

New MU Survey Will Help Evaluate and Teach Students News Literacy

COLUMBIA, Mo. — A crucial role of journalism is educating the public about important events and issues. However, impactful journalism requires consumers who are “news literate,” meaning they possess the ability to think critically about what they read and watch. Evaluating the level of an individual’s news literacy has long been a challenging task for educators and media researchers. Now, Stephanie Craft, an associate professor in the University of Missouri School of Journalism, along with former University of Missouri School of Journalism doctoral students Seth Ashley, who is now on the faculty at Boise State University, and Adam Maksl, who is now on the faculty at Indiana University Southeast, has developed a survey to measure news literacy and tested it with a key population demographic: teenagers. She says this survey instrument can be a helpful tool in teaching teens critical thinking skills regarding information they are exposed to through the media.

“News literacy is seen as an important component of democracy,” Craft said. “It is not just that I follow the news, but that I know enough about how the news was produced so that I can make good decisions through how I vote or what I buy. This survey can help teachers develop curriculum that will teach news literacy as well as evaluate students’ levels of news literacy before and after taking those courses. This measuring tool will be an important step toward helping citizens adequately decipher media messages and stay informed by finding credible information about their communities.”

For her research, Craft worked with focus groups composed of Chicago high school students. Based on information garnered from those focus groups, the Craft developed a survey to measure participants’ news literacy. Her initial survey of more than 500 Chicago high school students found that the level of news literacy among teenagers did not predict the amount of media they consumed.

“We found that teenagers are being exposed to quite a bit of media, including news, albeit from more nontraditional sources such as social media,” Craft said. “However, just because teens are consuming news doesn’t mean they have a high level of news literacy. Possessing factual knowledge of news events appears to be a better indicator of news literacy.”

Craft also found that the level of education achieved by teenagers’ parents has a significant influence on news literacy. She says understanding news literacy is especially important because new technology complicates the search for information.

“With all the new technology and the Internet, it is more difficult for people to identify reliable news sources and differentiate them from unreliable sources,” Craft said. “The information landscape is a confusing place these days, so the more we can do to figure out what people understand about the news and how they identify news sources, the better we can understand how news affects people’s decisions.”

The research project was funded by a grant from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation. The grant is part McCormick’s 3-year, \$6 million [Why News Matters](#) initiative.

“News literacy is a vital component of critical thinking skills, as well as an indicator of civic engagement,” said McCormick Journalism Program Director Clark Bell. “Professor Craft’s work helps shed light on what it takes and what it means to be news literate.”

This research will be presented at the 2013 Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications conference in Washington, D.C.

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