Assessing the News Literacy of Public High School Students

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News literacy is having the ability to understand, evaluate, and make use of the news in different situations. Guided by Potter's Media Literacy Theory, this study assesses news literacy of public high school students nowadays. A total of 205 public high schools students, chosen using non-probability sampling, completed a self-administered questionnaire. Findings reveal that the respondents were generally aware of what news is. They selected and consumed news based on their personal interests and perceived importance. While they considered political news important, they did not consume much news about it since politics was not among their primary interests. Also, news for them had some relevance since they can use it especially in classroom-related activities. And as they handle variety of news, it can therefore be held that they are competent not only in news acquisition, but also in understanding and evaluating the news. Hence, as revealed by the findings in areas of news literacy, the authors regard the respondents as news literate.

With the advancement of communication technologies, the modes through which the citizenry may be informed and educated are expanding. Consequently, these technological innovations facilitate the dissemination and exchange of diverse messages. The question therefore is how citizens access, acquire, and process information in this hyper-mediated and content-saturated landscape (Potter, 2005; Silverblatt, 1995).

More often than not, people find it necessary to be familiar with the news not only to be informed but also to form opinions. To arrive at informed opinions, they select aspects of the news important to them. Selection, however, is not analogous to understanding. In relation to news consumption, one should have the skill of examining the information critically (Potter, 2004), or what is also referred to as news literacy. News literacy entails not only the ability to access and acquire the news from various media sources but also being aware of current events and being able to understand, evaluate, and make use of the news in different situations.

While the study of literacy in general is relatively established in the literature, news literacy – more so among young people – is seemingly not addressed, especially in the Philippine context. The researchers deem the importance of looking at such matters, particularly in the case of less privileged public high school students.

Echoing Jose Rizal's words, "The youth is the fair hope of the motherland." Young people are the future leaders and movers of society. To be able to serve the country well, the youth must have substantive knowledge on concerns of public importance. This knowledge is vital to their maturity in making critical and sensible decisions later on. It is through the media that they primarily acquire information on pertinent events and issues here and abroad. Considering the ubiquitous and polysemous nature of media messages, young people are susceptible to misinterpret them.

While the news media may educate, young people may be misled without the proper skills for evaluating and understanding messages. In order to devise an effective program for honing such skills, there should be an assessment of their current proficiency in analyzing the news. This is what the present study attempts to do, with focus on public high school students who are seen to be generally disadvantaged (compared to their counterparts from private schools) in terms of access to

various information sources. Specifically, it seeks to answer the question:

RQ: How news literate are today's public high school students?

To answer this research question, the study has the following research objectives:

1. To find out from which media sources respondents acquire news;
2. To ascertain the respondents' reasons for accessing news;
3. To determine how the respondents define news;
4. To find out which news items interest the respondents;
5. To ascertain the importance of news awareness to the respondents;
6. To measure the respondents' knowledge on current events;
7. To identify the respondents' various uses for news; and
8. To determine their competency in handling the news.

Review of Related Literature

News is among the messages one acquires from various media. The news may contain embedded messages that can be either responsibly or sensationally reported. However, people receive news as pure information, and accept the reality presented in the news without questioning how it was produced or how it came to be news (Bugaoisan, 2002). Though people claim that they learn a lot from the news, they actually do not understand much of what they know (Gunter, 1987).

Although "changing lifestyle[s] leave children to explore television by themselves," (Acosta, 2005) little research has been done on young people's reception of the news. According to some estimates, news and current affairs programming constitutes only one quarter of total broadcast output (Buckingham, 2000). Moreover, merely eight percent of television content during the children's hour (four to nine in the evening daily) is allotted to news programs.

There has been a considerable decline in news consumption among young people. Several authors have noted young people's low use of and interest in news (Harcourt & Hartland, 1992; Buckingham, 2000). In *The Age of Indifference: A Study of Young Americans and How They View the News*, young people were described as being "consistently less interested in news (particularly political news) and less well-informed than their counterparts in earlier decades" (Times Mirror Center, 1996).

The news media, though, have a tendency to underestimate the capacity of young people to understand news content (Gauntlett, 1996). Children are perceived to be passive audiences who cannot resist the "attractive flow" of images on television. While the "look" immediately appeals to children, it is the content that holds their attention. They actively give attention to programs that capture their interest and challenge their developing minds (Gauntlett, 1996). Some studies have also shown evidence that children know of the "possibility of bias, exaggeration, and selective reporting in the news" (Gauntlett, 1996: 48).

Meanwhile, in their study on children's relationship with the news, Conway, Stevens, and Smith (in Gunter, 1987) found that news consumption among young people was dependent on political interest, and that those who frequently consumed news exhibited greater political knowledge. However, the influence of news may vary according to age. In a longitudinal study examining media use and political knowledge, Atkin and

Gantz (in Gunter, 1987) described older children as being "more affected by the news" (32). They have "greater capacity for learning from news messages" (32) because of their higher ability to process, structure, and store information.

In addition, stored knowledge, abstracted by personal and/or vicarious experiences, guides people's mental processes. This schema theory explains audiences' (in this case, young people's) attention to, interpretation, and evaluation of news, as well as retention and recall (Pernia, 1993).

Study Framework

News literacy, particularly in the local context, appears to be a relatively unexplored area of research. Media literacy, however, has already gained significant attention and is already an established domain in the international academic community (Silverblatt, 1995).

This study made use of the Media Literacy Theory (Potter, 2004) as a guide in assessing news literacy among public high school students. The theory offers a model that is grounded by four factors, namely: knowledge structures, personal locus, competencies and skills, and information processing tasks. These components work interactively.

The *knowledge structure* guides the respondents in getting the news. Their knowledge of news outlets, news content, the effects, and their own self guide their choices of news. Knowledge may vary according to the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The *personal locus*—goals and drives—is the respondents' personal values and interests which also guide their acquisition of news. This is determined by their reasons for getting the news and interest in different news items. Such personal factors also shape the processing of information by identifying which items are important and have value to them. *Competencies and skills*, for instance in reading, listening, or viewing the news, are the respondents' tools in their news

consumption. This component is also vital in understanding, evaluating, communicating, and making use of the news. *Information-processing tasks* consist of filtering, meaning matching, and meaning construction the moment news is acquired. In filtering, one tries to

Figure 1. Analytical Model

make sense of the news. After which, the information is matched with learned ideas and concepts. Consequently, the constructed meaning is applied in particular situations. The figure below illustrates this study's analytical framework.
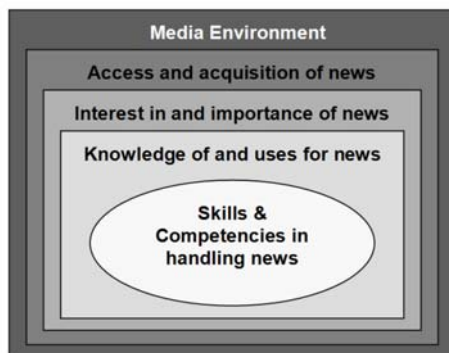
Methodology

To gather the data, a survey was conducted among 205 students enrolled in two national high schools in Metro Manila on the first quarter of 2007. A total of 56 first year, 41 second year, 47 third year, and 61 fourth year high school students participated in the study. Two-thirds of the respondents were women. Though 41% of respondents did not specify their monthly family income, 27% (56 out of 205) said their family earned less than P10,000 a month.

Non-probability sampling was used in the selection of schools and respondents. The researchers depended on the availability and the agreement of the schools to conduct the study in their premises.

A self-administered survey questionnaire was designed to assess the respondents' news literacy. Representing each objective of the study, there were eight major sections in the questionnaire. The instrument mainly consisted of five-point Likert-type scales, wherein 5 was the most positive value (such

as "always" and "strongly agree"). Mean scores were obtained in sections that used the Likert-type scales. On the other hand, a multiple-choice format for measuring awareness on current events was an exception. Response categories for each scale changed according to the variable being examined:

- Media sources
- Reasons for accessing news
- Definitions of news
- Importance of news awareness
- Interest in news items
- Competency in handling news

Scope and Limitation of the Study

The study relied on the self-report of respondents. It is important to note that self-assessment does not always represent actual proficiency. The sampling was done by convenience, thus did not yield generalizable results. There were no subgroup comparisons among year levels and between schools. Despite these limitations, the study offers a broad exploration on assessing news literacy.

Results and Discussion

News access and acquisition

Among possible media sources of news, free TV was the most frequently accessed, followed by FM radio and broadsheets. On the other hand, least accessed were cable TV and the Internet, particularly those which featured foreign websites (see Table 1). This ordering of media sources according to frequency of access can be explained by the ready availability and relative affordability of television, radio, and newspapers. Furthermore, "television news is the most pervasive source of public affairs information" (Gunter, 1987: 1). Comparatively, access to cable

Table 1. Mean Scores for News Sources Accessed (N=205)

Media Source	Mean
Free TV	4.45
FM Radio	3.48
Broadsheets	3.02
Tabloids	2.91
Cellular Network Service	2.84
AM Radio	2.50
Local Websites	2.46
Cable TV	2.43
Foreign Websites	2.19

TV and the Internet can be more prohibitive, especially considering the respondents' socio-economic status.

Interest in and importance of news

As indicated by the mean scores in Table 2, the respondents accessed the news primarily to be aware and updated of national issues and current events, respectively. They also accessed the news because of academic requirements and since their parents told them to do so.

Accessing the news "actively" means seeking the news deliberately because of the desire to be a well-informed person. Accessing the news "passively" may also be deliberate since it is often done out of requirement. The main difference between the two is the source of motivation for accessing the news, wherein passive reasons are due to external influences (e.g., school, parents, friends) rather than personal drives.

In general, consuming news entails an active stance since it involves high-level cognitive processing. Actively seeking the news, however, does not always translate to active consumption. For instance, watching the news requires less mental effort than

Table 2. Mean Scores of Reasons for Accessing the News (N=205)

Reason	Mean
Active Reasons	**4.00**
I want to be aware of national issues	4.15
I want to be updated of current events	4.14
I am always curious	3.99
I just wanted to	3.94
I want to inform others	3.75
Passive Reasons	**3.68**
We often have quizzes/assignments on current events	3.83
My parents told me	3.71
My friends also access it	3.50

reading the news (Gunter, 1987). Thus, though the average of active reasons was higher than the average of passive reasons, the conclusion that the respondents actively consumed news could not be made at this point.

From a list of possible definitions of news, respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement to statements regarding newsworthiness and news characteristics. Findings indicate that the respondents agreed on politics and government, health, economy, weather conditions, law violations, and technological advances as newsworthy (see Table 4). News in general is "information about recent or contemporary events" (Crisell, 2006: 49). Nonetheless, there is a distinction between hard news and soft news: the former focuses on serious matters such as politics and economy, while the latter features more entertainment and human-interest stories. Local news usually combines these two. Despite so, the respondents were selective enough to distinguish one from the other and put more relevance to hard news. Selectivity is a basic ability in news literacy.

Table 3. Mean Scores of Personal Definition of News (N=205)

Definitions	Mean
On Newsworthiness	
Politics and government issues are news.	4.46
Health advisories are news.	4.43
The state of a country's economy is news.	4.41
Reports on weather conditions are news.	4.41
Reports on law violation (murder, kidnapping, rape, etc.) are news.	4.21
Technological advances are news.	4.15
Entertainment is news.	3.84
Business matters are news.	3.66
Stories involving famous personalities and celebrities are news.	3.47
Fashion trends are news.	3.43
Lottery results are news.	2.92
On Characteristics of News	
Anything that's happening around is news.	4.17
News should be neutral.	4.12
Anything that's out of the ordinary is news.	3.16
News is mainly for the educated.	2.80
News should cover only current events.	2.67
News is mainly for adults.	1.90

On characteristics of news, respondents expressed that anything could be news and that news should be neutral. The students were undecided on whether or not news was mainly for the educated. However, they certainly disagreed on news being mainly for adults (see Table 3). While local news is primarily oriented towards an adult audience (in terms of content, tone, and presentation), this did not prevent the respondents to consider themselves as news consumers. This self-recognition is vital to succeeding discussions.

Table 4 shows the summary of respondents' interest in different types of news. As indicated by the mean scores, respondents were very interested in news about science and technology. This complements their agreement on technological advances as newsworthy (see Table 3). Though they considered

Table 4. Mean Scores of Interest in Different News Items (N=205)

News Items	Mean
Science and Technology	4.58
Enrivonmental	4.39
Sports	3.90
Police/Crime	3.73
Political/Government	3.73
Entertainment	3.64
Business/Economy	3.20

political and government affairs as the most newsworthy, their interest in such items was not very strong. Likewise, they were least interested in news about business and the economy. These findings present a discrepancy between *interest* and *newsworthiness*. Some items that the respondents considered newsworthy did not come out as matters that interested them. Interest, not notions on newsworthiness, directs news consumption.

Findings indicate that respondents put great importance on news that interests them (see Table 5). They also recognized the significance of news awareness in creating opinions about issues and preparing for school requirements. Generally, respondents considered news awareness important. This adds support to findings that the respondents actively sought news (see Table 2) and that they thought of themselves as news consumers. Furthermore, giving importance to news awareness is a requisite to eventually *being* news aware and *making use* of the news, which shall be discussed next.

Table 5. Mean Scores of Importance of News Awareness (N=205)

Statement	Mean
I gather news that is interesting for me.	4.50
The news helps me create personal opinions about issues.	4.27
The news helps me prepare for school requirements.	4.01
I gather news from different segments/portions of the news medium.	3.95
I gather news that is of personal relevance to me.	3.91
I gather news intentionally.	3.88
I gather news that is sensational.	3.87
I discuss news with other people.	3.74
I focus my attention only to particular news.	3.49
The news presented by the media has little value to me.	3.00

Awareness of and uses for news

Using an 18-item test in a multiple-choice format, respondents' awareness on current events was assessed. Table 6 shows the summary of scores attained by the respondents. With a mean score of 11.3 (SD = 2.18, Median = 11, Mode = 12), respondents were relatively aware of current events. Awareness is relative because it is not only dependent on personal motivation and interest, but also subject to media's coverage and treatment of certain events and issues at a particular time. During the conduct of the study, predominant news items were the Subic rape case, ASEAN summit, and elections, among others. Since such items received substantial media exposure, the respondents were most likely to remember them. On the other hand, fewer respondents answered correctly on peripheral news items. While the test was not an absolute measure of news awareness, it illustrated what and how much the respondents know.

Table 6. Score Summary of Awareness on Current Events*

Score (out of 18 items)	f	%
0-3	0	0
4-6	2	1.05
7-9	42	22.11
10-12	89	46.84
13-15	53	27.89
16-18	4	2.11
Total	190	100

*N=205, 15 respondents did not complete the test.

While the respondents were presented with a list of possible uses of news, Table 7 shows only five of the most common. Four of the uses were class-related. This complements one reason for accessing the news (see Table 2), as well as the importance of news to the respondents in preparation for class requirements (see Table 5). Among the choices, the students said they always used the news in classroom discussions. Making use of the news is an important aspect of news literacy. Applying news information in different situations goes beyond merely knowing. At this stage, a person has already made sense of the news – through one's beliefs, experiences, and knowledge of social context – and thus is capable of selecting a particular facet of the information appropriate for a situation. This skill is necessary for developing competencies in handling news.

Skills and competencies in handling news

In their self-assessment, respondents noted themselves most competent in viewing news from TV (see Table 8). This is positively related to earlier identification of free TV as their most accessed media source of news (see Table 1). Other areas they

Table 7. Mean Scores of the Most Common Uses of News (N=205)

Uses	Mean
Classroom discussions	4.28
Class reports	3.93
Doing assignments	3.72
Writing class papers	3.67
Everyday conversations	3.56

considered themselves competent in were understanding opinions and emotions presented in the news, and evaluating the quality of the news story. The students felt they were least competent in reading news from the Internet and spotting grammatical errors in news reports. Accordingly, the former relates to the Internet as a news media source that is hardly accessed by respondents (see Table 1).

These competencies, taken collectively, represent news literacy. From news access and acquisition, to news interest and importance, then to news awareness and use – this transition leads to the development, and later internalization, of skills for better understanding, evaluation, and making use of news.

Conclusion

Considering its availability and affordability, free TV was cited as the most accessed news source by the respondents. Accordingly, the respondents perceived themselves to be most competent in viewing news from TV. In contrast, reading news from the Internet was one of the skills the respondents deemed themselves to be least competent in – attributable to the finding that the Internet was among the least accessed news sources.

In their reasons for news acquisition, the respondents were primarily active or personally driven to be aware and

Table 8. Mean Scores of Competency in Handling News (N=205)

Areas of Competency	Mean
Viewing news from TV	4.50
Understanding similarities and differences in opinion of people presented in the news	4.11
Evaluating whether the news is a good or bad story	4.03
Understanding emotions of people presented in the news	4.03
Determining values contained in news	3.96
Giving comments about the news	3.91
Reading news from the newspaper	3.90
Evaluating balanced reporting of the news	3.84
Listening to news from radio	3.74
Detecting bias in news reporting	3.67
Reporting news in class	3.64
Sharing news with other people	3.63
Debating about the news with other people	3.54
Using the news in class	3.53
Reciting news in class	3.52
Reading news from the Internet	3.52
Spotting grammatical errors in news reports	3.19

updated of national issues and events. This is an important gateway to other dimensions of news literacy because one cannot be news literate without the desire to be so. News consumption, however, is not determined by this motivation alone but by interests as well.

As the respondents indicated, they were very interested in science and technology – consistent with their identification of technological advances as newsworthy. On the other hand, there is a discrepancy between perceived newsworthiness of

politics and economy and the respondents' low interest in such topics. While it is a positive sign that the respondents knew which matters were relevant, their contrasting interest in them affects news consumption and consequently, political knowledge (Conway et al. in Gunter, 1987).

With a mean score of 60%, the respondents did reasonably well in the test measuring awareness on current events. Recall of news items was highly dependent on what and how events and issues at a particular time are covered by the media. Making use of the news in different situations is also an important dimension of news literacy. One has truly understood and made sense of what has been learned if the knowledge can be applied for constructive ends. Bearing in mind that the respondents were students, the most cited uses for news were classroom-related (e.g., discussions, reports, assignments, papers). While limited in scope, their application of the news was specific to their current situation and immediate concerns as students. This ability to make use of the news can be brought to other areas and circumstances that may arise later in their lives.

As a whole, the respondents were news literate in the sense that they had the basic aptitude to access the news, define newsworthiness, recall news items, and apply news information. However, there is still much to improve on their interest in hard news and on their skills and competencies in dissecting news content, structure, and slant. Only when they have holistically embodied these dimensions would they be considered completely news literate.

Implications and Recommendations

News literacy is vital to an informed citizenry, a people who can make sense of the world and of themselves. Young people are exposed to news of all sorts and are susceptible to misinterpret some messages which may adversely affect their

beliefs and behaviors. It is thus invaluable to equip them with skills to properly understand, evaluate, and make use of the news. Findings of the study may assist educators to devise modules for enhancing news literacy of students, specifically on which dimensions to focus. As the results have shown, there are aspects (like interest in hard news) that need improvement. The study may also guide the news media in considering a more youth-friendly orientation. Young people must be recognized as a significant portion of the audience, so as to reformulate the news into something easier to appreciate – but without failing to challenge decision-making skills and critical sensibilities of the youth.

The study sought to explicate the idea of news literacy, a concept which has been relatively unexplored in the local context. Towards this end, the study explored different components that contribute to the overall assessment of the level of news literacy of today's public high school students. It explored how each component contributed to the next one to establish a stronger sense of news literacy.

As the study shows, the process towards news literacy begins when individuals intends to be well-informed by acquiring news from various media sources. Their selection of news items, meanwhile, is largely determined not by newsworthiness but by their personal interests. Once they have cognitively processed these news items, these become stored knowledge that may be evoked to carry out certain tasks. Their repetitive consumption of the news then helps develop skills and competencies in handling news; this, in turn, affects all other components. Thus, the relationship among the various components in this study should not be seen as a linear progression but as an interactive process leading to holistic news literacy.

In promoting news literacy, it is first important to make young people curious about, and identify with, news and current events because the impetus for the acquisition of news begins from a self-actualized sense of interests rather than from

an external valuation of newsworthiness. Moreover, this personal interest can be sustained by continued discussions which enable young people to process their stored knowledge of news information. It is through this dynamic interaction among news acquisition, processing, storage, and retrieval that young people can truly sharpen their news literacy.

More studies need to be done to further understand this complex process of news literacy. First, a qualitative study can be conducted to probe young people's reception and perception of the news, as well as related attitudes and practices. Second, a comparative study involving private and public high school students may be undertaken to verify if the type of education is a factor in news literacy since only public school students participated in this study. Third, a quantitative study with a larger representative sample can be conducted to generate generalizable results.

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