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Assessing Political Literacy Among University Students in Interpreting International News

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the political literacy levels of 30 English Literature students at the State University of Medan, focusing on their ability to navigate, interpret, and critically evaluate international news. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire addressing key factors such as media literacy, civic engagement, and critical thinking. The findings reveal that only 30% of the students demonstrated good political literacy, characterized by consistent fact-checking and critical evaluation of news sources, while 70% exhibited moderate to poor literacy. Key challenges include over-reliance on social media, limited civic participation, and a lack of understanding of political structures. Additionally, only 23% of students correctly identified factual and fake news items, underscoring gaps in media literacy. These results highlight the need for targeted interventions, such as media literacy workshops, enhanced political education, and increased opportunities for civic engagement. By addressing these gaps, the study aims to foster a politically literate and engaged generation of university students.

Keywords: Political Literacy, Civic Engagement, International News.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era, where information is perpetually disseminated via digital platforms, the capacity for political literacy has become a crucial competency for citizens to navigate, interpret, and critically assess the news. Milner (2002) Posits that Political literacy empowers individuals to comprehend the intricacies of political systems, discern reliable information, and engage with global issues in a meaningful manner. The ability to distinguish between factual information and hoaxes in international news has become a crucial skill in the digital age, as social media platforms have become a primary conduit for both accurate and misinformation.

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) posit that political literacy is a foundational element of what they term "participatory citizenship." This concept encompasses not only the act of remaining informed about political matters but also the active engagement of individuals in the public sphere through activities such as voting, advocacy, and community involvement. Civic engagement is closely tied to political literacy, as a well-informed citizenry is more likely to participate actively in democratic processes. The combination of civic engagement and robust political literacy has been demonstrated to reinforce democratic resilience by fostering a public that is discerning, well-informed, and resistant to misinformation and political manipulation (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017).

International news adds a unique layer of complexity to political literacy, as it requires individuals to interpret events from unfamiliar cultural, political, and historical contexts. News coverage of international events often includes nuanced information about foreign policies, diplomatic relations, and cultural dynamics that may be challenging for young adults to grasp without prior knowledge or exposure.

The level of political literacy among individuals is influenced by a number of factors, including access to quality education, exposure to diverse media sources, socioeconomic background, and personal interest in politics. Milner (2002) posits that educational systems that incorporate civic education are pivotal in developing political literacy, as students learn the structures of governance and the skills required for critical media engagement. Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) highlight the value of diverse, credible media sources in fostering political literacy and navigating misinformation. Socioeconomic factors are also important because people with more resources have better access to information, which helps them engage with politics (Claes & Hooghe, 2017). This means there needs to be more educational initiatives to help everyone participate more equally in politics.

Previous research has conducted and highlighted the importance of media literacy and emotional awareness for politics and civic engagement. Keegan (2021) proposed an affective civic literacy framework, arguing that political literacy should extend beyond cognitive understanding to encompass emotional awareness. Emotions such as fear and anger can affect how we perceive political events and the concept of "otherness." This is backed by Mihailidis and Viotty (2017), who say that media literacy is crucial in today's "post-truth" world. Furthermore, studies on civic engagement conducted by Hobbs (2010), highlight the necessity of cultivating digital media proficiency to combat misinformation and promote informed engagement.

The demographic of university students is distinctive in the context of political literacy, as they frequently find themselves at a crossroads between developing their personal and political identities. As a result of greater exposure to global issues through both formal education and social media, students frequently encounter a multiplicity of perspectives and intricate political information (Kahne & Bowyer,

2017). This current study examines the political literacy of university students in terms of their ability to interpret international news. This study narrows the focus to examine university students' abilities to evaluate international news sources. The aim is to enhance political literacy education, equipping students with the skills to navigate an increasingly complex global media landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Literacy in The Digital Age

Political literacy in the digital age refers to the ability to critically analyze, interpret, and engage with political information, especially as it appears across digital platforms. This skill has become crucial as people increasingly consume news through social media, which frequently presents both accurate information and misinformation. Milner (2002) emphasizes that political literacy allows individuals to comprehend complex political systems and make informed decisions based on reliable information. Hobbs (2010) further highlights that digital media literacy is essential for navigating today's information-rich environment, where distinguishing between facts, opinions, and biases is key. Hobbs argues that a media-literate citizenry is empowered to better recognize misinformation and become more discerning in their political engagement.

In the university context, students often find themselves exposed to multiple political perspectives, both domestically and internationally. As Westheimer and Kahne (2004) point out, digital media's global reach requires young adults to critically evaluate political events within unfamiliar political and cultural frameworks. This skill is especially pertinent in interpreting international news, where understanding foreign political systems or cultural nuances may be challenging. Political literacy in the digital age, therefore, involves not only interpreting political issues but also navigating the structures, biases, and influence present in digital information ecosystems (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is closely tied to political literacy, as a well-informed and politically literate citizenry is more likely to actively participate in democratic processes. Kahne and Bowyer (2017) discuss civic engagement as participation in democratic activities, such as voting, community advocacy, and social activism. According to Milner (2002), political literacy is a prerequisite for meaningful civic engagement, as understanding political systems and issues enables citizens to engage constructively in public life.

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) introduced the concept of "participatory citizenship," which encompasses both staying informed about political matters and actively engaging in democratic practices. In this framework, political literacy is foundational, serving as a tool that empowers individuals to make thoughtful contributions to their communities and society. Hobbs (2010) further argues that digital media proficiency enhances civic engagement by enabling individuals to access a variety of viewpoints and information, which is essential for a healthy democracy. Civic engagement, bolstered by political literacy, strengthens democratic resilience, equipping citizens with the ability to resist manipulation and participate more fully in democratic life (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017).

Factors Affecting Political Literacy

Milner (2002) identifies eight key factors that influence an individual's level of political literacy. These factors—education, media exposure, socioeconomic status, political socialisation, age and experience, interest in politics, access to reliable information, and civic engagement—interact within the digital age to shape how individuals engage with political information.

1. Education

Education is foundational to political literacy, as formal civic education provides essential knowledge about political systems, governance, and the critical thinking skills needed to interpret political content effectively. Educational institutions that emphasise civic education equip students with analytical tools to evaluate information from various media sources, fostering a citizenry capable of distinguishing credible information from misinformation (Milner, 2002). In the university setting, this foundational knowledge helps students to develop the cognitive skills necessary for navigating complex political information in digital and global contexts.

2. Media Exposure

3. The diversity and credibility of media sources that individuals consume significantly shape political literacy, especially in today's digital landscape. Exposure to a variety of media allows individuals to access multiple perspectives, increasing their ability to assess the reliability and accuracy of information. Milner (2002) argues that, as people engage with both traditional and digital media, they develop critical literacy skills essential for identifying biases, distinguishing fact from opinion, and navigating misinformation—skills that are crucial for informed political engagement.

4. Socioeconomic Status

5. Socioeconomic factors, such as income and educational background, influence political literacy by affecting access to resources, technology, and quality information. Those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds generally have better access to comprehensive education and reliable media, which facilitates a deeper understanding of political issues (Claes & Hooghe, 2017). This access disparity means that socioeconomic status can either support or hinder the development of political literacy, impacting an individual's ability to critically engage with political content and participate effectively in democratic practices.

6. Political Socialisation

Political socialisation—the process through which individuals acquire political attitudes and beliefs—affects political literacy through influences from family, peers, and community. Milner (2002) notes that early socialization shapes one's political perspectives, as families and social circles provide the initial environment for political discourse. A supportive environment that fosters open, informed political discussions encourages the development of political awareness, preparing individuals to navigate complex political landscapes.

7. Age and Experience

Age and life experience contribute to political literacy as individuals accumulate a greater range of political knowledge over time. Older individuals are more likely to have encountered diverse political events and issues, providing them with a broader understanding of political structures and policies. Milner (2002) suggests that experience with political and social issues fosters deeper

engagement with political content, enhancing the ability to critically assess information within digital and traditional media.

8. Interest in Politics

Interest in politics is a key driver of political literacy, as individuals who are more politically curious tend to actively seek information, engage in discussions, and stay informed on political issues. Milner (2002) observes that a strong interest in politics motivates individuals to explore political topics in-depth, building their understanding of political systems and current events. This intrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in sustaining political literacy, especially as individuals engage with the constantly evolving political landscape.

9. Access to Reliable Information

Access to accurate, reliable information is vital for political literacy in an age where misinformation can easily spread through digital platforms. Milner (2002) highlights the importance of accessible, high-quality information, which enables citizens to make informed choices and understand political events without bias. The lack of reliable sources may leave individuals vulnerable to misinformation, undermining their political literacy and engagement.

10. Civic Engagement

Civic engagement itself, including participation in activities like voting, advocacy, and community involvement, reinforces political literacy. Kahne and Bowyer (2017) emphasize that direct involvement in democratic processes enhances practical political knowledge and deepens individuals' understanding of civic responsibilities. Engaging in civic activities allows individuals to apply political knowledge practically, fostering a commitment to informed citizenship and a resilient democracy.

These eight factors illustrate the dynamic interplay between education, personal interest, social influences, and media that collectively shape an individual's political literacy. In the university setting, these factors can either enhance or limit students' ability to interpret political information critically, preparing them for active civic engagement within a digital and interconnected world.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

Research design

This study explores university students' political literacy and its influencing factors. A qualitative approach is ideal for exploring students' knowledge and experiences of political literacy. The open-ended responses collected through a semi-structured questionnaire are the main source of data. This design focuses on participants' unique perspectives and allows flexibility in adapting analysis to new themes.

Participants

The study participants were English Literature students at the State University of Medan. This group was selected on the basis of their exposure to global issues and limited formal political education. A purposive sampling method was used to recruit the participants, ensuring manageability and diversity. English Literature students engage with international content through their studies, but lack critical political

literacy skills. Their responses offer insights into the relationship between media literacy, global awareness and political education.

Data Collection

The data were collected via google form using a semi-structured questionnaire. Google forms allow for an efficient, cost-effective, and participant-friendly approach to data collection. This method aligns with the study's focus on gathering diverse perspectives from university students while accommodating their digital habits and preferences. It comprised open-ended questions about participants' political literacy and its influences. The questions were focused on the key factors that affect the level of political literacy. The questionnaire format ensured consistency and allowed participants to express themselves freely, and to reduce social desirability bias responses were gathered anonymously.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method allowed for the identification of patterns, themes, and insights across participants' responses. The steps are as follows:

1. Familiarisation with Data
2. Generating Initial Codes Searching for Themes
3. Reviewing Themes
4. Defining and Naming Themes
5. Producing the Report

This process ensured that the data were systematically analysed and interpreted, providing rich insights into the research topic. By focusing on the qualitative dimensions of political literacy, the study captures the complexity of students' experiences and perspectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of this study, analyzing the political literacy of English Literature students at the State University of Medan. This chapter examines students' responses to the questionnaire, focusing on their ability to navigate and critically evaluate political information. The discussion is organized around key themes, including media literacy, knowledge of political structures, civic engagement, and critical thinking. The findings reveal significant gaps in students' political literacy, particularly in their reliance on social media for news and their limited engagement in civic activities. These insights are contextualized within the framework of Milner (2002) factors that affect political literacy, offering a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities for fostering informed and engaged citizenship among university students.

Media Literacy Challenges

Findings:

- a) **70% (21 students)** relied primarily on social media for political news.
- b) **30% (9 students)** accessed more credible platforms such as online news or print media.

- c) **10 students (33%)** consistently fact-checked their news, while **20 students (67%)** rarely or never did.
 - d) Only **7 students (23%)** correctly identified the factual and fake news examples provided.
- Media literacy remains a significant challenge, with most students relying on social media for news. This over-reliance often leads to exposure to biased or unverified information. Furthermore, the infrequency of fact-checking contributes to students' struggles with discerning credible content.

For instance, one student stated:

"I always check Instagram for news, but I rarely bother verifying if it's true." Another added, "Sometimes I believe a story if it looks real, but I don't really know how to check."

Knowledge of Political Structures

Findings:

- a) **47% (14 students)** demonstrated partial or detailed knowledge of international organizations like the UN or NATO.
 - b) **53% (16 students)** showed vague or incorrect understanding.
- Students displayed mixed knowledge of global political structures, with only a minority providing accurate explanations.

For example, one student remarked:

"The UN is there to prevent wars, but I'm not sure how they operate." Another admitted, "I've heard of NATO, but I don't know what they do."

These responses highlight a lack of depth in understanding, which could stem from limited political education.

Political Values and Beliefs

Findings:

- a) **90% (27 students)** agreed or strongly agreed that understanding global politics is important.
- b) However, **30% (9 students)** acted consistently on this belief, engaging in fact-checking and civic activities.

Most students value global politics, recognizing its importance in daily life. However, their behaviors often do not align with this belief.

For example, one student commented:

"I know politics matters, but it feels overwhelming to follow everything." Another noted, "It's important, but I don't know where to start learning about it."

These responses suggest a gap between belief and action, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to bridge this divide.

Civic Engagement

Findings:

- a) **20% (6 students)** participated occasionally in civic activities, primarily through university programs.

- b) **80% (24 students)** reported no engagement in activities like voting or protests.

Civic engagement among students is notably low, with most reporting no participation in political or community activities. This disengagement limits opportunities to apply political knowledge practically.

One student stated:

"I've never voted because I don't think it makes a difference." Another mentioned, *"I joined a campus event about politics once, but I haven't done anything since."*

This lack of engagement underscores the importance of creating accessible avenues for student involvement in civic life.

Critical Thinking Skills

Findings:

- a) **40% (12 students)** occasionally or consistently evaluated news sources critically.
b) **60% (18 students)** rarely or never analyzed credibility or engaged in political discussions.

Critical thinking remains underdeveloped among many students, with most failing to evaluate news sources rigorously.

One student admitted:

"I sometimes question what I read, but not often." Others indicated hesitation in discussing political topics due to a lack of confidence. For instance, *"I don't talk about politics because I'm afraid of saying something wrong."*

Political Efficacy

Findings:

- a) **33% (10 students)** felt confident in discussing politics and believed their opinions mattered.
b) **67% (20 students)** lacked confidence or expressed uncertainty about their political impact.

Students' perceptions of their political efficacy vary widely. While some feel empowered to contribute, others doubt their ability to influence outcomes.

One student stated:

"I think my opinion matters, but I'm not sure how to make a difference." Another expressed, *"Politics feels too big for someone like me to impact."*

Access to Information

Findings:

- a) **100% of students** had reliable internet access, but many relied on social media as their primary news source.

Although all students had access to digital resources, their reliance on social media limited their exposure to diverse perspectives.

One student noted:

"I know there are better sources out there, but social media is just easier." Another commented, *"I don't really go out of my way to find other news platforms."*

The findings indicate that **70% of students** exhibit moderate to poor political literacy. Major challenges include over-reliance on social media, minimal civic engagement, and a lack of critical thinking skills. Quotations reveal a disconnect between students' recognition of politics' importance and their ability to engage effectively. Addressing these gaps through targeted interventions in media literacy, civic education, and critical thinking training is essential for fostering a politically literate generation.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the political literacy levels of 30 English Literature students at the State University of Medan, focusing on their ability to navigate political information and critically evaluate international news. Using the Milner (2002) framework, the analysis highlighted significant gaps in political literacy among students, with only 30% (9 students) demonstrating good political literacy and 70% (21 students) exhibiting moderate to poor literacy levels. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to address these gaps. These include incorporating media literacy workshops into academic programs, enhancing political education through interdisciplinary modules, and encouraging civic engagement via practical activities such as debates or mock elections. Strengthening these areas will equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to critically engage with political issues and contribute meaningfully to civic life.

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