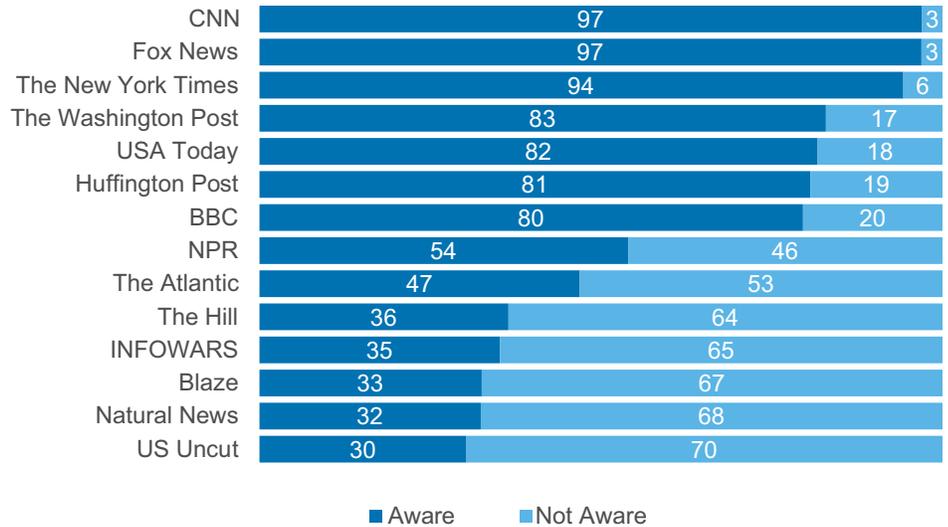| Source	Aware	Not Aware
CNN	97	3
Fox News	97	3
The New York Times	94	6
The Washington Post	83	17
USA Today	82	18
Huffington Post	81	19
BBC	80	20
NPR	54	46
The Atlantic	47	53
The Hill	36	64
INFOWARS	35	65
Blaze	33	67
Natural News	32	68
US Uncut	30	70

■ Aware ■ Not Aware

Figure 1. Students' reported awareness of news sources.

Secondary News Sources

In addition to using primary news sources, students also reported using secondary sources (Figure 2). Of the latter, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter were the most used, while other secondary sources, such as discussion boards, blog sites, and Tumblr, were used much less frequently. Thirteen percent of students reported not using any secondary news sources.
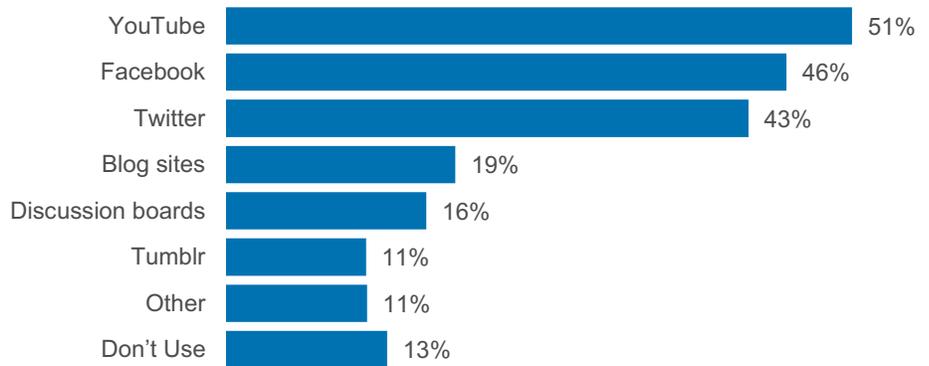
Source	Percentage
YouTube	51%
Facebook	46%
Twitter	43%
Blog sites	19%
Discussion boards	16%
Tumblr	11%
Other	11%
Don't Use	13%

Figure 2. Percentage of students using secondary news sources.

Accuracy of News Sources

Among students who were aware of a particular news source, the majority described the source as accurate.[9] Traditionally reputable sources such as the BBC, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* received the highest ratings (Figure 3). However, approximately half of students identified sources that are often classified as misleading, such as US Uncut (51%) and The Blaze (46%), as accurate. Similarly, 39% reported INFO*WARS*, a website routinely cited as containing misinformation, as accurate.[10]
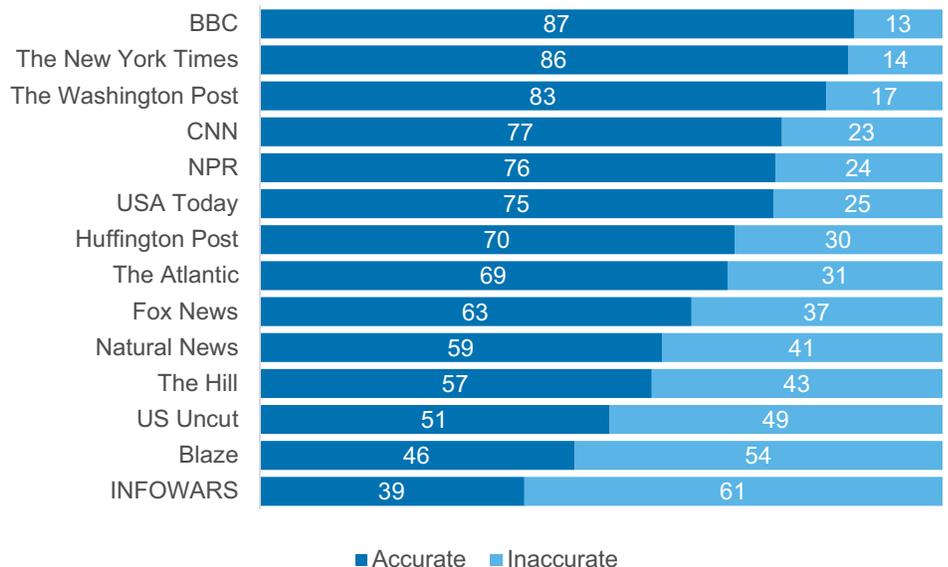
Source	Accurate	Inaccurate
BBC	87	13
The New York Times	86	14
The Washington Post	83	17
CNN	77	23
NPR	76	24
USA Today	75	25
Huffington Post	70	30
The Atlantic	69	31
Fox News	63	37
Natural News	59	41
The Hill	57	43
US Uncut	51	49
Blaze	46	54
INFOWARS	39	61

■ Accurate ■ Inaccurate

Figure 3. Students' evaluations of the accuracy of news sources.

Steps Taken to Check Accuracy

Sixty-two percent of the survey respondents reported believing that news sources are false more than about half the time. Given this, what steps do they take to check the accuracy of the news they consume?

The most frequently reported steps were those that do not involve leaving the webpage. For instance, the most popular steps were to examine the website's name (81%) or domain name (78%) (Figure 4). Relatively few students reported reading other articles by the author (39%) or conducting a reverse image search of a photograph to determine its origin (28%). Similarly, few students reported using other websites such as Fact Check (36%), PolitiFact (18%), Snopes (9%), or Open Secrets (5%).

Seven percent of students reported taking no steps to check accuracy, while over 75% reported taking four or more steps.[11] Students who rarely or never questioned the accuracy of new sources were those who took the fewest steps to check accuracy of news sources.[12] The students who were more likely to report taking more steps to check the accuracy of news sources tended to be those who reported having greater confidence in their ability to determine the accuracy of news sources and/or taking a course intended to teach them how to evaluate news sources.[13]

Recommendations

Information has the opportunity to help shape a student's knowledge and opinions on a variety of topics. The results discussed above indicate that large majorities of students are aware of traditional news sources and about one
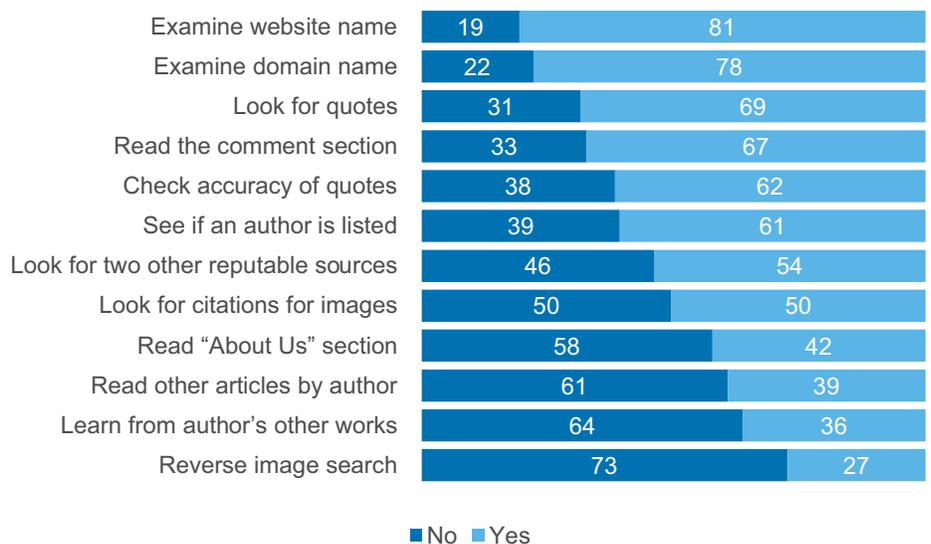
Step	No	Yes
Examine website name	19	81
Examine domain name	22	78
Look for quotes	31	69
Read the comment section	33	67
Check accuracy of quotes	38	62
See if an author is listed	39	61
Look for two other reputable sources	46	54
Look for citations for images	50	50
Read "About Us" section	58	42
Read other articles by author	61	39
Learn from author's other works	64	36
Reverse image search	73	27

■ No ■ Yes

Figure 4. Steps students reported taking to check the accuracy of news sources.

in three are aware of newer sources that tend to have a political bias. Unfortunately, the results also show that considerable percentages of students who were familiar with the latter sources believed that they were accurate.

Our study, as well as other recent research, suggests that students will be better equipped to evaluate news sources if they have received appropriate instruction. Based on the survey findings, we recommend schools and districts develop courses to teach students how to differentiate between accurate, reliable information and inaccurate, unreliable information.

Given the proliferation of news sources and students' access to them, educators (and parents) should take steps to help students prioritize fact-checking in their reading and work to better distinguish between real and fake news stories and sources and to help ensure that students are basing their views on factual information. ■

Notes

1. Katie Rogers & Jonah Engel Bromwich, "The Hoaxes, Fake News and Misinformation We Saw on Election Day," *The New York Times*, November 8, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/us /politics/debunk-fake-news-election-day .html; BBC Trending, "The Rise of the Left-Wing, Anti-Trump Fake News," BBC, April 15, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news /blogs-trending-39592010; Evan Annett, "What is 'Fake News,' and How Can You Spot It?" *The Globe and Mail*, May 23, 2017, https://www.theglobeandmail.com /community/digital-lab/fake-news-quiz-how -to-spot/article33821986/; Sapna Maheshwari, "How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study," *The New York Times*, November 20, 2016, https://www.nytimes .com/2016/11/20/business/media/how-fake -news-spreads.html.

2. Raeal Moore, Michelle Croft, & Gretchen Guffy, *The Next Generation of Voters: A Sample of Student Attitudes after the 2016 Presidential Election* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2017), http://www.act.org/content/dam /act/unsecured/documents/the-next -generation-of-voters.pdf.

3. Michael Barthel, Amy Mitchell, & Jesse Holcomb, *Many Americans Believe Fake News is Sowing Confusion* (Pew Research Center, December 15, 2016), http://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/.

4. Sam Wineburg & Sarah McGrew, "Why Students Can't Google Their Way to the Truth," *Education Week*, November 1, 2016, http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/11/02/why-students-cant-google-their-way-to.html; Stanford History Group, *Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning* (2016).

5. Stanford History Group, *Evaluating Information*; Camila Domonoske, "Students Have 'Dismaying' Inability to Tell Fake News from Real, Study Finds," *NPR*, November 23, 2016, http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/11/23/503129818/study-finds-students-have-dismaying-inability-to-tell-fake-news-from-real.

6. News sources were identified using an infographic that evaluates news sources on quality and political bias; see Vanessa Otero, "The Reasoning and Methodology Behind the Chart," http://www.allgeneralizationsarefalse.com/?p=65. The steps to check accuracy were identified using a document crated by a professor of

journalism; see Melissa Zimdars, "False, Misleading, Clickbait-y, and Satirical 'News' Sources," (2016), https://docs.google.com/document/d/10eA5-mCZLSS4MQY5QGb5ewC3VAL6pLkT53V_81ZyitM/edit.

7. A total of 56,896 students were invited to participate. Only the data of students who responded to 80% or more of the survey items were retained for analysis purposes. The sample was stratified by race/ethnicity to better reflect national demographics.

8. Otero, "The Reasoning and Methodology"; see also Media Bias/Fact Check, https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/.

9. Students were asked to rate sources as "very accurate," "fairly accurate," "fairly inaccurate," or "very inaccurate."

10. Linda Qui & Justin Bank, "Fact Check: Distortions and Fake News after Virginia Shooting," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/15/us/politics/fact-check-virigina-shooting.html; Christine Hauser, "Alex Jones Retracts Chobani Claims to Resolve Lawsuit," *The New York Times*, May 17, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/17/us/alex-jones-chobani-lawsuit.html; Eli Rosenberg, "Alex Jones Apologizes for Promoting 'Pizzagate Hoax,'" *The New York Times*, March 25, 2017, https://www

.nytimes.com/2017/03/25/business/alex-jones-pizzagate-apology-comet-ping-pong.html; Dana Milbank, "Trump's 'News' Source: Alien Lizards, Fluoride Mind Control and Voter Fraud," *The Washington Post*, November 28, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-news-source-alien-lizards-fluoride-mind-control-and-voter-fraud/2016/11/28/c0326c26-b5a0-11e6-b8df-600bd9d38a02_story.html?utm_term=.93c56c94d10d

11. Students were considered to have used a tool to evaluate the accuracy if they reported using it at least "about half the time" or more often.

12. We also examined whether students who think news sources are false were more confident in their ability to determine the accuracy of online news sources or if they had taken courses to evaluate online news sources. In both cases, there was not a statistically significant relationship.

13. The finding about students who took or were taking such a course is consistent with recent research by Joseph Kahne & Benjamin Bowyer; see "Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age," *American Educational Research Journal* 54 (2017): 3–34, http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/citedby/10.3102/0002831216679817.