IDENTIFYING MEDIA CONSUMPTION HABITS
AND MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS IN
COLLEGE UNDERGRADUATES

by

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ABSTRACT

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In the United States, media literacy education is not as advanced as in other English
speaking regions such as, Great Britain, Canada, and Australia. Most teachers and students in
the US are unaware of issues involved in media literacy education (Kellner & Share, 2005). Due
to the fragmentation of today’s news environment, the artificial division between news and
entertainment has been blurred. In addition, news broadcasted through these mediums have
become fragmented as well, with issues being reduced into small sound bites. The significance of
this study is to juxtapose the viewing habits of undergraduate college students who have had a
media literacy component in their academic curriculum and those who have not. Based upon the
literature tracing the impact of an evolving media environment, this qualitative study consists of
an interactive activity and follow-up interview with undergraduate participants. This study revealed
how undergraduate students view media outlets as sources of information.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Fragmented News Environment

In fall 2010, the author worked on a midterm gubernatorial election campaign, and experienced first-hand how political opinion is heavily influenced by media representation. In one particular instance, a registered voter was contacted via phone banking and verbally expressed how upset she was over the issue of amnesty. This individual was then asked if she knew the correct definition of the term, to which she could not give a correct reply. The question then arises, why would this person be so upset over a word she could not define? One plausible reason could be how media outlets cover salient issues. As technology advances today, there are numerous ways that voters can hear about prominent political issues. Outlets such as the Internet and cable television networks have opened new doors or political information to be fed in a variety of ways to the public. For example, with the creation of the Internet, any individual can find a forum whether it be Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc. to voice their own opinions regarding current affairs and political issues. By having open forums where the general public can voice their opinions on current affairs, individuals may give credibility to other’s opinions rather than the actual facts of the issue.

The traditional role of news media is shifting due to advances in technology. One creation in particular, cable television, has influenced not only news content, but also the way in which news is gathered. Instead of three main evening news programs, there are cable news networks fueling what is known as the 24-hour news cycle. A 2007 Pew Research Center survey showed that fewer network news journalists were listed, while mentions of cable news hosts and anchors remained steady. According to the Pew study, the decline in mentions of admired journalists is a response to a broader range of news choices, essentially creating a fragmented news universe.
In comparison, a 2010 Pew Research study, which focused on a “fragmented news universe,” showed that fewer people are now using traditional broadcast news for information (“Fewer Journalists Stand Out,” 2010). The Pew Research Center revealed that about half of the public surveyed offered no specific answer when prompted to name a newperson or journalist they most admire. In response to the open-ended question, no journalist was named by more than 5% of the people and, of the journalists who were listed, both network anchors and cable hosts were listed most frequently (“Fewer Journalists Stand Out,” 2010). The study notes “about one-in-ten (12%) now name a cable talk show host as their most admired journalist, while 5% name an anchor of a cable news program” (“Fewer Journalists Stand Out,” 2010). Morris (2007) asserts that in the past, the homogenized television news environment allowed individuals an increased opportunity to hear rhetoric from both sides of an issue and often take a more moderate viewpoint. Now as negative feelings toward the media carry on, viewers continue to take advantage of a fragmented media environment by seeking out sources of news that better fit with their own political views and ideologies (Morris, 2007). Adding to the confusion are shows like Colbert Report and The Daily Show that also report news, but from a comedic perspective.

Another poll conducted by the Pew Research Center revealed that 53% of viewers for Colbert Report and 43% of viewers for The Daily Show reported that entertainment is one of the biggest factors why they tuned into these shows (“Americans Spending More Time Watching the News,” 2010). It may seem logical that viewers would be tuning in for entertainment purposes since both television shows are on the network, Comedy Central. However, another poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press revealed that 21% of 18-to 29-year-olds regularly tune into satirical public affairs television to obtain information about presidential politics (Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, & Carlton, 2007). Data collected from both Pew Research Center studies appear to contradict the objectives of why a younger viewing audience tunes into these shows. Furthermore, a 2004 Pew Research survey revealed that young people are turning away from traditional sources for information about the campaign [2004 presidential
campaign]; only 23% of Americans age 18-29 stated they regularly learn something from nightly news networks about a campaign, a decrease of 39% from 2000. Cable news networks were the most frequently mentioned source of campaign news amongst young people, but the Internet and comedy programs were also important outlets of election coverage for Americans under 30 (“Cable and Internet Loom,” 2004). “One-in-five young people say they regularly get campaign news from the Internet, and about as many (21%) say the same about comedy shows such as Saturday Night Live and the Daily Show” (“Cable and Internet Loom,” 2004). This survey also revealed that Americans under 30 identified comedy shows almost as frequently as newspapers and evening network news programs as regular sources for election news coverage (“Cable and Internet Loom,” 2004). Due to the ever-evolving media environment with outlets such as political comedy shows and cable networks, there are plenty of alternatives where viewers can turn to find news information.

The development of media, such as the Internet and cable news networks, have made it difficult to preserve the artificial division between public affairs and entertainment, ultimately causing an erosion of the walls built to separate the two types of media (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004). This erosion could influence many viewers to form a particular political opinion based solely on information from an entertainment source rather than from a news source. Baumgartner & Morris (2008) write that political satirists such as Jon Stewart are being taken more seriously than those political satirists in the past. Both Stewart and Colbert have been recognized by the industry with various awards and speaking engagements that could lead the general public to believe that they are journalists rather than comedians. For example, the Peabody Awards “recognize distinguished achievement and meritorious service by broadcasters, cable and Webcasters, producing organizations, and individuals” (“The George Foster Peabody Awards”). In 2004 The Daily Show (TDS) received a Peabody for its coverage of the 2004 presidential elections, which was labeled “Indecision 2004.” The citation for the award on the Peabody Awards’ website says:
Through the momentous weeks of the 2004 Presidential Campaigns, Jon Stewart and cohorts provided the kind of cathartic satire that deflates pomposity on an equal opportunity basis. Somehow this sharp commentary made the real issues more important than ever. Much has been made of the fact that growing numbers of viewers, old as well as young, turn to The Daily Show with Jon Stewart for "news." Mr. Stewart, however, repeatedly reminds those viewers that his program is "fake news." Nevertheless, the program applies its satirical, sometimes caustic perspective to the issues of the day, on those engaged with the issues, and on the everyday experiences that will be affected by them. In the context of The Daily Show with Jon Stewart serious, even-handed interviews with significant political figures including many presidential candidates, commentators, reporters, and authors took on new significance and reached new audiences. (The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: Indecision 2004, 2004)

In addition, in 2005 Jon Stewart was listed as one of the 100 most influential people by *Time* magazine (“The 2005 Time 100”). Not only has Jon Stewart and his show *TDS* received awards, but scholars are researching the effects that *TDS* has on viewers and how they form political opinions.

Cao (2010) notes that due to the evolution of television, viewers do not have to choose between news and entertainment. Cao (2010) argues "entertainment-oriented television programs such as *The Daily Show* can direct viewers' attention to politics" (p. 42). Baym (2005) describes *TDS* as a "unique blending of comedy, late-night entertainment, news, and public affairs discussion" and that mixture of elements has "resonated with a substantial audience" (p. 260).

With prominent political satirists such as Jon Stewart influencing audiences, in addition to a fragmented news environment, it is essential that the public become more media literate and understands how to identify and separate information received from hard news and soft news sources. Marghescu (2010) says that new generations need to be prepared to “identify, criticize and oppose the media manipulation” (p. 127). Furthermore, Marghescu (2010) writes that the mission of education is to build awareness of new media, which would consist of “integrating the new media in the process of education and, respectively, forming a critical media culture, which will allow the new generations to successfully face the challenges of a cultural environment as manipulating as it is seductive” (p. 127). In a time where new media (i.e., Internet) have become
integrated into the daily routines of many individuals and made the distinction between entertainment and hard news more loosely defined, this study identifies whether undergraduate students have developed media literacy skills to critically analyze the content they are consuming. Students who have had a media literacy component (communication majors) should have been taught through their coursework how to critically analyze different components portrayed in different media mediums. The significance of this study is to juxtapose the viewing habits of undergraduate college students who have had a media literacy component in their academic curriculum and those who have not. Furthermore, this study will identify the impact of political comedy shows such as, The Daily Show, in regards to political issues covered within the media. This next section reviews the literature beginning with theoretical concepts that lay the foundation for this media study. The first portion of the review of literature provides the framework of how overtime the mass media has constructed messages and continues to create messages. The evolution of how media have changed over time will be discussed, in addition to the implications this shift has caused on viewers. Furthermore, the literature review discusses the foundation of defining media literacy and how it can be integrated into an educational framework. The impact of media literacy skills will also be discussed, which shows how viewers are inclined to critically view news information.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The National Communication Association (1998) has stated that media literate individuals should be able to understand how people use media in their personal and public lives, understand the commercial nature of media, recognize the complex relationships between audiences and media content, and be able to appreciate that media content is created within social and cultural contexts. By living in a media saturated world, it is apparent that on a daily basis society consumes media content through various forms, whether they are aware or not. The theoretical framework for this media study provides insight into how media messages have evolved through shifts in society and technology; and how media messages are created through agenda-setting and gatekeeping processes. By identifying how media messages are formed further aids in identifying how media literacy skills can be utilized to critically analyze media content in order to bring awareness to media creation tactics.

2.1.1 Critical and Cultural Studies

Critical and cultural theories are typically not derived from mass communication studies, “but are more broadly aimed at addressing how societies and social experiences are developed and shaped” (Rubin & Haridakis, 2001, p. 81). According to Davis, Puckett, and Real (as cited in Rubin & Haridakis, 2001), when critical and cultural theorists apply these theoretical concepts to the field of mass communication, the focus is targeted on “evaluating the media’s role in social change associated with the growth of mass culture and mass society” (p. 81). The standpoint of these theorists is essential to the study of media effects on shaping political opinion. Rubin and Haridakis (2001) believe that:
Communication is a social process in which audiences construct views of reality by interpreting the cultural products often provided by the media. The media are seen as powerful and as serving those who hold political and economic power. They play a central role in creating and maintaining mass society. They do this by presenting images that subordinate deviant social elements and control social change. (p. 81-82)

Since the invention of electronic mass media scholars have debated about the power of the media and the ability of those in authority to use the media to influence society. For instance, with the discovery of television came a media agent that could relay messages rapidly to society and potentially influence society in a powerful way.

Gerbner (1998) looks at the power of television in terms of a cultivation effect. He defines the term ‘cultivation’ as television’s contribution to conceptions of social realities, which is more than just another word for ‘effects.’ Furthermore, Gerbner (1998) states that the term does not imply a one-way, monolithic process. The influences from this pervasive media medium are subtle, complex, and intermingled with other influences. Therefore, the perspective of cultivation assumes an interaction takes place between the medium (television) and its publics. Since most viewers lack first-hand experiences with topics displayed in the media, they are more inclined to rely on media generated heuristic opinions of reality.

Shrum (1996) notes that information is more cognitively available to the audience based upon the repeated exposure the media makes. Shrum (1996) discovered in his study of testing cultivation effects on the accessibility of information that, when participants are asked to shape a social judgment, they rarely engage in an extensive memory search; instead, they simplify the issue by utilizing heuristics. According to Gerbner (1998) television does not create nor reflect images, opinions, and beliefs; instead, it is a fundamental aspect of a dynamic process. Ultimatley, “Institutional needs and objectives influence the creation and distribution of mass-produced messages which create, fit into, exploit, and sustain the needs, values, and ideologies of mass publics” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 180). In return, these publics obtain specific identities as publics partly through the exposure of the ongoing course of messages. Ultimatley, the ‘dynamic process’ between viewers and television messages relies on what the media selects to cover. Not
only is television a persuasive medium, but all forms of media have persuasive elements that affect viewers opinions.

2.1.2 Social Responsibility Theory

In the mid-1950’s, Peterson (1956) formulated the Social Responsibility Theory to illustrate the importance of honest reporting in the media. The beginning of this theory came about in post-World War II American society. Schumpeter (1942) and Berelson (1952) identified a variety of social, political, and economic changes in this era, and wanted to reconcile the increasing centralization of ownership and the decreasing competition in the printed press, the rise of a centralized and expensive electronic media, and social science research and events occurring within real-world events that had increased concerns about the stability of democratic systems and civic capacity of democratic citizens (Schumpeter, as cited in Williams and Delli Carpini, 2004). Peterson (1956) in highlighting the major premise of Social Responsibility Theory wrote:

Freedom carries concomitant obligations; and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under our government, is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication in contemporary society. To the extent that the press recognizes its responsibilities and makes them the basis of operational policies, the libertarian system will satisfy the needs of society. To the extent that the press does not assume its responsibilities, some other agency must see that the essential functions of mass communication are carried out. (p. 74)

There were many technological developments that led to the creation of this theory. The technological and industrial revolution affected the nature of the press due to the way the nation and the American society was changing at this point in history. “Technological advances increased the size, speed, and efficiency of the old media and brought new ones—movies, radio, and television” (Peterson, 1956, p. 77). These technological changes also aided in the shift to the press being controlled by just a few owners, and the corresponding technological improvements made it possible “for just a few media to serve a vast audience” (Peterson, 1956, p. 78). Daily newspapers had started to decrease in number due to the costs of producing for a large audience base. Furthermore at this time in society newcomers found it very difficult to enter the
communications industry and many companies that already existed found it hard to survive.

Ultimately, five giant publishers comprised a large majority of magazine circulation, and another five companies produced almost all the movies that Americans watched. In addition, two or three large networks served almost all of the broadcasting stations within the nation (Peterson, 1956) meaning that the press was becoming a “pervasive implement of mass communication” (p. 78).

This led to a great deal of criticism for the media in the twentieth century. The press used its enormous power for its own ends by having owners propagate their own viewpoints, particularly regarding politics and economics, at the expense of differing views. The press became submissive to big business, to the extent of letting advertisers control editorial policies and content. The press began to resist social change, and more attention was given to the superficial and sensational than to the significant in regards to coverage of current issues. The “business class” began to control the press, which resulted in limited access to the industry for the newcomer; therefore, the ideas of the free and open market were endangered (Peterson, 1956).

All of these changes in society and the influence of the media led to Peterson formulating the theory of social responsibility. Williams and Delli Carpini (2004) summarized this theory by stating:

This new theory introduced (or reinforced) three significant conceptual distinctions. First, the news media was separated from entertainment media, with the former viewed as most directly responsible for fulfilling the media’s civic functions. Second, within the news media, fact would be distinguished from opinion and news reporting would strive to be accurate, objective, and balanced. Third..., reflecting arguments made much earlier by Lippmann (1922), the public was distinguished from media elites and policy experts, with the former viewed as generally passive, easily manipulated consumers of information and the latter as information gatekeepers who represented the public’s interest in the construction of policy and social reality. (p. 1210)

Williams and Delli Carpini (2004) further state that, “the ‘truth’ about the social and political world was no longer (if indeed it had ever been) constructed out of enlightened public discourse, but, instead emerged from a more managed and limited exchange among experts in the news media” (p. 1210). Due to this shift, “citizens were redefined as unsophisticated consumers of information, and the public was redefined as an audience” (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2004, p. 1210). With
the advancement of technology more questions have been raised about the power of media and its ability to set an agenda for society.

2.1.3 Agenda Setting

Agenda setting is a function of the media whereby, “salient issues or images [are established] in the minds of the public” (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008, p. 293). McCombs and Shaw (1972) state:

While the mass media may have little influence on the direction or intensity of attitudes, it is hypothesized that the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues. (p. 177)

In their seminal study, McCombs and Shaw (1972) investigated the agenda-setting role of the mass media during the 1968 presidential campaign. This study aimed to match what Chapel Hill voters said were key issues of the election with prominent issues covered by the mass media used during the campaign (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). As a result McCombs and Shaw (1972) noted that:

The political world is reproduced imperfectly by individual news media. Yet the evidence in this study that voters tend to share the media’s composite definition of what is important strongly suggests an agenda-setting function of the mass media. (184)

The work of McCombs and Shaw, and others, can best be summarized in this way:

Considerable evidence has accumulated that editors and broadcasters play an important part in shaping out social reality as they go about their day-to-day task of choosing and displaying news...This impact of the mass media—the ability to effect cognitive change among individuals, to structure their thinking—has been labeled the agenda-setting function of mass communication. Here may lie the most important effect of mass communication, its ability to mentally order and organize our world for us. In short, the mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about. (as cited in Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 293)

McCombs (2004) says that over time those facets of public affairs that are prominent in the press typically become prominent among not only the public but government officials as well. Jamieson (1988) asserts that abbreviated coverage meant that viewers were denied the right to hear articulate presenters debate the differing sides of important candidate platforms. Furthermore, Jamieson (1988) says that abbreviated coverage of the 1984 conventions meant that networks denied viewers the "privilege of assessing the substance and political potential of some important
speakers” (p. 7). The ability to direct attention on a select amount of public issues in addition to many other aspects of public affairs is the definition of the agenda-setting role of the press (McCombs, 2004). In effect what agenda setting illustrates is the gatekeeping function of the media.

2.1.4 Media Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping theory got its start partially due to Kurt Lewin’s experiments on how to entice Iowa women to eat more beef as a patriotic duty during World War II (Rogers, 1994). Lewin discovered that housewives served as the gatekeepers who control what food enters the “channels” and ultimately ends up being served for dinner. “Each channel is walled into sections surrounded by gates – the decision-making points that determine whether the food will enter the channel to start with, or move to the next section” (Roberts, 2005, p. 5). Furthermore, during this process forces apply pressure to either accept or reject food. Lewin realized that his gatekeeping model could expand beyond one’s food choices; he stated, the theory of gates “holds not only for food channels but also for the traveling of a news item through certain communication channels in a group…” (Lewin, 1947, p. 145). David Manning White (1950) further built upon the concept of gatekeeping by observing how The Peoria Star’s wire editor selected what stories would be published. “Mr. Gates” was asked to record his decision making process for a week in February 1949. Out of the approximate 12,400 inches of press association news (AP, UP, and INS) during the week, Mr. Gates used 1,297 column inches of wire news, one-tenth of the wires received. Mr. Gates essentially made decisions on selecting news stories by being influenced through both his personal beliefs and his knowledge of news routines. This study revealed how the communication of “news” is subjective and is really based on the “gate keeper’s” own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations (White, 1950). Gatekeeping models have become progressively more sophisticated as theorists consider broader ranges of external pressures on gatekeepers and the internal characteristics of the individual gatekeepers and the system that engages them (Roberts, 2005).
Masterman (1985) writes that, “the media tells us what is important and what is trivial by what they take note of and what they ignore, by what is amplified and what is muted or omitted” (p. 5). Masterman (1985) says that agenda setting is not necessarily a negative issue:

It needs to be insisted at this point that there is nothing inherently sinister about these processes of selection, agenda-setting and interpretation. Any medium, however organized and financed, will inevitably be involved in such activities. The problems arise when this work takes place behind the backs of audiences. If broadcasters could only bring themselves to be more open about the problematic nature of ‘objectivity’, then much of the power and many of the problems associated with the media would begin to wither away. (p. 5)

As society has moved into the twenty-first century, new media and have joined traditional media as sources from which the pubic gathers their information.

The United States has experienced a significant change in its media environment due to “the expansion of cable and satellite television, the advances in the Internet and World Wide Web, the horizontal and vertical integration of media though conglomerates” (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2004, p. 1212). “Technological advances and regulatory modifications in the communications industry have allowed the number of news sources to flourish in the last decade, therefore fragmenting the mass media environment”(West, 2001, as cited in Morris, 2007, p. 710). The new media environment has several characteristics that differentiate itself from the traditional media environment:

The increased volume of information that is available; the increased speed with which information can be gathered, retrieved, and transmitted; the increased control given to consumers of the media; the fragmentation of media audiences and the resulting greater ability to target media messages to particular audiences; the greater decentralization of certain aspects of the media; and the greater interactive capacity between consumers and producers of media messages. (Abramson, Arterton, & Orren, 1988; J. Katz, 1997, as cited in Williams &Delli Carpini, 2004, p. 1212)

The shift in the media environment has opened doors for new media outlets to emerge that tailor to a viewer’s specific interests or ideologies. For instance, Fox News Channel has been the “main beneficiary of television news fragmentation” due to its ability to appeal to those viewers who have become disillusioned with what they perceive as liberally-biased mainstream media (Morris, 2007, p. 707). Williams and Delli Carpini (2004) say that these changes new media have
established make it difficult to preserve the artificial division between public affairs and entertainment; there has been an erosion of the walls built to separate these two types of media. Due to the increased difficulty of differentiating between public affairs and entertainment, the separation of media organizations into these two categories has become more porous (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004).

Prominent media figures such as journalists, management executives, public officials, and entertainers have been able to move more freely through different media genres due to the creation of celebrity identities that surpass any specific genre (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2004). The effects of the ability to flow freely through the different genres is illustrated as follows:

The distinction between fact and opinion or analysis is much less clearly identified by simple rules such as where it appears, who is saying it, or how it is labeled. Public affairs time slots have become overwhelmed by the range of options open to citizens: Traditional news can be gotten any time of the day through cable or the World Wide Web or equally ignored at any time of the day. Even the informal standard operating procedures, routines, and beats that determined newsworthiness have come under serious rethinking both from within and outside the journalistic profession (Rosen, 1999, as cited in Williams and Delli Carpini, 2004).

Williams and Delli Carpini (2004) also state that as audiences absorb the changes and erosion of the distinctions between the two types of genres, that they also will start to move freely between genres, which ultimately diminishes the gatekeeping ability of any group of elites (i.e., “serious” journalists or political leaders). A long-term picture of how new media and mass media information flows is not easily predictable. Mass media outlets are struggling with changing gatekeeping standards because of the demands for interactive content produced by audiences themselves (Bennett, 2003).

With the decrease of the media’s gatekeeping role, the way political information is portrayed through the various mediums has significantly changed. This specifically impacts the field of political coverage through both hard and entertainment news divisions. The environment created by new media creates an assortment of gates through which information passes to the audience both in terms of the number of sources of information available (i.e., Internet, cable television), the speed of information transmission, and the genres the audience uses to obtain
political information (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2004). With today’s technological advances, viewers have an overabundance of alternatives to choose from when gathering political news. With “unprecedented ease,” individual news consumers can bypass traditional news mainstays (daily newspapers, weekly magazines, and network news) by easily clicking the remote control or computer mouse. Now individuals can access numerous news sources that best meet their personal preferences (Morris, 2007, p. 710). Due to the creation of new media, individuals who have long been on the “receiving end of one-way mass communication” are now more likely to become producers and transmitters (Salman, Ibrahim, Abdullah, Mustaffa, & Mahbob, 2011, p. 3). Overall, these trends may be the most revolutionary facets of the new media environment (Bennett, 2003). Not only are citizens able to generate news content, but also these technological advances have opened doors for individuals to seek information in various formats though the different media outlets now readily available. The emergence of new media have created the opportunity for the public to enter and interpret the political world; the public is now placed in a situation where they have to be able to critically evaluate what is “really” happening in today’s political society. A key factor of the fragmented news era is a heterogeneous news environment where media reports of the same topic can vary significantly depending on the source (West, 2001 as cited in Morris, 2007). Based upon the claims from previous scholars on how new media and a fragmented media environment can influence viewers’ perceptions of media and alter their media consumption habits, it is necessary that individuals learn how to critically evaluate information in this ever-evolving news environment by utilizing media literacy skills.

2.2 Media Literacy

2.2.1 Defining Media Literacy

Mass media has significantly evolved over the past two decades. With the advances in digitization of information and convergence across channels of transmission, researchers have begun to look more closely as the issue of media literacy. This is a relatively new field of research, with a large amount of literature from different academic backgrounds and interests. Scholars
have defined media literacy in multiple ways, depending on which key subjects they like to narrow their focus on (Potter, 2010). There are several definitions of media literacy that relate to this study. Anderson (1981) defines media literacy as the “skillful collection, interpretation, testing and application of information regardless of medium or presentation for some purposeful action” (as cited in Potter, 2010, p. 676). Silverblatt and Eliceiri (1997) classify media literacy as “a critical-thinking skill that enables audiences to decipher the information that they receive through the channels of mass communications and empowers them to develop independent judgments about media content” (p.48). In 1992 the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy defined media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms” (Aufderheide, 1993, as cited in Potter, 2010, p. 679).

Members of the National Communication Association created a definition of the media literate person as a person who:

Understands how words, images, and sounds influence the way meanings are created and shared in contemporary society in ways that are both subtle and profound. A media literate person is equipped to assign value, worth and meaning to media use and media messages. (as cited in Potter, 2010, p. 679)

In regard to media literacy, there are three major issues, with which scholars are confronted. The first issue asks, “What are the media? In terms of media literacy, we must clarify which media we mean” (Potter, 2010, p. 679). Many scholars focus on a single field such as television or print, yet with the increasing awareness of media literacy, media literacy should be concerned with all forms of media (Potter, 2010). The second issue according to Potter (2010) is what exactly is meant by literacy? Over the course of time, numerous scholars have taken a broad outlook and written about media literacy as an activity that involves both developing skills and building knowledge (Bazalgett, 1997; Hobbs, 1996). The final issue revolves around the purpose of media literacy (Potter, 2010). Many scholars who answer this question believe that the purpose is to improve the lives of the public in some way. The improvement of life generally entails giving the public more control over how media messages will affect them (Anderson, 1983; Buckingham, 1993a; Hobbs, 1996; Masterman, 1985, 1997, 1998). Regardless of creation of an exact
definition of media literacy, scholars have reached some consensus over underlying themes across the multiple definitions; the variations of definitions occur based upon the focus scholars choose to emphasize within their studies (Potter, 2010). Many of the commonalities include individuals being able to learn that media messages are constructed and the importance of being able to analyze content and messages.

2.2.2 Media Literacy in Education

Media education has expanded at a rapid pace in the United Kingdom, but until recently, the United States has lagged behind in showing real progress in media education. Most teachers in the United States still think of media literacy as the usage of TV or film as a teaching tool (Hobbs, 2005). Since media literacy is a relatively new topic of interest, there is no consensus about what would be the best media literacy curriculum. There has not been a distinct curriculum that “meets the goals of all the kinds of schools, across all grade levels, all sizes of schools, and all countries” (Potter, 2010, p. 683). Masterman (1985) writes that regardless of media being an evolving influence on individuals in society, there is little foundation implemented in the educational setting:

As communication systems and information flows become increasingly central components of social, economic and political activity at all levels, media education remains marginal within education systems everywhere. The media themselves are constantly changing, expanding and developing, frequently in the direction of an increasingly sophisticated management of their audiences, but sometimes in ways which open out more democratic possibilities. (p. 1)

Masterman (1985) goes on to state that media education is vital in curriculum because education needs to be flexible and open to change. Furthermore, “The creation of public opinion which counts because it is well-informed on media issues is a matter of urgent necessity if these possibilities are to be realized (Masterman, 1985, p.1). Traditional concepts of education need to incorporate work from agencies and groups that have a genuine stake in the development of media literacy. Broadcasters, parents, community and special interest groups, political activists, and all who are involved in education need to take on the role of implementing media education. The media has a significant influence on shaping individuals perceptions and ideas.
With media education being a relatively new field of study, there is not a set guideline on how curriculum should be shaped; yet there are some essential components that should be included within the coursework. Hobbs (2005) writes that:

Most conceptualizations of media literacy now involve a type of “critical” literary based on reflection, analysis, and evaluation, not only of the content and structural elements of specific media texts but of the social, economic, political, and historical contexts in which messages are created, disseminated, and used by audiences. (p. 866)

Masterman (1985) also says that the essential task of media teachers is to, “develop in pupils enough self-confidence and critical maturity to be able to apply critical judgments to media texts which they will encounter in the future” (p. 24). To develop media literacy skills within the classroom, teachers may use instructional techniques such as contextual analysis of specific TV shows or films, cross-media comparison, role-playing, and close analysis (Hobbs, 2005). For example, Buckingham (2003) notes that contextual analysis can be used to encourage students to pay close attention to the opening and closing sequences of movies or TV programs. These scenes can provide vital information about how the content is targeted at a particular audience and the different roles within the production process. Hobbs (2011) states that pedagogical practices need to be:

Emphatically student-centered and inquiry-oriented, helping students interrogate the process of making meaning through critical investigation using strategies of both close reading also called deconstruction or decoding and media production, where the practices of brainstorming, scriptwriting, and video or website production are enacted, not for the primary purpose of developing vocational or professional skills, but as a means to promote transfer of critical thinking skills from the classroom to the contexts of home, community, and culture. (p. 426)

Buckingham (2003) also points out those courses should educate about media representation, a founding principle of media education. Media does not just present reality, it also re-presents it; therefore, media production entails selecting and uniting incidents, building events into stories, and constructing characters. Representations created by media invite the audience to see the world in some particular ways and not others, causing them to be biased rather than objective (Buckingham, 2003). Buckingham (2003) says that when studying media representations, it is essential to examine the following areas:
Realism. Is the text intended to be realistic? Why do some texts seem more realistic than others?

Telling the truth. How do media claim to tell the truth about the world? How do they try to seem authentic?

Presence and absence. What is included and excluded from the media world? Who speaks, and who is silenced?

Bias and objectivity. Do media texts support particular views about the world? Do they put across moral or political values?

Stereotyping. How do media represent particular social groups? Are those representations accurate?

Interpretations. Why do audiences accept some media representations as true, or reject others as false?

Influences. Do media representations affect our views of particular social groups or issues? (Buckingham, 2003, p. 58)

When examining these factors, students can gain knowledge by comparing different media outlets, and by reflecting on the different representations represented by communications industries (Buckingham, 2003, p. 58). Phang and Schaefer (2009) also stress that curriculum should focus on an individual’s ability to analyze by discussing how rather than learning ‘how’ to analyze programming via commentators who are skilled in program training; students need to develop critical sensibilities, knowledge, and judgment through an academic process. Hobbs (2011) reaffirms the significance of not teaching students what to think but the significance of helping individuals to arrive at informed choices that are consistent with their own values via the “active, reflective, collaborative, and self-actualizing practice of reception and production” (p. 428). In addition to identifying what objectives of a media literacy course should entail, there has also been research conducted to identify the benefits of media literacy education.

5.2.3 Plan of Action: Media Literacy

Hobbs (2007) reveals that media literacy education can be a reason why individuals become more active information seekers and increase their civic knowledge structures. To generate a sense of media awareness and an appreciation of media and its messages students should be exposed to a curriculum that develops and nurtures their media awareness.

Rushkoff (1996) has labeled the current youth generation as “screen-agers” due to their media use being a series of screens, which they both access and manipulate in a constantly evolving stream of shared communication. This generation does not see media as discrete
products that can impact them or their culture but as elements within their culture. In addition, screen-agers experience the world without physical boundaries but instead as an instant global network of wireless connections and interconnections (Rushkoff, 1996). Thoman and Jolls (2004) state that in this kind of world, the content of a specific media message is no longer that relevant to the “screen-agers,” but what is important is facility with analyzing new information as it’s received, evaluating it against one’s prior knowledge, creating a response and eventually communicating to others your decision or point of view. A plan of action needs to identify common objectives to teach during a media literacy curriculum.

Hobbs (2010) asserts that the essential competencies of digital and media literacy are (1) access, (2) analyze and evaluate, (3) create, (4) reflect, and (5) act. Table 2.1 is an excerpt taken from Hobbs (2010) that defines each of the five essential competencies.

Table 2.1 Essential Competencies of Digital and Media Literacy

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<td>1. <strong>ACCESS</strong> Finding and using media and technology tools skillfully and sharing appropriate and relevant information with others.</td>
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<td>2. <strong>ANALYSE &amp; EVALUATE</strong> Comprehending messages and using critical thinking to analyze message quality, veracity, credibility, and point of view, while considering potential effects or consequences of messages.</td>
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<td>3. <strong>CREATE</strong> Composing or generating content using creativity and confidence in self-expression, with awareness of purpose, audience, and composition techniques.</td>
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<td>4. <strong>REFLECT</strong> Applying social responsibility and ethical principles to one’s own identify and lived experience, communication behavior and conduct.</td>
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<td>5. <strong>ACT</strong> Working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, the workplace, and the community, and participating as a member of a community at local, regional, national and international levels.</td>
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“These five competencies work together in a spiral of empowerment, supporting people’s active participation in lifelong learning through the process of both consuming and creating messages” (Hobbs, 2010, p. 18). Ultimately, for all aspects of every day life, individuals need a collection of
well-developed communication and problem-solving skills that include the five competencies listed above. The Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010) says, “To be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, report on, and create a high volume and extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new.” Furthermore, the National Communication Association (1998) states that media literate individuals should be able to: understand how people use media both in their personal and public lives, understand the commercial nature of media, recognize the complex relationships between audiences and media content, utilize media to communicate to specific audiences, and appreciate that media content is created within social and cultural contexts. By implementing these media literacy objectives into curriculum, students would be more aware of media structures and construction of messages.

Orr (2008) states that students are exposed to the mass media for more time each week than any other source of information (school, parents, social groups, and religious organizations), and concluded that students need a better understanding of “the ways in which mass media shaped and framed their understanding and a repertoire of tools to use in analyzing the media and, if necessary, calling for changes to media institutions” (p. 29). This study consisted of middle school students who had a media literacy curriculum within their coursework. Orr collected data regarding student learning, attitudes, and beliefs of self-efficacy in regards to media analysis and consumption. This study consisted of middle school students who had a media literacy curriculum within their coursework. Orr collected data regarding student learning, attitudes, and beliefs of self-efficacy in regards to media analysis and consumption. It was discovered that early in the semester, participants did not fully understand media literacy concepts because they did not have the vocabulary necessary to construct a clear understanding through speech or writing. Participants could speak about media and touch on concepts related based on prior knowledge, yet could not engage fully in discussions of media literacy. Results showed that participants learned media literacy concepts when attention was given to vocabulary
development and to consistent use of popular media sources. An analysis from data generated from the questionnaires and participant work samples, revealed participants’ self-efficacy in analyzing the media increased overall, especially in regards to confidence in participants’ ability to analyze media sources to reveal stereotypes and advertising techniques. Participants also became critical of some mass media production techniques and by a media proliferation of the status quo, but did not feel empowered to insist on changes to media (Orr, 2008).

Babad, Peer, and Hobbs (2009) state, "media literacy education can help strengthen students' access, analysis and communication skills and build an appreciation for the value of monitoring one's community and the world at a personal, social, cultural and global level (p.4).” This education can also assist students to develop skills necessary to recognize how bias exists in both the production and reception of messages; such as identifying the difference between well-supported arguments and false claims (Babad, Peer, & Hobbs, 2009). In their study, high school students were shown a brief political interview in which the interviewer's nonverbal behavior was friendly or hostile to the interviewee. One group that was actively in a media literacy course was compared to a control group of students who were not enrolled in the course. Results indicated that media literacy students appeared to be immune to the media bias effect, judging the interviewee in the same way whether the interviewer was friendly or hostile. Findings from this study provide empirical support to show the effectiveness of media literacy education programs, which intend to increase the elaborated information processing and increased mindfulness when responding to television news and informational programming (Babad, Peer, & Hobbs, 2009). To explain the study's results, the theory of mindful or mindless processing can be used. Research has shown that mindful television viewing can be achieved by asking viewers to take various perspectives on what they view (Langer & Piper, 1998). While mindlessness viewing is the tenancy to operate on 'autopilot' (i.e. stereotyping, performing mechanically, or not paying attention), mindfulness viewing includes a greater sensitivity to one's environment (open to new information, enhanced awareness of multiple perspectives in problem solving, and creation of

Media literacy education may encourage viewers to use more mindful and elaborated information processing since viewers are encouraged to—ask critical questions as they experience mass media and popular culture (Hobbs, 2007, 1998); with repeated practice, this questioning process may lead to heightening perception in information processing overall, leading individuals to develop more complex and differentiated individual criteria of criticism and interpretation rather than absorbing messages at face value with little conscious awareness (Kubey & Czikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Vraga, Tully, and Rojas (2009) also conducted a study that looked into the impact of media literacy training on individuals’ perceptions of media bias. Their study explored how improving individuals’ understanding of the news process can reduce hostile interpretations of media content. This research tested whether heightened awareness of the news process through the form of news media literacy training, could reduce perceptions of bias in the news media when individuals are exposed to messages from a controversial source about a controversial issue.

Undergraduate students from a large Midwestern university were used as participants for this study and were randomly assigned to the experimental or control groups. The experimental group was exposed to a short media literacy presentation that emphasized the news process, how audiences interpret news and the importance of having multiple ideas presented in the media. This presentation was three minutes in length and included a PowerPoint along with a voiceover. The control group was not exposed to this presentation. Both groups were given a short online newspaper article about the war in Iraq written by the Associated Press and published on FoxNews.com in June 2007. Political ideology was also surveyed by having respondents answer two questions asking them to rate their ideology for social issues and people’s behavior and for economic issues on a seven-point scale from 1 "very Liberal" to 7 "Very Conservative." Vraga, Tully, and Rojas (2009) found respondents shown the presentation were significantly less likely to perceive the news story as biased, yet when testing the hypotheses that the “news media literacy presentation would increase trust in the media both in the specific news story and to cover the Iraq war” (p. 75) was not statistically supported. The findings from this
study lend partial support to the idea that news media literacy can affect perceptions of the media since exposure to the news media literacy presentation decreased perceptions of bias in the news story, but did not appear to increase trust (Vraga, Tully, & Rojas, 2009).

2.2.4 Influences and Effects on Political Opinion

Media education and democracy play a significant role in how individuals formulate their opinions when voting in political campaigns. In the past, general elections were external events that the media would happen to cover. In today’s society, political campaigns have become media events that include itineraries, speeches, debates, and other miscellaneous planned events that center on the media. Television has played a significant role in influencing individuals who are undecided during a political election (Masterman, 1985). Furthermore, Strömbäck and Kiousis (2010) studied the context of different media channels and media types in the 2006 Swedish parliamentary election and discovered the influence of the media:

In affecting perceived issue salience—that is, the extent to which people think that the issue they find is the most important will affect their voting in election. As predicated, general political news attention prompted increased levels of perceived issue salience. (p. 287)

Masterman (1985) writes that the "American trend of presenting politics is a matter of personalities and images, rather than issues" (p. 12). Furthermore, this trend consists of packaging political candidates as if they were a consumer product; this can have serious repercussions if individuals are not taught to think critically about the subject matter being presented on television (Masterman, 1985). With limited media literacy skills, the cognitive process of an individual could be severely altered if no filter is used to process credible and non-credible news sources.

2.3 Political Comedy Shows

Political comedy shows have emerged over recent decades as a thriving force within the television genre. While many of these shows have been labeled as entertainment, the repercussions from viewership of such shows have had an increasing impact on how the public shapes its political opinion. Polk, Young, and Holbert (2009) state that humor has been used for
years as a tool of persuasion in order to make stories more captivating, sources more likeable, or arguments more effective. Specifically, this method has and remains frequently used in political communication (Polk et al., 2009). Cappella and Jamieson (1997) identify the consequences of political cynicism that have emerged from media coverage regarding public policy. When reporting is constantly framed as self-interested and seldom in terms of the common good regarding politicians and their policies, regardless if such characterizations are correct or incorrect, the audience’s experience of their leaders then becomes biased toward attributions that induce mistrust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Baumgarter and Morris (2008) comment that, “political satirists and comics are (perhaps ironically) being taken more seriously than those of yesteryear” (p. 622). This assertion has been illustrated through comedians such as Jon Stewart, being recognized by Time magazine as one of the 100 most influential entertainers in 2005 (“The 2005 Time 100”). Furthermore, in 2006, Stephen Colbert was a featured speaker at a White House Correspondents Dinner (Baumgarter & Morris, 2008). Baumgarter and Morris assert that as:

Political humor becomes more prevalent, researchers have started to investigate how it may influence various aspects of the political process in America. While individual research efforts have produced varying results, there seems to be a consensus that political humor does have an effect on attitudes and opinions. (p. 622)

Based upon the evolving research within this medium, exposure to such political comedy shows has resulted in positive and negative effects on how viewers form political opinions.

Tsfati, Tukachinsky, and Peri (2009) discuss the significance of studying the impact of political comedy and entertainment shows and the influence these media outlets have on security and political mistrust. These scholars justify the significance of their study by discussing that it is important to take into consideration that the public is exposed to current-affairs through news programs, but also through various entertainment genres. For this study, a representative sample of the adult Jewish Israeli population was surveyed on their perception of different media exposures. The significance of this study in relation to citizens in the United States is the fact that a popular television show, Eretz Nehederet, could be described as having similar storylines and
elements as the *John Stewart Show* and *Saturday Night Live*. The study by Tsfati et al. (2009) supported the work of other scholars (Baum, 2003, 2005; Cao & Brewer, 2008; Moy et al., 2006) by emphasizing the important role entertainment media plays in shaping political perceptions. Furthermore, these entertainment outlets appear to aid in the public forming deeper attitudes pertaining to the political world (Tsfati et al., 2009). Tsfati et al., (2009) looked at “differences between the coefficients for political comedy and talk shows, on the one hand, and the coefficients for the rest of the media items (TV news, newspapers, radio, and Internet) on the other” (p. 416). Overall, “the effects of these entertainment genres were generally stronger than that of any news media” (Tsfati et al., 2009, p. 416). Polk et al. (2009) show how humor can serve the purpose of distracting an audience from a message’s core argument by placing a demand on limited cognitive resources, which lowers the audience’s ability to counterargue the message. The implementation of humor could decrease an audience’s interest to counterargue a message simply due to the fact that the message is ‘just a joke’ and not noteworthy for deeper consideration. Based upon their findings, Polk et al. (2009) stress the importance of researching embedded political messages within humorous context, since mass mediated content has continuously been shifting from hard news to ‘infotainment’.

While some studies identify reasons why political comedy and entertainment shows can negatively affect the public’s perception on political opinion, some scholars say that these types of outlets can entice participants to seek further political information. Cao and Brewer (2006) designed a study to measure if there was an increase in public participation in seeking political information in the 2004 U.S. election based on participants’ viewership of political comedy shows. It is believed that since such entertainment programs present politics in an entertaining fashion that it could possibly lead more viewers to think that politics is enjoyable, which would stimulate political participation (Cao & Brewer, 2006). Data for this study was collected from a telephone survey and, based upon their results, Cao and Brewer (2006) discovered that “during the 2004 Democratic presidential primary campaign, one in four Americans reported regularly or
sometimes learning about the race from political comedy shows” (p. 96). Cao (2010) further stresses “the argument that entertainment-oriented television programs such as *The Daily Show* can direct viewers’ attention to politics” (p. 42). Hariman (2008) also emphasizes that political parody is important because it

creates and sustains public consciousness first and foremost by exposing the limitations of dominant discourses: it counters idealization, mythic enchantment, and other forms of hegemony. But that is not enough. A vital public culture has to include more than a corrective mechanism. Parody not only reins in other public arts but also spins important threads in the fabric of democratic polity. (p. 253)

2.3.1 *The Daily Show* ‘Fake News’ Program Format

The traditional role of news media has begun to shift due to advances in technology. One creation in particular, cable television has opened the doors for numerous new influences on today’s news agenda. As noted earlier, fewer journalist are standing out due to a “fragmented news universe,” and that “about one-in-ten [of those people surveyed] name a cable talk show host as their most admired journalist, while 5% name an anchor of a cable news program” (“Fewer Journalists Stand Out,” 2010). *The Daily Show* contributes to this fragmentation of the news environment due to the way the show is formatted. Baym (2005) states, “Its unique blending of comedy, late-night entertainment, news, and public affairs discussion has resonated with a substantial audience” (p. 260). Borden and Tew (2007) state that although *TDS* is created and produced by nonjournalists, the creators are “familiar with the moral standards and performance conventions of journalism” (p. 309). Furthermore, *TDS* is performing a “valuable auditing function, watching and covering the powerful” (p. 309).

The term “fake” news has been attributed to shows such as *TDS* because it is a performance of news since Stewart parodies the news while simultaneously presenting and criticizing it (Borden & Tew, 2007). *TDS*, from the start of the show, positions itself as if it is an actual televised newscast. Each night the show begins with a full-screen graphic of the date, an American flag, and the globe. In addition, this graphic element is complimented with a music track similar to that of nightly newscasts with an announcer stating, “From Comedy Central’s world
news headquarters in New York, this is *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (Baym, 2005, p. 262). Baym (2005) notes that “the initial emphasis on the date borrows a technique from broadcast journalism that seeks textual authority through a claim to immediacy” (p. 262). Furthermore by stating ‘world news headquarters in New York’ this contains connotations that invoke power and prestige one would associate with a New York-based national news program. After the initial serious introduction to TDS, it quickly cuts away to a screenshot of a cheering crowd while playing up-beat music. Based upon these two elements, TDS interweaves two levels of discourse, traditions of authoritative nightly news and entertainment talk show. By blending these two production elements, humor becomes intertwined with a serious concern for current events (Baym, 2005).

*TDS* is composed of three major content elements, with the first being the satirical news update. This segment consists of an introductory monologue that makes brief references to current events in order to set up a punch-line (Baym, 2005). The one-liners focusing on politically-oriented content use the news for its inspiration, but generally focuses on the personal foibles and character flaws of prominent political figures (Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003, as cited in Baym, 2005). Furthermore, *TDS* includes video clips, soundbites, and complete reporter packages (common news elements), which generally focuses on the trivial aspects of the political domain, yet tackles national and global issues of unquestioned significance more frequently. The second element of *TDS* is the parody news reports. The show has a cast of comedians who serve as ‘news reporters.’ These comedians either appear on set with Stewart or in a mock ‘live shot,’ where they will be in front of a chroma-key background that serves as the scene for a big story. The news reporters provide mock versions of an instant analysis that is similar to contemporary news. In addition, pre-produced news packages are also created to cover public affairs stories (Baym, 2005). Baym (2005) writes, “Always silly and at times ridiculous, these stories do offer a measure of insight into topics of significance for the political process. Their
greater purposes, however, may be to mock the genre of television news itself” (p. 259). The final segment of *TDS* is an interview segment. Baym (2005) states:

> While it is modeled in the tradition of the late-night celebrity interview, the discussion segment differs from its predecessors in important ways. Although the guests at times are the familiar movie stars who frequent the late-night circuit to promote their latest films, more often they are politicians, journalists, or commentators. (p. 271)

The significance of the interview segment is the fact that Stewart’s politically-oriented interviews entail thoughtful discussions of national problems, instead of gearing the discussion to attacking the opposing side of an issue. Furthermore, Stewart approaches the interview as a hybrid that combines pop culture and humor with a willingness to discuss difficult issues (Baym, 2005).

### 2.3.1.1 The Daily Show Usage of Inter-Media Agenda Setting

Inter-media agenda setting can be defined as when the news agenda of one medium follows that of another (Atwater, Fico, and Pizante, 1987). McCombs (2004) says that “the elite news media frequently exert a substantial influence on the agenda of other news media” (p. 113). *TDS* uses the function of inter-media agenda setting, for the selection process of issues covered on the show. While Stewart does cover issues from network TV journalism, cable TV news is the target for most of Stewart’s coverage and criticisms on *TDS* (Borden & Tew, 2007). The reason for selecting from a pool of cable TV news over traditional TV journalism is because cable shows have “more content latitude than traditional network television”; cable TV journalists are able to alter their journalistic performances to draw in a larger audience, which generates them to become more ego-driven, trivial, entertaining, and manipulative (Borden & Tew, 2007, p. 306). Baym (2005) says that *The Daily Show* re-uses information from mainstream news sources, and that there is no original reporting; the ‘joke’ interviews and chats with guests follow more in line with the tradition of late night comedy shows such as *Late Night with David Letterman*. Furthermore, while the show relies on “raw material that has been “vetted” by journalists” *TDS* indirectly buys into factuality and its associated rules of evidence (Borden & Tew, 2007, p. 305). Since *TDS* follows the format of “fake” news, its dependence on mimicry will be based upon
“recycled news, Internet chatter, and C-SPAN footage” (Borden & Tew, 2007, p. 312). The combination of mimicry of information sources can have an impact on a young viewing audience.

2.3.2 Influences of Political News Coverage on Youth

Today’s youth are exposed to a wide spectrum of media influences. Unlike in the past, these media influences include multiple cable networks, Internet, and social media. News is no longer distributed purely through the channels of traditional news media (i.e. a select few broadcasting stations or newspapers). Hart and Hartelius (2007) have noted that today’s youth are more likely to be subjected to the appeal of cynicism because it is a “way of sounding older, more worldly, a way of announcing that all life is dross, that social organizations and continuing commitments—the very essence of politics—are passé” (p. 269). Media figures such as Jon Stewart are making cynicism attractive, and turning political commentary into a profitable market (Hart & Hartelius, 2007). Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, and Carlton (2007) conducted a study on undergraduate students who were enrolled in several different introductory courses offered at a university in order to test the participants’ political gratifications associated with CNN television news and The Daily Show. This study found that:

Entertainment-based political outlets like The Daily Show not only have the ability to generate effects on the dependent variables traditionally studied in the field of political communication (e.g., vote likelihood, political knowledge, issue salience), but can also affect individual-level perceptions of traditional political communication information outlets (e.g., national television news). (p. 32)

This data illustrates the importance of communication scholarship necessary to implement a strategy to further study the emerging entertainment-based political information outlets such as The Daily Show (Holbert et al., 2007). Another finding from this study showed that individuals who viewed themselves to be politically incompetent and ineffective become especially attached to the satirical message of The Daily Show and what this outlet had to say about national television news (Holbert et al., 2007). This discovery opens the door for further research specifically focused on individuals who are unsure about the political process and to collect data about how
they cognitively process and seek out additional information, or if and why they do not deem additional information important.

This review of literature lays the foundation of how media have evolved over time and the impacts they may have on viewers' opinion forming process of salient issues in the media. Furthermore, the ability of media to construct and withhold information from the general public was discussed as it aids in creating salient issues. With the creation of new media outlets, such as cable news networks and political comedy shows, there is a broader range of outlets accessible to the public than there was in the past, which could generate either a positive or negative affect. Although it may be plausible that media literacy skills could assist viewers in making informed media consumption habits by through critically analyzing the sources and content they select to intake, it has not officially been established through the literature. Having reviewed the applicable literature, this next section identifies the research questions that guide this study.

2.4 Research Questions

In order to be functionally literate in a media-saturated world, individuals need to be able to read the messages that inform and entertain. Furthermore, as the internet becomes a 'fact of life,' the critical thinking skills that help individuals navigate through traditional media are even more important (“Why Teach Media Literacy?”, 2010). Kellner and Share (2005) state:

Living in what Marshall McLuhan (1997) coined the global village, it is not enough to merely understand media, students need to be empowered to critically negotiate meanings, engage with the problems of misrepresentations and under-representations, and produce their own alternative media. Addressing issues of inequality and injustice in media representations can be a powerful starting place for problem-posting transformative education. Critical media literacy offers the tools and framework to help students become subjects in the process of deconstructing injustices, expressing their own voices, and struggling to create a better society. (p. 382)

Due to the current fragmented media environment, this study takes an exploratory approach to see how students select media sources when trying to find news information. As Williams and Delli Carpini (2004) have noted in their studies, new media have made it difficult to preserve the artificial division between public affairs and entertainment, and the separation of media
organizations into these two categories has become more porous. Furthermore, Jamieson (1988) adds how the early days of radio had hour-long speeches that over time ultimately have shrunk down to essentially soundbites of information in present day society. She writes, “As entertainment was added to lure and retain audiences, speech time shrunk” (Jamieson, 1988, p. 9). The assertions stated by Williams and Delli Carpini (2004) and Jamieson (1988) illustrate how media messages have shifted over time to become condensed and fragmented.

Based upon the changes in media messages, this study specifically focused on undergraduate college students and their perceptions of hard and soft news media outlets. The objective of this study was to compare student responses of those who have had a media literacy component in their education to those who have not had such academic training.

Research Question 1 is designed to see the differences between students who have been taught media literacy skills within their academic curriculum and students who have never had such academic training.

*RQ1a:* What strategies do students who have taken a course containing a media literacy component utilize to select media outlets during the interactive activity?
*RQ1b:* What strategies do students who have not taken a media literacy component utilize to select media outlets during the interactive activity?

As previously mentioned, the traditional role of news media is shifting due to advances in technology. One creation in particular, cable television, has influenced not only news content, but also the way in which news is gathered. A 2010 Pew Research study, which focused on a “fragmented news universe” illustrated how the distribution of audience’s seeking traditional broadcast news for informational sources has decreased (“Fewer Journalists Stand Out,” 2010). Instead of just three main evening news programs, there are cable news networks and the Internet that provide viewers with more opportunity to select media outlets that meet their own individual interests and needs.

*RQ2* was designed to see how students define the term media literacy. Since recent scholarly work has various definitions of this term, this research question was established to see how students perceive media literacy in their own terms.
RQ2a: How do students who have had a media literacy component define the term media literacy?
RQ2b: How do students who have not had a media literacy component define the term media literacy?

Another objective of this study was to see the influence entertainment news sources (political comedy shows) have on students’ perceptions of being an outlet for news information. As Holbert et al. (2007) discovered in their study, individuals who viewed themselves as politically incompetent and ineffective became more drawn and attached to the satirical element of The Daily Show and how this television show shaped its opinion about national television news. Instead of testing participants who viewed themselves as politically incompetent, this study used participants who have and have not been trained to identify deconstruct and analyze media outlets.

RQ3a: How do students who have had a media literacy component view political comedy shows as sources of information?
RQ3b: How do students who have not had a media literacy component view political comedy shows as sources of information?

Since those who have received a media literacy component are more likely to know how to critically think about different news sources, it seems more plausible that their responses may slightly differ from those who have not had such academic training. Having reviewed the literature and listed the research questions guiding the study, the next chapter describes the methodology used to conduct this study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Justification of Research Approach

This study was conducted using a two-fold process. Participants were asked to participate in an interactive activity, which was then followed up by individual interviews. This qualitative approach was selected due to the nature of the research questions. Since this study examines how students use and understand media outlets as sources of information, it is beneficial to use an exploratory approach to investigate how and why participants respond to the media in certain ways. When surveying previous research within the scope of individuals’ perceptions of media outlets, there were very few studies that took a qualitative approach. Many studies conducted have taken the methodological approach of surveying viewers to generate statistical data, but do not go in-depth into why viewers select certain outlets. Furthermore, interviews can also create a more relaxed atmosphere for data collection—participants may feel more comfortable engaging in a conversation with the researcher(s) rather than filling out a survey (Boyce & Neale, 2006). While this method of data collection provides an insight into the minds of students, there are some weaknesses to using this methodological approach. McCracken (1988) discusses that participants lead hectic, privacy-centered, and deeply segmented lives, which would cause a straightforward approach to data collection to be extremely difficult. Time scarcity is a weakness since it is difficult even for the most willing of participants to devote enough time to produce complete responses to provide data that will answer the research questions of the study. The limitation of time is not restricted to participants having enough time; in addition, researchers also find it difficult to find enough time to immerse
themselves within the culture of their participants (McCracken, 1988). Data collected from qualitative methods such as interviews, are typically not generalizable. When in-depth interviews are conducted, generalizations about the results are usually not able to be made due to small samples that are chosen, in addition to, random sampling methods not being used (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

This method was selected over a large-scale survey because information obtained through in-depths interview helps exploring matters in greater detail than what could have been gathered from a general questionnaire (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, Newbold, 1998). Studies such as Burson’s (2010) study have utilized Likert-scale questionnaires to establish media literacy skills amongst students. The usage of Likert-scale questions allows a researcher to identify the percentage of students who exemplify media literacy skills, but does not reveal an individual participant’s reasoning for why they answered questions in a particular way. Furthermore, a questionnaire “does not usually allow space for an on-going, in-depth investigation of attitudes and opinions” (Hansen et. al, 1998, p. 232). Unlike gauging student responses from a scaled survey, this study was created to identify participants’ candid reactions to different news mediums in an effort to reveal why they either select or do not select media sources when seeking out news information. A distinction occasionally drawn between qualitative and quantitative methods is that qualitative studies generate data that are freely defined by the participant rather than structured in advance by a researcher (Patton, 1980). In addition, ‘pre-structured’ data are taken to involve selection from a limited range of alternatives defined by a researcher though methods such as a multiple-choice questionnaire (Dey, 1993). The literature previously mentioned further adds to the justification of structuring an interactive activity to observe participants’ reactions to media outlets, which was then followed by an interview, which allowed participants the opportunity to explain and reveal how and why they think and act the way they do when exposed to certain mediums.
3.2 Participants

Participants for this study consisted of undergraduate students at a university with a communication department that has a course containing a media literacy component within its curriculum. The university selected for this study has two lower division required core courses all communication majors must take and one of them specifically contains a course with a media literacy component. According to the University course catalogue, COMM 274 Introduction to Communication Studies entails the:

survey of the role of communication in daily life; concepts and contexts therein. Emphasis on the acquisition of media literacy skills and critique, as may be applicable, for upper division work in the discipline. ([http://www.csub.edu/catalog/2009-2011_regularlyUpdated/pages/0022-003.pdf](http://www.csub.edu/catalog/2009-2011_regularlyUpdated/pages/0022-003.pdf))

As indicated through a COMM 274 course syllabus, students who take this course should be able to define the concept and types of convergence in today’s media, define media literacy, understand how one interacts with the media, recognize the interaction between media and society, and recognize the various types/forms of mass communications. For this class, students were required to keep a journal of their media use for a composite week (Simmons, personal communication, April 11, 2012). Upon completion of the journal, students were asked to write a reflection paper identifying what they learned about when, what, and how they use mass media. Based upon the description of this course it is assumed that communication majors will have learned the basic media literacy skills to critically evaluate and critique various media. This course was identified after looking at course syllabi and identifying a course where students are taught to critically think about news sources and how to separate the different types of media genre. A communication professor sent a mass email (Appendix C) out to her students to find participants willing to participate in the study. In addition participants were also found through word-of-mouth from communication students who agreed to participate in the study. Half of the participants were selected from this course, and the additional students were selected at random from majors other than the communication department.
Central location intercept was used as a method of recruitment to find additional participants. This process is similar to the marketing research technique of mall intercept interview, which is, “a survey method that involves interviewing people in the common area of shopping malls” (Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 2009, p. 246). The central location identified for this study was a popular building on campus, DDH, where student organizations hang out in between classes. Also, participants were recruited through Facebook. Greek organizations were targeted as a means to find students since these organizations have members of all ages and majors. A recruiting message was drafted (Appendix D) and sent to Greek organization Facebook groups or pages.

The number of participants recruited for this study was 20 students: 10 communication majors and 10 non-communication majors. Glaser and Strauss (1967) introduced to the field of qualitative research the concept of data saturation and stated it as the point in data collection when no new additional data are found to develop aspects of a conceptual category. Boyce and Neale (2006) also note that the general rule on sample size for interviews is when the same themes, issues, stories, and topics are revealed from the participants, it is then a sufficient sample size has been reached. While conducting the 20 interviews, participants generated similar themes and revelations within this study to conclude that a sufficient sample size was utilized due to saturation within the data.

3.3 Creating Interactive Activity

In order to hear participants’ own testimony without generating structured responses (i.e. Likert-scale questions), an interactive activity was created to observe how participants use media. It was essential to create an activity in which participants were exposed to various media outlets and prompted to critique and evaluate each source for its news content as well as which sources students would naturally gravitate towards in order to seek out information. Media literacy worksheets provided by Baran (2008) served as a guide for formatting this interactive activity. Baran’s text, *Introduction to Mass Communication: Media Literacy and Culture with Media World*
2.0, is a common text used in entry-level communication and media literacy courses. Several of these worksheets entail students evaluating and critiquing different media outlets, both traditional and non-traditional. Furthermore, students engage in breaking down the media messages and contexts that are distributed through these various outlets and how they perceive these different media messages. Thus, it was determined that an interactive activity modeled after what communication students would be exposed to in a media literacy course would be an ideal way of discovering how participants use and view the news.

A current affairs topic was preselected for this study in order to narrow down the topic for which participants would be seeking information. Since this study was scheduled to begin as participants returned back to school (beginning of January), a composite week was selected in mid-December. During the composite week used to collect data for this study, Newt Gingrich was re-entering the 2012 GOP presidential nomination race. Since this topic was prevalent in the media during the week of December 11, 2011 through December 18, 2011 it was selected based upon the accessibility and availability of news stories distributed at the time across various media outlets.

3.3.1 Creation of Word Press Blog

A Word Press blog was created in order to efficiently organize the directions and content used for this study. In addition, by organizing the news stories and providing hyperlinks to each story, it eliminates the ability for students to be distracted from the activity itself and allows them to remain focused on the topic at hand. If participants were just given unlimited Internet access that could lead participants to search for material unrelated to activity topic. This blog lists nine of the 13 media outlets that will be available for participants to select from. Using a Word Press Blog was convenient to capture the information broadcasted on television or posted on the Internet from traditional broadcast networks, cable news networks, and political comedy shows since it provided participants with web links that would direct them to a specific story. The names of the
nine outlets were listed alphabetically to eliminate any doubt of favoritism or hierarchy of outlets to participants. This blog site contains both text and video formats of news stories.

3.3.2 Selection of Media Outlets

Nine electronic media outlets were featured on the Word Press site, in addition to four newspapers. The media outlets available online included a combination of traditional broadcast networks, cable news outlets, and political comedy shows. Appendix E has a complete listing of all media outlets and stories selected. The rationale for selecting outlets from these news media genres is to provide participants with news information across all media spectrums.

Political comedy shows are defined as, “a television program that emphasizes humorous coverage of current issues and parodies of political figures” (Cao & Brewer, 2006, p. 90). Three clips were selected, and each clip was one to three minutes. The clips were selected from Comedy Central’s website, which posts video clips of The Daily Show and The Colbert Report. The clips covered general topics currently being covered in the media.

Four newspapers were selected based upon easy accessibility around town i.e. which newspapers are most frequently located within coffee shops, gas stations, and grocery stores. Three of the papers selected have mass circulation around the nation, USA Today, Los Angeles Times, and New York Times. The fourth paper is a locally distributed paper, The Bakersfield Californian. Periodicals were selected from both west and east coast publications and locally in order to eliminate a bias of newspaper selections available for this activity. Furthermore, due to new media and newspapers posting online formats now, it was decided that the newspapers for this study would be provided in traditional hard copy format. By providing a traditional form of media, questions during the follow-up interview can pertain to participants’ opinions on traditional versus non-traditional ways to seek out news and information. Each story selected was placed into a folder with the name of the outlet written on the outside.
3.3.3 Selection of News Stories

Three stories from each media outlet were selected that covered Newt Gingrich running for the GOP nomination or provided information regarding the GOP nomination overall. A maximum of three stories from each outlet was decided based upon two main factors. First, since some of these participants may never seek out news on a regular basis, it was important not to intimidate them with an information overload. Second, for the consideration of the participants’ time it was important to select only three stories per outlet. If the activity and interview lasted too long, it may become difficult to retain the participant’s attention. Stories were selected based upon what was distributed in the media during the composite week. For electronic media outlets (broadcast and cable networks), it was based upon which stories were posted on the front page of the network’s website on a given day. The shows from Comedy Central were selected based upon a topic search of “Newt Gingrich” or “GOP” and which stories featured those key words. Stories from the newspapers were selected based upon which stories were published pertaining to the topic during the composite week.

3.4 Creating Question Guide

To understand how participants perceive different media outlets, participants were asked to identify three media sources they use on a weekly basis (2 to 3 times per week). Participants then answered questions identifying why those outlets were of interest to them. Participants were also asked generic questions about their media consumption habits in order to gauge how frequently they use media and which forms are frequently used. Several questions were taken from a previous study conducted by Burson (2010), who studied media literacy among college journalism students. Questions taken from Burson (2010) pertained to individual media consumption habits and media literacy.

In addition, participants were asked questions related specifically to political comedy shows such as The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. Participants were shown clips from these shows and prompted to provide a yes or no response if they would be motivated to find additional
information about the topic shown on the clip from a hard news outlet. These interview questions are geared toward finding data that illustrates whether humor can motivate students into being more interested in political news. Polk et al. (2009) wrote that humor has made stories more captivating and that it might facilitate an attitude change by reducing the audience's cognitive resistance. By juxtaposing participants’ responses based on if they have a media literate academic foundation or not could reveal data that shows one type of participant would be more willing than the other to seek out credible news information. Ultimately, the goal of this study was to get into the mind of each participant to unveil how they select media outlets for sources of information.

Since this activity centered on a current affairs topic pertaining to political coverage, questions regarding participants’ political ideologies and knowledge were also created. These questions helped gauge the level of political coverage participants are exposed to on a regular basis and if they actively seek out political news and information. Also, to get a sense of how knowledgeable participants are about current events, three current affairs questions were asked at the end of the interview. These three questions were selected based upon current United States news and political information.

The ultimate goal of constructing this discussion guide was for participants to tell their story in their own terms. According to McCracken (1988), it is essential when formulating questions to phrase these questions in a general and nondirective manner. McCracken (1988) says that the questions and prompts created are only to “spring” respondents to talk about certain subject areas and not to over specify the substance or perspective of what the participant has to say. Prompts were vital to follow particular questions in case participants were having difficulties generating a response. Planned prompts give participants something “to push off against” …“It is to give them an opportunity to consider and discuss phenomena that do not come readily to mind or speech” (McCracken, 1988, p. 35).
3.5 Conducting Interviews

Since this study was utilizing an interpretive approach, the interactive activity and interview were administered face-to-face. McCracken (1988) says that this qualitative research method generates descriptive and analytic data that can lead researchers into the mental world of participants. Individual interviews, “gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world” (McCracken, 1988, p. 17).

It was an essential component of this activity and interview that participants were not informed of the study’s focus on media literacy skills. As Williams and Delli Carpini (2004) have noted in their studies, new media have made it difficult to preserve the artificial division between public affairs and entertainment, and the separation of media organizations into these two categories has become more porous. If participants were led to believe that they were being questioned on their media usage habits for a media literacy study, they could be more inclined to focus answering questions in a manner in which they believe is the “correct” answer instead of giving their honest opinions on which types of outlets they utilize on a routine basis.

3.6 Procedure

Several locations were selected to conduct the interviews. Empty classrooms in Dorothy Donahue Hall, a main classroom building centrally located on campus, and conference rooms located in the campus library were chosen to conduct the interviews. The small rooms provided students with the ability to casually sit at a conference table and engage in conversation. Also, since the rooms were located on campus, participants would already be in an environment with familiar surroundings and consequently would create the most natural setting possible for students.

The interviews were held during the first several weeks of winter quarter, January 9, 2012 through January 21, 2012. This timeframe was selected in order to recruit participants before they become involved deeply with academic responsibilities during their winter quarter. The interviews were selected on days that participants had breaks in between their classes, which was typically
mid-afternoon Monday through Friday. By choosing a central location on campus, participants did not have to schedule an additional time to return to campus. The length of the interviews varied from 18 minutes to over 60 minutes. Appendix F identifies each participant by gender, age, and major.

3.6.1 Implementation of Study

Participants were given specific directions for the activity, similar to an educational exercise in a classroom environment, (Appendix G) and then prompted to begin the activity. Participants were provided with a worksheet that allowed them to write the media outlets they would use to complete their activity (Appendix H) and with a laptop that was opened to the Word Press blog created specifically for this activity. When participants notified the prompter that they completed the activity, a follow-up interview immediately followed.

McCracken (1988) says the objective of an interview is to create enough testimony around key terms to provide sufficient data for the analysis portion of the study. In order to successfully record the data, tape recorders were used for each interview. After an interview was finished, the interviewer sat down and transcribed the audio recording into a transcript. It was vital to convert the data collected from audio into a transcript document in order to review the commentary provided by each participant.

3.6.2 Thematic Analysis

The data generated from participant testimonies is treated as “reproductions of reality” (Corbin, 1990, 1998, as cited in Hall & Callery, 2001, p. 258). When categories are revealed through open coding, the data provided first-hand experiences and perspectives that aided in juxtaposing the different cognitive thought processes of participants who have been educated on media literacy and those who have not, since this data taken from the context of the participants’ realities.

The creation of categories is rooted in repetitive observations, and this entails enumeration of what data does or does not ‘fit,’ therefore, enumeration is not a ‘luxury extra,’ but
essential in order to classify data (Dey, 1993). Three coders utilized open coding to generate
categories within the interview transcripts. Open coding allows for the unrestricted coding of data
(Strauss, 1987). Each coder went through the transcripts line-by-line and categorized portions of
data on the basis of its coherent meaning (Spiggle, 1994). Through this process, categories were
built, named, and had attributes assigned to them. Dey (1993) notes that categorizing can
contribute to revealing meaning-in-context. Once each coder analyzed the transcripts, a
negotiation took place for any discrepancies regarding categories in order to consolidate the three
coders’ categories into one definitive list of categories.

With the data segmented into different categories, this information was then thematically
analyzed to reveal common themes amongst the participants. Owens (1984) states that a theme
emerges when “three criterion are present (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness” (p.
275). Recurrence is when; the same “thread of meaning” is illustrated in at least two different
portions of the data (Owens, 1984, p. 275). When key words or phrases are used multiple times,
repetition is being used. The third criterion, forcefulness, is identified as participants using, “vocal
inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses,” when speaking (Owens, 1984, p. 275). For example, the
theme bias was determined by having all three criterions stated by Owens (1984).
Communication majors used the term bias in their own words when describing their selection
process of media outlets for the interactive activity. The change in participants’ tone of voice
when speaking about biased media outlets showed that bias was a negative connotation for
selecting media outlets. Additionally, when speaking about bias media outlets, participants had
the same “thread of meaning” by reiterating that bias reporting was a reason not to select a
particular outlet.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

4.1 Overview of Participant Responses

For this research, 20 undergraduate students from a university within the California State University (CSU) system participated in an interactive study with follow-up individual interviews. To retain the privacy of participant testimonies, all participants’ names were changed. Ten of the participants (six female and four male) were communication majors while the others (five female and five male) were from different academic fields of study. The non-communication majors came from various areas such as business, kinesiology, history, and liberal studies. The participants varied in ages from eighteen years of age to thirty-nine years of age. A majority of the participants were between the ages of twenty and twenty-three years of age. Participants also came from all grade levels, freshmen through senior. Below is a brief description of each participant:

Brian: communication major, 23-years-old, senior, undecided on political affiliation
Carl: communication major, 21-years-old, undecided on political affiliation
Ronald: communication major, 21-years-old, senior, undecided on political affiliation
Annie: communication major, 20-years-old, junior, undecided on political affiliation
Katie: communication major, 21-years-old, senior, Republican
Kathy: communication major, 20-years-old, junior, undecided on political affiliation
Travis: communication major, 21-years-old, senior, Republican
Michelle: communication major, 21-years-old, senior, Republican
Mary: communication major, 19-years-old, sophomore, undecided on political affiliation
Jessica: communication major, 39-years-old, senior, Republican
Monica: kinesiology major, 21-years-old, senior, Republican
Carrie: psychology major, 21-years-old, senior, undecided on political affiliation
Matthew: biology major, 20-years-old, sophomore, undecided on political affiliation
Jennifer: business administration major, 22-years-old, senior, undecided on political affiliation
Jane: human resources major, 23-years-old, senior Republican
Jacob: physical education and kinesiology major, 20-years-old, sophomore, Democrat
George: history and criminal justice major, 20-years-old, junior, Democrat
Eric: undeclared, 18-years-old, freshman, Democrat
Kevin: business administration major, 23-years-old, senior, socially liberal and fiscally conservative
Kelley: liberal studies major, 23-years-old, junior, Democrat
The twenty interviews were conducted from January 12, 2012 through January 28, 2012. In order to answer the research questions, it was essential to separate participant responses based upon majors.

4.2 Research Question One

4.2.1 RQ1a

*RQ1a:* What strategies do students who have taken a course containing a media literacy component utilize to select media outlets during the interactive activity?

While the ten communication major participants all had their own reasons for selecting media outlets and stories, there were several dominant themes that were revealed through their interviews. Several participants said they sought out neutral information when completing the study. Whether they selected stories that were completely neutral in their reporting or selected stories that were both negative and positive, they felt it was important to report in a neutral fashion to give a well-rounded recap of the information, which resulted in the theme, *bias.* Participants did not select stories they perceived as biased because they felt fair reporting was not being given over the issues within the stories. In addition, participants sought out information that was concise and straightforward to the reporting of facts, which results in the theme of *straightforward.* Articles were also selected based upon participants’ familiarity with the various media outlets, through *word-of-mouth.*

4.2.1.1 Bias

Bias is defined as favoring one side of an issue versus another. For example, media outlets that report stories favoring one political party over another. Participants found it important that news be reported as impartial with a political or ideological grouping. Several communication majors said that they would not select articles from several media outlets because they feel there is a bias in the way the stories convey information. Participants said that when selecting articles it is important to find ones that were neutral in the reporting of facts or to find a well-rounded collection of information from opposing sides.
Travis commented that he sees a ‘heavy liberal bias’ in New York Times and Los Angeles Times. He recalls from personal experience as to why he feels this way about these media sources:

I used to live in LA and I didn’t like half of the people there, they mostly are idiots. And um recalling previous elections and that kinda stuff those heavy populous centers always nine times out of ten will go democrat um and that’s in my opinion due to um the large amount of population that lives below the poverty line would live in those major cities.

Several participants said that they feel Fox News is guilty of reporting its news stories with a conservative bias. Ronald stated that he feels Fox leans towards one side due to the fact that he watched a documentary in class on how Fox reports its stories.

Carl also commented that he has watched a documentary as well that has left him with a negative impression of Fox. He states the movie was, Out Foxed, and it broke down ethical issues in the media and especially focused on Fox News. Katie said that she had grown up not appreciating Fox because, “obviously they make fun of people and choose their sides as well. I don’t think a news source should choose a side.”

Brian commented that he chooses stories that he feels, “I know it’s kinda loaded thing but least biased in a sense.” He went on to further elaborate by stating:

Like as much as I might find stuff on here like with Jon Stewart, Steven Colbert stuff I would pay attention to that on TV in the idea that it would be entertaining but I wouldn’t go to that for any legitimate information, and then certain things like Fox News or MSNBC, I tend to avoid those just because so much of it tends to be kinda based around entertainment as well, even though they aren’t as apparent as the Jon Stewart stuff so I mean that’s kinda how I ruled out the ones that I wouldn’t pay attention to. These I mean if I really want to go for something that I trust most in terms of information I would go more for the print stuff which is why it was mostly like New York Times and LA Times, USA Today um for more of an informational kind of standpoint. Um and then when I actually went into each individual one sifting through them in part it was the ones that were most interesting that kinda jumped out more um like uh ‘Romney attacks Gingrich as zany’ I mean in part I chose that because the title stood out but it was also something that genuinely interest me. Um ‘Different voter enthusiasm with GOP asset’ again more kinda grounded as oppose to a lot of the stuff that I would see like on Fox News or MSNBC where it’s more of the “mudslinging” and more of the entertainment based stuff so.

Katie also said that she just doesn’t trust everything the Bakersfield Californian has to say because, “They are very selective on what they choose to say, so say they choose one side of
the campaign, they stick with it and they don’t give all full forced facts. Like I’ve witnessed in some of their stories they say things that they have no fact for.”

Michelle also said that there were some outlets she did not even take the time to look at:

Because some of them I think would like misinterpret things or um leave out facts on purpose kinda, more lead you in some way or the other, some like The Colbert Report and The Daily Show like they’re funny and everything but they’re not like real news stories you know what I mean?

When asked to explain why she believes they are not real news stories, Michelle said that “they’re kinda like a play off of news, I mean they may report real news, like things that actually happen but they may take their own spin on it.” Furthermore, she said that while they may make it funny, it is difficult to select what are the actual facts and comments, “I think it’s like hard to pick out what actually is like 100% completely true so it’s good to have one that is like neutral I guess.”

Travis pointed out how the way outlets report their stories influences which ones he would seek out for news information:

Um [pauses] well I already went over why I didn’t choose the other papers um Fox News is too lenient towards Republicans and conservative ways um MSNBC and NBC lean somewhat liberal um depending on the show that’s on and I’m trying to remember what the other ones are. ABC again leans liberal and I did go to CNN for um one story and CNN usually is um kinda middle of the road, I mean some of them are left and some of them are right but usually between the two they are pretty even.

For example, Michelle, a 20-year-old junior, said:

Um well I always think that you should always see both sides just because you know the media tends to take on one side or the other a lot and it’s hard to find sources that take on both sides because it’s kinda like unfair if you’re only watching like...like democrat like TV you know what I mean? Or somebody’s always zeroed in on you know the Riley factor or something like that, ‘cuz I think they just don’t get all of the facts it’s more like opinions.

Carl, decided to select three articles to complete the study and opted to select one that was negative towards Newt Gringrich, one that was positive, and one that appeared neutral, at least from his perspective. He comments that, “It was important for me to find a positive, neutral, and negative story so that I can get the most information to write a well researched, objective story. If I just read a positive or negative story, my story would be slanted.”
4.2.1.2 Straightforward

Several participants state that they select the outlets and stories they did based upon the fact that the reporting was done in a straightforward manner, presenting facts related to the issue. This theme is operationalized as reporting in a direct manner and not deviating away from the point of the article. Jessica comments that several articles were appealing to her because “they were very direct on what they were stating like this is what Gingrich is doing, so they were very clear headlines that you knew what you were going to read in the article.”

Katie pointed out that she has a sense of trust for articles that “tend to start with actual facts and they write longer articles that like discuss everything rather than focusing in on one thing and doing a little blurb.”

Travis said it is important to select stories that were more in the middle and had less bias because:

I don’t like any extreme of how a story is to be told um usually the middle way...the middle, which is usually how most of America identifies (pauses) you do have your Republican populous and Democratic populous but you have usually the middle of the road places that will get the story, they don’t practice kinda flamboyant journalism, they aren’t trying to get you to feel a certain way, they are just telling you how it is.

Kathy “when it comes to politics, I don’t like when they just jab at each other.” She went on to say that she had only selected one story for the activity where it appeared candidates were attacking one another. Kathy commented how she identifies ABC, CNN, Fox, and MSNBC as all the same to her, not in a sense of either all Democratic or Republican but that their reporting appears to swing one way versus the other. She stated, “I just don’t like to see it swing one way, I feel like the newspapers stay more true to the um stories.”

4.2.1.3 Word-of-Mouth

This theme is operationalized as media outlets that are well known or ones that participants use frequently as a result of popularity of outlet or from what others have spoken on behalf of outlets.
As previously mentioned, two students were able to recount how a film aided in them identifying Fox as a biased outlet. In addition, Mary commented that she did not choose several outlets not really based on her own opinions but from hearsay she has heard from others. She stated, “I have heard that NBC isn’t a very good news like (hesitates) newscaster. I don’t know why I have heard that, but I actually heard that a few days ago from my Poli Sci professor.”

Jessica said that there are several outlets she is drawn to out of habit:

I chose the first one I went to was MSNBC.com because I go on that every day and it seems to be the first source of news that I am drawn to. I think it’s user friendly in the way that it’s set up too um so that was why I went there first. And the other ones I think it’s just a force of habit, the ones that I’m use to going to ‘cuz then I went to CNN and then I chose the local networks and then finally the newspapers…

Annie stated that she selected the outlets that she did because they seem most reliable to her based upon the fact that “they are bigger companies.” Ronald said that he would read articles on CNN because he had taken a journalism class where the professor would use that as one of the examples in class so he says that he would follow that.

4.2.2 RQ1b

RQ1b: What strategies do students who have not taken a media literacy component utilize to select media outlets for the interactive activity?

The ten non-communication major participants also have individual reasons as to how they select the media outlets they did. While each one of them is personalized, there still were several overarching themes that were found within their responses. Participants selected media outlets based upon how familiar they were with the outlets. Additionally participants selected outlets based upon how straightforward the information was presented. Participants also found it was important to select a well-rounded collection of information that prompted students to remain neutral, which resulted in the theme of balance.

4.2.2.1 Familiarity

This theme is operationalized as media outlets that are well-known or ones that participants use frequently which results in the participants being well acquainted with them. Participants said the reason why they selected a particular media outlet was based upon how
familiar they are to those outlets within their own personal lives. Carrie, a psychology major, said that she would select *The Colbert Report* and NBC because:

> Um just what interests me as far um as *Colbert Report*, it’s just [pauses] I watch that show anyways so I’m more interested in knowing what he has to say versus something I’m not familiar with, and then the NBC as well, I constantly watch that. So I picked whatever I’m comfortable watching anyways.

Carrie said both are popular in her household, “I’m always watching either NBC or *The Colbert Report*, so it’s just something I’m use to watching so that’s why I chose it.”

Kelley, a liberal studies major, could only summarize that she picks the ones she was most familiar with. Kelley said that she became familiar with these particular outlets by having to use them for school assignments.

Eric, who has not declared a major, commented that he selected CBS, ABC, and *The Daily Show* to complete the activity because he has seen them before.

Monica, a kinesiology major, added that she did not select several outlets for the activity because she had never heard of some of them such as, *The Colbert Report* and Associated Press.

Participants also decided not to use certain media outlets based upon the fact that they are not familiar with them. Kevin, a 23-year-old business administration major, commented that, “ABC, Associated Press, and CBS, and CNN I am not very familiar with them.” In addition, Carrie said that she couldn’t comment on several of the sources because “they’re unfamiliar to me so I really can’t have an opinion about them.”

4.2.2.2 Straightforward

Several participants said they selected the outlets and stories they did based upon the fact that the reporting was done in a straightforward manner. This theme is operationalized as reporting in a direct manner and not deviating away from the point of the article. Matthew, a biology major, commented that he sees CNN as a very respectable news network due to the fact that he feels “like they aren’t trying to beat around the bush and try to hide anything.”
Jane, a 23-year-old human resources major, stated that she enjoys reading stories on CNN and Fox because she likes the way they read and “I think that I can get more information quicker, more to the point of what I wanted to say if I was actually going to make a two-minute story about it.” Furthermore, Jane added that the titles initially grabbed her attention during the activity because they are:

Concise and they include words that obviously um give information about the article as well as kinda give the side of like what political view they are on so if I’m looking for both sides of the story I would look for a title that you know says he’s leading in the polls or one that says the other candidates are winning, just both sides of the story ‘cuz there are two views for every story.

Jacob, a physical education and kinesiology major, commented that he did not select sources because when he browsed over them “it didn’t seem like they talked about the topic too much.” To further convey his point Jacob pointed out that the titles captured his attention and selected which ones would seem best to fit the story he had to write for the hypothetical story.

4.2.2.3 Balance

This theme is operationalized as being impartial with a political or ideological grouping. Several participants stated that when selecting articles it was important to find ones that were neutral in the reporting of facts or to find a well-rounded collection of information from opposing sides in order to create a balance of information they read. George, a history and criminal justice major, pointed out “Fox, it tends to be a little like lean more towards like the conservative side. I more like to choose news kinda like neutral.” During the interview, George goes on to further stress how he sees that neutral information is important to find:

Like doesn’t take sides from either Democrats or the Republicans, they just say the news. And basically I just tired to like look for sources that don’t say ‘oh like Romney attacks this other person, candidate.’ I just try to find out who’s in the lead polls um what are kinda like um I remember reading one of them that says that kinda like what they are trying to do something pushes like this health reform and kinda like those things.

Interviewer: Okay, why do you think that it’s important to be neutral?
George: Uh because then when the people see they news they’re not kinda getting the full story, they’re getting what the news wants you to think.

Interviewer: Okay.
George: And so I just like it to be neutral so you can see like both sides and then you can make your decision on who you want to be like, on the left or on the right.

Kevin stated he selected the four media outlets that he did because by combining the views of these outlets he receives a balanced combination of information:

The Daily Show and The Colbert Report usually because I probably would pay more attention because they put it in a funnier uh format, with their actual information they put out. And then Fox because The Daily Show and The Colbert Report are typically like very uh liberal and Fox to me seems super conservative so I want to have at least a balance. And the New York Times because I feel like it’s reliable.

Jane also commented on how she combines outlets to create a balance source of information she is reading. She states that “Fox is known for more conservative views and CNN is more liberal, so I can get two sides of a story.”

Kelley also said that it is important to look at more than one side of an issue so that you do not “have one bias or one perspective on a subject.” She also goes on to say:

They [outlets] have different views um politically different views. Like you know CBS is [pauses] I don’t even know what they are but I know they are different [increases her voice louder] you know I know that The Colbert Report is a little more liberal at times and you know certain things like I knew that I needed to have a more well-rounded um idea of what was going on instead of looking at one side I would have wanted to look at more than one side of the information.

Kevin also commented on not being too fond of CNN, Fox, The Colbert Report, and The Daily Show, because “they are all pretty unbalanced” in his opinion of how they report on stories.

4.2.3 Media Outlets Selected

Participants wrote down on their worksheet which media outlets and stories they would use to complete their hypothetical assignment of creating a two-minute news story. Below Figure 4.1 illustrates the number of stories selected from each media outlet. Several participants selected more than one story from a specific outlet therefore the numbers recorded are based upon stories selected and not just counted one time per participant. Based upon Figure 4.1, communication majors selected more periodical outlets than non-communication majors did to complete the interactive activity. The most selected source from communication majors was the New York Times, with participant responses selecting stories from this outlet ten times. Non-
communication majors selected stories from both CBS and Fox more than any other outlet, by having seven stories per outlet selected to complete this activity. CNN was the cable news outlet that was selected most frequently by communication majors. The most frequent periodical selected by non-communication majors was a tie between USA Today and LA Times, with four stories being selected each. Communication majors did not select Fox or The Daily Show, while no non-communication major selected a story from the Bakersfield Californian.

![Graphical Representations of Participant Selections of Media Outlets Used to Complete Interactive Activity.](image)

**Figure 4.1** Graphical Representations of Participant Selections of Media Outlets Used to Complete Interactive Activity.

### 4.3 Research Question Two

*RQ2a:* How do students who have had a media literacy component define the term media literacy?

*RQ2b:* How do students who have not had a media literacy component define the term media literacy?

When asked to define the term media literacy in their own words, two dominant themes emerged from participant responses. Many participants used the terms 'understand' or 'understanding' when defining how they perceive the word media literacy to mean. The first theme was defined as, *Understanding*, which is operationalized as grasping the nature, significance, or explanation of something. Several of the participants define media literacy as a
way of being able to be conscious of what is going on in the media or how those messages need to be analyzed. The second theme identified was having awareness of the media. This term is operationalized as having knowledge or realization of media messages and effects. Not only were participants asked to define media literacy, but were asked if they felt that media literacy skills are important for students to learn as part of their educational curriculum in a series of open-ended questions.

4.3.1 RQ2a

How do students who have had a media literacy component define the term media literacy?

4.3.1.1 Understanding

Annie, a communication major, stated that the definition is “understanding different types of media.”

Julie said that it is “using and understanding information from different sources such as text, Internet, radio, TV. The ability to understand the messages being presented.”

Carl said media literacy is “being able to watch, read, or listen to something and be able to understand and digest it.”

Katie identified that media literacy is “understand what media and media tools are and how to use them.”

Michelle stated that the term means, “being able to utilize different types of media and understand it.” A second portion of Michelle’s definition relates to the theme of analyzing, as it pertains to critiquing media sources and outlets.

4.3.1.2 Awareness

Michelle commented that media literacy is “being able to tell the difference between different types of media, for instance what’s real and what isn’t.”

Travis stated it is “the ability to discern truth and forming one’s own opinion by sampling many different media outlets.”

Brian said media literacy is “to be knowledgeable in the content and process of the
influence of media in one’s life.” He further goes on to express that to be literate “is to know and to be aware.”

Kathy pointed out that media literacy is “being knowledgeable/aware of all media outlets and not just preference to certain media, understanding all media available to you.”

Richard commented that the term means, “knowing what sources are reliable.”

4.3.2 RQ2b

How do students who have not had a media literacy component define the term media literacy?

4.3.2.1 Understanding

Jacob, a physical education and kinesiology major, said the term means “knowing how and what media is.”

George, a history and criminal justice major, commented that media literacy is “understanding which sources are not useful or irrelevant to the topic.”

Kelley, a liberal studies major, commented that the term means, “the ability to understand media sources and be able to analyze the sources.”

Matthew, a biology major, stated that it is “the ability to read and fully understand what the media tells you and feeds you and being able to decide if it’s true or false. Matthew’s response also falls into the theme of awareness which identifies that participants define media literacy has having the ability to understand the affects of media messages.

4.3.2.2 Awareness

Jane, a human resources major, said it is “the ability to understand what is being portrayed in the media and being able to see past biases and understand the whole story.”

Kevin, a business administration major, defined media literacy as, “the ability to search through your chosen media and be able to completely and without bias interpret the information.”

Matthew pointed out that media literacy entails “being able to decide if it’s [what media tells you] true or fake.”

Monica, a kinesiology major, defined media literacy as “knowledge of media sources and
what's going on.”

In summary, both communication and non-communication majors pointed toward understanding and awareness as being keys to media literacy. There was no distinct differences between the two groups definitions under the themes understanding and awareness.

4.4 Research Question Three

RQ3a: How do students who have had a media literacy component view political comedy shows as sources of information?
RQ3b: How do students who have not had a media literacy component view political comedy shows as sources of information?

When participants were asked their opinions about political comedy shows, The Daily Show and The Colbert Report, there were three overarching themes amongst the responses. Many of the participants identified these media outlets as a form of entertainment. This theme has been operationalized as a way of using humor to show the weaknesses or bad qualities of a person, government, society, etc. Essentially participants identify these media outlets as a form of entertainment based upon their comedic delivery of information. Secondly, participants did not view these shows as having reliable information due to their bias nature of presenting facts. Bias is defined as favoring one side of an issue versus another. Several participants state that instead of presenting hard facts, Stewart and Colbert present facts with objectivity inserted into their delivery of information. Then there were several participants who had never heard of these shows in general with gives them lack of awareness of these political comedy shows as outlets of information. This theme is operationalized as not knowing or being able to identify the outlets or content distributed by the outlets.

4.4.1 RQ3a

RQ3a: How do students who have had a media literacy component view political comedy shows as sources of information?

4.4.1.1 Entertainment

Michelle commented that she did not even want to look at these political comedy shows during the activity due to their humorous nature:
Some of them I think would like misinterpret things or um leave out facts on purpose kinda, more lead you in some way or the other, some like The Colbert Report and The Daily Show like they’re funny and everything but they’re not like real news stories you know what I mean?

Michelle was then asked to elaborate on why she views these outlets as ‘not real’ and she responded by commenting:

(Laughing) I mean they’re kinda like a play off of news. I mean they may report real news, like things that actually happen but they take their own spin on it, you know? They make it funny, they make it you know (pauses) make it however they want to make it. It’s not actual facts all the time…"

Travis, a communication major, pointed out that the shows do “what it’s intended to do, it’s a satire, it’s just a comedian sitting up there pretending to be a news anchor and reporting on things as if he was in a ridiculous and comical manner.”

Brian, a communication major, said that while The Daily Show and The Colbert Report may be identified as entertainment shows, there are several other media outlets and journalists who could fall into that same category of entertainment. He commented how it is important to find the least biased information while seeking out news information:

Like as much as I might find stuff on here like with Jon Stewart, Steven Colbert stuff I would pay attention to that on TV in the idea that it would be entertaining but I wouldn’t go to that for any legitimate information, and then certain things like Fox News or MSNBC, I tend to avoid those just because so much of it tends to be kinda based around entertainment as well, even though they aren’t as apparent as the Jon Stewart stuff so I mean that’s kinda how I ruled out the ones that I wouldn’t pay attention to. These I mean if I really want to go for something that I trust most in terms of information I would go more for the print stuff which is why it was mostly like New York Times and LA Times, USA Today um for more of an informational kind of standpoint. Um and then when I actually went into each individual one sifting through them impart it was the ones that were most interesting that kinda jumped out more um like uh ‘Romney attacks Gingrich as zany’ I mean impart I chose that because the title stood out but it was also something that genuinely interest me. Um ‘Different voter enthusiasm with GOP asset’ again more kinda grounded as oppose to a lot of the stuff that I would see like on FOX News or MSNBC where it’s more of the “mudslinging” and more of the entertainment based stuff so.

Brian also stated that in his opinion it is important to understand that these shows are upfront with their intentions of delivering information, where on the other hand some media figures are not as upfront about putting their own thoughts into disseminating the news:
I guess the only thing with The Daily Show is it’s just a little less zany than Steven Colbert. I mean it’s not a matter of taking sides on anything um and I understand again it’s I think it’s more of an appreciative of the fact it’s both of those shows regardless of whatever they’re talking about or upfront with how obvious it is that it’s about entertainment where a lot of what goes on say Fox News is also entertainment. Like Glen Beck was an entertainer but I mean there were a lot of people who took what he would say very very very seriously, I mean I think that’s kinda just as dangerous as if someone were to follow Jon Stewart very very seriously, I mean there’s kinda that blurred line between being a journalist and being an entertainer and people lose sight of that sometimes so.

Brian went on to say why he believes people lose sight of the line between entertainment and news by commenting:

I think as an entertainer you really have to connect with the audience, when you’re a journalist you’re just kinda providing I don’t want to say a product but you’re kinda just providing a very black and white kinda thing, you’re providing the news, with an entertainer part of your job is to connect with your audience and really get inside their heads and that’s how you keep your audience so as an entertainer you get into those peoples’ heads, you tell them what they want to hear or something they agree with or if you challenge them on something and so it really entertainment invokes a much more emotional response I think than a journalist would.

Travis, selected an episode of The Colbert Report to complete his response to the interactive activity and comments that he went to this outlet because “in previous experiences it does portray it in a satirical kinda way but there are kernels of truth” within the episodes. He goes on to say that he has looked up additional information for topics discussed on these political comedy outlets. While Travis admits there is some ‘kernels’ of truth in these shows, he commented that “just his [Steven Colbert] manner in which he conducts his speeches, he acts very professional and to someone who’s uneducated you wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between him and a professional.” Furthermore, when asked if he thinks Colbert’s humor does good or harm to the subjects he’s discussing, Travis responded by saying:

It depends on the subject, if it’s serious subject and he’s treating it not seriously um it may kinda detract from the subject itself um I know some of Colbert’s…I don’t really watch The Daily Show, but The Colbert Report interests me because he’s funny. Um [pauses] he’s actually given credence to some movements I guess um like delivered the speech at the White House dinner a few years ago and it was funny, he ripped on everyone there [laughter].
Jessica also believes that the intelligence of the viewer relates to the impact media messages delivered from these shows has on viewers. She said, "I think it depends on the intelligence of viewer that's watching it, whether they get the things that hi is saying."

4.4.1.2 Bias

Kathy said that she did not choose either outlet for the interactive activity because, "I know it has comedy put into it and sometimes that's not as reliable as the hard news."

Furthermore, in one of her communication courses, Kathy's class watched both shows in addition to other news stations such as ABC and NBC to compare and contrast how the different mediums present the news. She also added that she does not feel these comedic outlets give full coverage of an issue because, "if you read into the subject like from different sources you get more from other places than what they are saying, I feel like they are biased sometimes."

Katie also said that she would not rely on these shows for information because, "they're short and they are more about talking about the issue rather than going into hard facts." She commented that she would seek out additional information if she heard about a topic on either one of these shows.

4.4.2 RQ3b

*RQ3b: How do students who have not had a media literacy component view political comedy shows as sources of information?*

4.4.2.1 Entertainment

Jacob, a peak major, said that "I mean when your shows on Comedy Central I mean probably less people are prone to take you seriously or as if it was on CNN or Fox it probably would be taken more seriously." To strengthen his assertion, Jacob went on to comment, "I mean Comedy Central is used as a comedy outlet for people seeking like funny shows, something to watch, whereas CNN and Fox are prone to putting up political debates rather than *The Colbert Report* on Comedy Central."

George, a criminal justice and history major, pointed out that he watches these shows because, "I just basically, like sometimes I like get bored, I just watch like political stuff to give me
information on stuff. Like I like how like they use like you know like give you the politics but find like the humorous side to it.” When asked if he felt they give complete coverage of an issue he commented, “I’m going to say no, only because like I said like they’re only like they have humor stuff like comedy to it.” He also says that he has never gone out and sought additional information on topics discussed because he does not really think to do so.

Jane, human resources major, stated that she has never watched a full episode of either show because there is “too much gimmicky” for her liking. In addition, Jane added, “I do believe that they are funny but I don’t think I can gain anything from them (laughter).” She also said that there are political commentary shows on cable networks by commenting on how she likes to watch The O’Reilly Factor and says, “I do prefer those kind of shows and not necessarily like news um like you would think on like Fox News of like ABC, it’s not news stories, it’s more political commentary.” She further stated that one cannot take information said on those political commentary shows at face value, and has pointed out that she has sought out additional information to see what is being discussed on these commentary shows.

Kelley, a liberal studies major, commented that satire affects the coverage of issues “in multiple directions, I feel that people can watch it and either go oh this is really funny or they can watch it and go wow he has a really good point.” She went on to further reveal that she has sought out additional information on topics discussed on these shows to have a “semi well-rounded perspective” on the topics.

4.4.2.2 Bias

Matthew, a biology major, did not select either outlet for the interactive activity because, “they don’t seem that serious about topics sometimes. They joke around most of it.” When asked if they give complete coverage of an issue, Matthew replied by saying, “I think they give pretty well coverage, but um their biases are slightly inputted.” In addition, when asked if someone his age was to watch either show does he feel they would turn to additional sources to learn more information he said, “I think people just look at it [the shows] because it is there.”
Carrie, a psychology major, reveals she regularly watches *The Colbert Report* but when asked why does she think it’s biased she replied with laughter and asked, “Have you seen it?” Carrie then commented, “I feel it’s biased because they clearly have (pauses) they steer you into the direction they want you to believe. They give their opinions on it a little too much.” When asked if she would turn to additional outlets to seek out information she had replied by saying, “if it was interesting enough yes.” The sources Carrie listed she may potentially turn to for information were, “possibly another TV channel that’s on besides *The Colbert Report*, they also have (sighs) *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* they have that as well. So I mean it’s all biased but I know I’m gaining different perspectives on a certain topic.”

4.4.3 Unaware

When asked about *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* several participants admitted to not knowing what those shows were. This theme is operationalized as not knowing or being able to identify the outlets or content distributed by the outlets. When asked why he did not choose particular outlets for the study, Eric, who has not declared a major, said that he has never heard of *The Colbert Report*. Furthermore, when asked if either shows give complete coverage of issues he replied by saying, “honestly, I haven’t heard enough to say if they do or don’t.”

Monica, a kinesiology major, also pointed out that she too has never heard of *The Colbert Report* or *The Daily Show*. Annie, a communication major, says that she has only heard about *The Daily Show* but “not a whole lot but I kinda heard they kinda make fun of people,” other than that Annie was unable to recall anything about either outlet.

When Ronald, a communication major, was asked if he has watched either show, he replied by saying, “I don’t even really know what that is really.” The interviewer responded by saying they are political comedy shows on Comedy Central. Ronald said he had heard of them but did not want to guess incorrectly what they were and comments that “they make fun of politicians or something like that for arguments yeah, but if anything I haven’t really cared to watch them.”
4.5 Open-ended Questions

Participants were asked a series of questions that expanded beyond directly answering the four research questions. While this data may not directly fit under the themes identified in the previous results portions, this data serves the purpose of further comprehending how students view the state of media literacy and how they engage in finding news sources on their own.

4.5.1 Search Engines

After completing the interactive activity, participants were also asked if they were not provided a list of sources to complete the activity, where would they go to find news information in order to complete their hypothetical assignment. All ten of the non-communication students said they would turn to search-engines, primarily Google to begin their search. Only five communication students stated they would turn to Google as a starting point and then turn to major media networks to find information, the remaining five listed both cable and traditional broadcast networks as starting points to find news information. Communication majors seemed more hesitant to list Google as a starting point for their news seeking process, while non-communication majors quickly replied with Google. When asked if they would discredit any types of sources on their Google hits, participants stated that they would not turn to blogs because they are heavily opinion based when reporting information.

4.5.2 Media Literacy in Curriculum

After participants provided their definition of media literacy they were asked if they felt media literacy should be taught as a course requirement. Participants said that they think it is important to have media literacy taught as a class or integrated into a pre-existing course required for undergraduate education for several different reasons. Both communication and non-communication participants felt that a media literacy course would bring awareness to media outlets in addition to learning how to find sources in order to make informed decisions.

Kelley, a liberal studies major, said that she would be ‘stoked’ to take a media literacy course and said it would be important education to have because:
I feel like that um as we’re raised as children we are raised to believe what our parents believe because that I mean it’s you know being a product of your environment and I feel like if there was a class that basically enlightened others on this is what you can do, this is really what you can do with media. You don’t have to just believe one thing, you can form your own opinion and I feel like it could almost be an empowerment thing with students because I feel like a lot of times you can walk into a class and you know if you have a teacher that’s telling you this one thing is right you almost have to believe what that teacher is saying because through knowing that teachers are your elders you know it’s almost one of those things, well they’re…they’re my guider, they’re guiding me in this you know class, guess I have to believe them and I feel like a lot of students once they enter college they stray a little bit from what they normally believed. Which I don’t consider necessarily a bad thing but you know what I mean?

Matthew, a biology major, said media literacy should be integrated into a pre-existing course such as English, “just so we can be more self-aware and that we don’t just take everything that is told to us with someone as status as true.”

Monica, a kinesiology major, said, “because kids our age usually don’t usually care and I think that if there was a class that you had to go to I think people would be more inclined to actually be active in those kinda things.”

Katie, a communication major, said, “I think if a person is not media literate they aren’t able to study as well as they should nor understand what is going on as well as they should and they take things without breaking it down and seeing how it affects them, they just accept it.” She further adds that, “it would be useful for beginners to just understand because media is so prominent in our lives; we look at it for everything.”

Jane, a human resource major, commented, “Yeah, I think that actually would be really helpful for a lot of students because I think a lot of kids don’t pay attention I think they are so focused on video games and god knows what else…Facebook uh so I think that if we had a class it would be interesting I would take it.”

Brian, a communication major, stated:

Oh yeah, I mean again especially now, I think there’s a certain level of media literacy that people inherently get just being surrounded by media everywhere but I think again it’s important for kids…I would say more so for it to be taught in high school, when kids are first really getting exposed to all the different kinds of media, it can be overwhelming and again you can really run into some bad information ‘cuz there’s so little kinda checking and balancing.
Carrie, a psychology major, said a media literacy component would be beneficial because, “if we’re in college we should be aware of what’s going on. As it is we’re the next generation that will be in the next you know elections, candidates so it’s good to be aware of having those skills and how to acquire information.

Mary thinks that a media literacy course should ‘absolutely’ be taught because:

There is a complete disconnect between people that are in school now and their parents, and the disconnect is totally media related. I mean maybe it’s more technology related, but the way that the way we get our media is very different and so even kids that do pay close attention to the news and follow the news are following blogs from people and feeds from umm umm websites online and our parents are reading it in the paper or watching it on a show that has been around forever, and so there’s just a disconnect there.

4.5.3 Political Awareness

4.5.3.1 Does Not Follow Political Coverage

Participants were asked questions regarding their interests in politics and many of them reported having none or little interest towards the subject. Many of the reasons why were because the interviewees felt an “age gap,” in other words they feel they will be more interested in politics as they get older or they flat out say that politics does not interest them because it is boring.

Jacob, a physical education and kinesiology major, said:

It’ll affect me more ‘cuz right now it’s like I’m mean I’m still being affected by it but I mean later on when I actually own a home or own vehicles and stuff like that I’ll have to look more into like issues that could hurt me financially or laws that have to be passed and stuff like that.

Monica commented that as of now she really does not understand politics but as she gets older she feels she would make more of an effort to understand politics. She stated that she read “somewhere that’s typical, ‘cuz all of the voters are usually older.”

Mary stated, she knows very little about politics right now but feels later on in life she will learn more because “in the future I will…it’ll be more relevant I think, well maybe more relevant in my mind, like I will be able to understand it more.”
Katie, a communication major said, “I’m just really bad about keeping up with politics of any kind. I…some of them I just don’t care about and some of them sometimes if I choose a selective person then I pay attention to them but I’m just bad at following.” She further adds that she does not ask questions or tries to find out any extra information.

4.5.3.2 Does Follow Political Coverage

Brain, a communication major commented that he somewhat follows political coverage but moreso in election years because:

I’m interested in seeing with candidates coming up what it is that the individual stands for or what their track history is, so coming up on elections I’m definitely much more kinda aware of what’s going on and trying to seek out additional stuff, where typically I just kinda sometimes.

Jane, a human resources major, stated she follows political coverage regularly in the media and that currently she is interested in the GOP candidates because:

I’m still figuring out which one I prefer. I like to know about all of them and their beliefs and history um so if there’s an article or a segment on the TV about that and their history of voting or their beliefs and how they are going to vote and change policy I think that’s what I’m most interested in.

Kevin, a business administration major, shared that he likes to follow “the actual primaries and the political debates. Like foreign policy, I like all of that stuff. I like economic stuff; I like to know what the free market trading stuff or whatever you want to call it. I’m trying to think of the best word for it, but yeah.”

The three research questions and additional open-ended questions provide insight into the thought process of these undergraduate students; the next chapter discusses the findings, addresses limitations to the study, and discusses future research possibilities based on this study.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Discussion

This study consisted of an interactivity activity that allowed participants to engage in the information seeking process of finding news information on a current affairs topic. Through this activity, participants' were exposed to different media outlets and were able to select which ones were of preference to them. This activity served as a prompt for the interview portion of the study. After participants were finished selecting news stories, they were asked a serious of questions that went more in-depth about their opinions of media outlets and why they would select or not select particular ones based upon their own opinion. Towards the end of the interview, participants were asked questions that specifically targeted political comedy shows and the topic of media literacy. It was necessary to include these questions at the end of the study in order for participants not to catch on that it was a study centered on media literacy skills. If participants were aware that this was a media literacy study, they may have been inclined to not be as candid with their opinions fearing they may be judged or give an incorrect answer. While interviewing communication major participants, it was interesting to note that in almost all of the ten interviews interviewees were more guarded and sensitive in how they responded to questions directed toward their opinions on media outlets and how they use them in their daily lives. This response was primarily revealed though body language. For example, during the interview once the questions switched over to specifically asking about media literacy and media literacy skills,
communication participants looked as if they were caught off guard that they were being asked to define the term media literacy in their own words. On the other hand, non-communication participants were much more candid in their responses and defined the term and answered questions about media literacy without any hesitation or nervousness. While there is not a right or wrong response, it could be suggested that from their coursework communication majors feel there is a sense of right or wrong when answering since they do get graded on assignments that pertain directly towards analyzing media outlets and content. One commonality between both groups of participants was the fact that each of the twenty participants selected more than one outlet/story when completing their interactive activity. Each one of them expressed in their own words that it is important to not only receive information from one source when wanting to be able to provide a detailed account of the issue at hand. How participants selected their outlets and stories varied as illustrated by the different themes that were revealed. While there were some crossovers of themes from communication and non-communication majors, each group had their own theme that seemed to dominate the others as to why certain news stories were selected.

5.1.1 Selection of Media Outlets and Stories

Communication majors stressed the importance of finding neutrality within the articles they selected to complete the activity. Several communication majors said that when selecting articles it is important to find ones that were neutral in the reporting of facts or to find a well-rounded collection of information from opposing sides. In addition, a large factor as to why communication majors did not select several outlets and stories was because they were believed to have bias undertones. Two communication majors even stated that in one of their journalism classes they watched a film that targets the perceived biased reporting of Fox News, when they were discussing ethical practices in journalism. These two factors, neutrality and bias, appeared to be the most dominant reasons why participants from this group either selected or did not select the outlets they did. This practice could be related back to media studies courses such as, Communication 274, which as noted earlier was an introductory course all communication majors
must have taken. In this course students had to analyze different news stories and outlets, identify what the messages of each story are and how the messages affect viewers. Students are also exposed to traditional and non-traditional media outlets through their communication courses.

*New York Times* was the media outlet selected most frequently by communication majors. Communication majors conduct activities through content analyses, textbook produced worksheets, documentaries, and class discussions that expose them to various outlets. Also, since communication majors identified they were seeking non-bias sources, periodicals could have been favorable due to their layout structure. Print journalism edits more than broadcast news—periodicals edit for clarity, fairness, and accuracy (Colgan, 2004).

Non-communication majors described some media outlets as being ‘unbalanced’ or favoring one side versus another in regards to the political spectrum. Participants were candid in the way they talked about outlets only reporting on one side of the issue as if it was neither negative nor positive, but just their everyday reporting style. For example, Jane commented on how she notices how both Fox and CNN report favoring one side over the other, and that is why she takes the time to read stories from both outlets to get a balanced take on the issue being discussed.

Familiarity was a dominant theme as to why non-communication majors selected media outlets. This group of participants selected cable news networks as their most frequent source of information. A 2011 Pew Research Study indicated that “Cable news outlets are central to viewer’s impressions of the news media, 63% volunteer the name of a cable news outlet, with CNN and Fox News being the most prevalent networks mentioned (“Press Widely Criticized”). The present study supports previous research, such as this 2011 survey by revealing that CNN and Fox were two of the most selected outlets by non-communication majors. It is possible that many of these students do not have “hands on experience” with various media outlets—which is something communication majors expressed having within their media courses. If students are
not routinely exposed to media outlets, they may be inclined to recall the most dominant names they hear people discussing or recognize most often, i.e. large cable networks such as CNN and Fox.

A 2012 Pew Research survey states that for those younger than 30 the top campaign news sources continue to be the Internet and cable news networks, yet only about three-in-ten report regularly learn something about the campaign from these sources (29% internet, 28% cable). Cable news outlets have retained it’s campaign news audience over the years and now rank as the top regular source of campaign news and information. 36% of viewers surveyed say they regularly learn about the campaign from cable news networks (“About the Surveys”).

Both communication and non-communication majors expressed the importance of finding a balance of information in order to make an informed decision. Several participants said they strayed away from articles that appeared to be attacking Gingrich due to the story appearing unbalanced. McCombs and Shaw (1972) point out that editors and broadcasters play an important part in shaping social reality as they select and display the news. For this study, several of the articles framed Gingrich as a candidate in a negative way; this was easily seen through the titles of the articles. This lines up with Agenda Setting where according to McCombs and Shaw (1972) the ability to affect cognitive change amongst viewers in order to structure their thinking is an important part of the agenda-setting function of mass communication.

To complete the interactive activity, participants were not given a limit as to how many sources they could select to complete their hypothetical two-minute news story. None of them selected to only use one story or one side of the issue, whether it was framed in a positive or negative fashion. All participants said that it was important to not structure their hypothetical news story with a bias slant; they needed complete coverage of the issue to make an informed article. 5.1.2 Lean-forward vs. Lean-back Media

In terms of the strategy that participants used to select stories, it seemed that there was a difference between an active and passive form of information seeking. The interactive activity
consisted of participants having to actively engage in seeking out news information. However, when follow up questions were asked to see what types of media participants consume on a routine basis, it was revealed that there was a more passive consumption going on. Several participants discussed turning towards more entertainment-based media on a regular basis as sources of information rather than hard news outlets. This notion of active verses passive seeking may be illustrated by Nielsen (2008) who coined the concept of 'lean-forward vs. lean-back' while trying to clarify the differences between the Web and television. Nielsen said:

On the Web, users are engaged and want to go places and get things done. The Web is an active medium. While watching TV, viewers want to be entertained. They are in relaxation mode and vegging out; they don’t want to make choices. TV is a passive medium.

While in lean-forward mentality one is in a scanning mode, actively searching for content, which results in a shorter attention span—this simulates what took place during the interactive activity. Lean-back forms of media allow for one’s attention span to be much longer because these are passive mediums and one is in a consumption mode (Rue, 2010). This study did highlight that communication majors felt more inclined to follow news information due to needing to participate in classroom discussions and assignments, but did not reveal if they would feel the same way if they were not discussing these topics within a classroom setting. Most participants expressed that they do not have time to follow news media because they are over consumed within their daily lives, whether it be with homework, jobs, or social obligations. Many participants revealed that at the end of the day their media consumption patterns relate to more entertainment based media.

5.1.2.1 Communication Majors

Jessica stated she prefers local news rather than national news because “…I like my local area because I do know what’s going on nationally but I just feel I don’t (pauses) in the morning need something so heavy with some of the things going on (laughter).” Jessica further notes that she finds local news to be a little more entertaining. Mary commented that she turns to “Google, umm Yahoo!, and probably to be honest probably through Facebook, like what friends
post and articles that friends post via Facebook," as sources of information she turns to on a regular basis. Michelle also noted that she turns to more entertainment-based media on a regular basis. She said, "I mean like obviously social media like Facebook like things like that, and I'm constantly on like the Internet or like Pintrest or Facebook just to waste time." Michelle was unable to list any news sources she would turn to on a regular basis for news information and added, "I actually like never think about it [news] and I always feel like I need to start paying attention to the news because everybody's always like oh saying things in class and stuff, and I'm like what are we talking about? Like I have no idea. So I know I need to start, but I don't even know where I would." Travis noted that he turns to more entertainment based media because, "politics usually doesn't interest me and that's all the news really has turned into now." He prefers to utilize mobile media with his iPhone to look up comic book histories and video games on Wikipedia.

5.1.2.2 Non-Communication Majors

Kelley, a liberal studies major, commented that she uses Facebook as her most frequent form of media because "I am a stalker (laughter) no um because I…I guess I like to feel connected to people that I don't feel like I can connect to on a regular basis, it's almost a way of subconsciously connecting with them." Eric, who is undeclared, noted that he most frequently uses Facebook unless he has a homework assignment. George, a history and criminal justice major, stated he uses YouTube as his most frequently consumed form of media. He said he will "look at videos online, when I'm bored, I just look at you know things like comedy or like TV shows that are online." Jacob, a physical education and kinesiology major, noted he consumes sports media most frequently through ESPN or the NFL Network on his cellphone. Kevin, a business administration major, expressed that he usually tries to find stuff that is interesting and funny because he doesn't need "to read any more depressing stuff." When asked what he would define as depressing he commented, "uh the over um over glamorization and over emphasize of tragic events."
5.1.3 Media Literacy

Overall, participants seemed confused when it came to talking about media literacy and identifying media literacy skills. This could be related to the fact that in the realm of academia, there is not a set definition for the term as of now. As Potter (2010) notes, after many attempts to create a definite definition for the term media literacy, one has yet to be established. Participants appeared hesitant to discuss what they thought were media literacy skills since it appeared they did not feel they could correctly define the term. Many participants, both non-communication and communication majors, stated they came up with their definition by defining the two terms separately and then putting them together.

An interesting observation was the fact that many participants seemed to be focused on the term ‘media’ as only relating to the Internet and not the numerous other outlets available in both traditional and non-traditional formats. Several participants identified a generation gap, where older generations may not necessarily be as “media literate” due to not being able to use the Internet efficiently. While there were different accounts of important media literacy skills, a majority of the participants all stated that it is important to not only take facts from one source, and that it is important to take in different sides of a story before forming your own opinion.

When asked if there should be a media literacy component taught as a requirement for undergraduates all but one participant (a communication major) agreed. Participants said that media literacy skills are important skills to learn to gain a sense of what is going on in the world and having awareness of the information one is in taking. Participants felt that it is essential to look at more than one source in order to formulate one’s own opinion about topics in the media. In addition, research skills should also be a learning objective for a media literacy course, which will allow participants to find useful information that expresses validity. Communication majors feel they have heightened media literacy skills in comparison to their peers because they have had courses that have allowed them to have “hands on experience” with the media. Many participants discussed how they have had to research articles and follow current events within
their courses. In addition, they said that their professors regularly talk about current events and media outlets within everyday classroom discussion. On the other hand, non-communication majors said that they feel they have received some media literacy training through both English and Political Science classes. In English classes, several students stated they learn how to find information for research papers, such as finding peer reviewed articles. In Political Science classes, participants pointed out how their professors would talk about current affairs topics. By comparing the two groups responses on how they have received media literacy training, only communication majors expressed having hands on experience with media outlets and articles within the classroom setting.

5.1.4 Political Awareness and Ideology

Participants were asked questions regarding their interests in politics and many of them reported having none or little interest towards the subject. Many of the reasons why were because the interviewees felt an “age gap,” in other words they feel they will be more interested in politics as they get older or they flat out say that politics does not interest them because it is boring. They are under the impression that politics will affect them more as they get older and own homes and start their careers. Many of them also expressed that they simply do not have time to follow politics with social obligations, jobs, and schoolwork consuming most of their time. Several participants did mention that they do follow politics regularly in the media because they want to be kept up to date on current affairs and to have a sense of what is going on.

Participants were asked three current affairs questions in order to get a sense of if they were aware of current headlines and things concerning political proceedings. Out of the twenty participants only one participant was able to answer all three questions correctly. The first current affairs question asked participants to identify which country the US most recently pulled troops out of. The correct answer was Iraq, but many participants responded with either Afghanistan or I don’t know, 11 participants were able to provide the correct answer. When asked who the current Speaker of the House was, participants seemed to have the most difficulty answering this
question due to their hesitation before they replied with an answer. Several participants replied with Nancy Pelosi, who was the former Speaker, yet many could not identify if it was a male or female or a Republican or Democrat who held this position. Only one participant provided the correct answer for this question. The final current affairs question appeared to be the question participants had the easiest time answering, which asked them to identify which month the presidential elections would be held in. 13 participants were able to provide the correct answer, November, to answer this question. Based upon the fact that only one participant was able to provide correct answers for all three questions, it gives an insight that what participants think they know and what they really know are different. Which was interesting since several participants stated they follow political coverage often in the media.

Regardless of if they follow political coverage regularly or not, almost all of the participants said that they intend to vote in the 2012 presidential elections. Those who do not follow the coverage regularly said that they do plan on taking the time to research candidates before they go and vote. When asked if they identify with a certain party, most of the respondents said no and those that did also said that they try not to let that influence what type of media outlets and stories they go to for information. The previous statement further strengthens the idea that participants addressed the importance of finding information from multiple outlets to in order to have a well-rounded perspective of the issue at hand.

5.2 Implications

This study revealed that communication students have a heightened sense of media awareness as compared to non-communication students. All participants were asked if they were not provided with media outlets to complete this activity, where would they first turn to seek out information. All ten of the non-communication students said they would turn to search-engines, primarily Google to begin their search. Only five communication students stated they would turn to Google as a starting point and then turn to major media networks to find information, the remaining five listed both cable and traditional broadcast networks as starting points to find news
information. When asked if they would discredit any types of sources on their Google hits, participants stated that they would not turn to blogs because they are heavily opinion based when reporting information. A 2012 Pew Research Center survey states that the most common method of getting news on a digital device is through the news outlet itself, yet conducting a search is not far behind, 33% of desktop/laptop users go directly to the news outlet itself while 30% begin by conducting a search (Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Christian, 2012). Furthermore, the information from these interview questions relates to a 2010 Pew Research study, which focused on a “fragmented news universe” and illustrated that the distribution of audience’s seeking traditional broadcast news for informational sources has decreased (“Fewer Journalists Stand Out,” 2010), since 15 of the participants revealed they would turn to a Google search in order to complete the interactive activity on their own. Also, participants listed Internet homepages such as, Yahoo! News, as sources they routinely turn to for news information. Participants did not mention traditional broadcast networks as often as other media outlets as sources of information.

When seeking out media outlets and stories to complete the interactive activity, the most dominant theme amongst communication students was finding facts that were presented in a neutral fashion. Communication majors said that it was important to find outlets that did not present facts with a heavy bias. Non-communication students also pointed out that they needed to find a balance of information to complete the activity, but expressed they completed that task by using differing opinions. As the researcher, there was a feeling that non-communication majors felt that all media was biased and that was just a normative characteristic of media reporting.

Matthew, a biology major, stated, “I’m pretty sure they omit some things, but that’s just like I guess normal,” when he was asked if media outlets give complete coverage of issues. Tracing back to cultivation theory, due to the overabundance of gatekeeping and agenda setting utilized by editors and journalists, it could be plausible that this undertone that all media is biased is a direct result of participants being constantly exposed to media bias. Since most viewers lack first-hand experiences with topics displayed in the media, they are more inclined to rely on media
generated heuristic opinions of reality (i.e. bias reporting styles). Shrum (1996) notes that information is more cognitively available to the audience based upon the repeated exposure the media makes. If participants are exposed to the repetitive nature of media bias, they may assume it is an ordinary media process, if they have not been formally trained with media literacy skills that aid in analyzing media messages. In comparison, based upon the usage of the term ‘bias’ by almost all communication major students, it felt that they were more actively seeking outlets that avoided bias altogether.

More non-communication students selected Fox News in comparison to communication majors. Several communication majors spoke negatively about Fox News and its reporting style by expressing that it has a heavy conservative bias. Morris (2007) says that Fox News Channel has been the “main beneficiary of television news fragmentation” due to its ability to appeal to those viewers who have become disillusioned with what they perceive as liberally-biased mainstream media (p. 707). It was easy for all participants to express there was bias reporting amongst the outlets, yet participants did not directly reveal why they believe bias reporting is infiltrated through the media.

5.2.1 Education on Media Outlet Framework

Tracing back to Peterson’s (1956) Social Responsibility Theory, technology aided in the press being controlled by only several owners. Peterson (1956) acknowledged that the press was becoming a “pervasive implement of mass communication” which led to a great deal of criticism for the media in the twentieth century, as a result seven different themes of twentieth-century criticism have been identified (p. 78). The press used its enormous power for its own ends by having owners propagate their own viewpoints, particularly regarding politics and economics, at the expense of differing views. The press became submissive to big business, to the extent of letting advertisers control editorial policies and content.

Media conglomeration is still a present business practice in modern society. Shah (2009) writes:
In some places major multinational corporations own media stations and outlets. Often, many media institutions survive on advertising fees, which can lead to the media outlet being influenced by various corporate interests. Other times, the ownership interests may affect what is and is not covered. Stories can end up being biased or omitted so as not to offend advertisers or owners. The ability for citizens to make informed decisions is crucial for a free and functioning democracy but now becomes threatened by such concentration in ownership.

William Safire stated, "While political paranoids accuse each other of vast conspiracies, the truth is that media mergers have narrowed the range of information and entertainment available to people of all ideologies" (quoted in Plate, 2003, p. B4). For example, Shah (2009) writes that by the end of the 1990s, there were nine corporations that dominated the media world: AOL-Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, Viacom, News Corporation, TCI, General Electric (owner of NBC), Sony (owner of Columbia and TriStar Pictures), and Seagram (owner of Universal film). As revealed through participant interviews, there was no discussion of media conglomerate as a reason for bias reporting. Travis, a communication major did point out, "Since William Hearst took over for the most part the entire newspaper industry um most media is practicing yellow journalism, where they do what’s going to sell the most ad space by getting the most viewers and not what actually is important to see or what actually is happening." This participant was the only one who pointed out how bias infiltrates into mainstream media. While participants may have a sense of awareness of bias in the media, it is important for them to learn how bias gets subjected into the media. Media literacy education can expand students’ perceptions as to why there is bias in media. Many communication and media study textbooks point out the conglomeration of media ownership in present society (Croteau, Hoynes, Milan (2012); Campbell, Martin, Fabos (2011); Baran (2010). This is only one facet of media literacy that can affect students’ perceptions of the media, which could further aid in students being able to critically evaluate media sources.

5.2.2 Political Comedy Shows

While participants may have not been able to identify directly why media outlets report with undertones of bias, it was apparent through all twenty interviews that political comedy shows
are viewed as an entertainment outlet rather than a source of news information. Baumgarter and Morris (2008) comment that, "political satirists and comics are (perhaps ironically) being taken more seriously than those of yesteryear" (p. 622), yet based upon participant interviews, this assertion was not supported in this study. Participants viewed *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as a form of entertainment based upon their comedic delivery of information. Many interviewees said that since the shows are broadcasted on Comedy Central, it further supports that they are comical in nature.

Several participants said that these shows leave out facts and lead viewers into believing one side of the story versus another. Some participants reveal that news reported on these shows are not taken as seriously as if they were to be reported on outlets such as Fox and CNN due to the overall concept of the network itself (comedy versus hard news events). One participant event called these shows “fake news” because “they may report real news, like things that actually happen but they take their own spin on it.”

An interesting observation to point out is never once did participants call cable or traditional news networks ‘fake news’ or wrote them off as entertainment based, yet they did admit that they too were at times biased in how they report issues in the news. This confusion of drawing the line between different outlets in the media could be due to the current fragmented media environment. As Williams and Delli Carpini (2004) have written in their studies, new media have made it difficult to preserve the artificial division between public affairs and entertainment, and the separation of media organizations into these two categories has become more porous. Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert may broadcast their programming on a network called Comedy Central that could be what directs the audience into specifically categorizing this form of media as strictly entertainment, while on the other hand cable and traditional news networks are not directly categorized into being forms of entertainment, when both may be at fault for placing ‘spin’ on stories reported.
While measuring media literacy among collegiate journalism students, Burson (2010) discovered that although journalism participants did well on questions designed to measure recognition of media effects, they did not do as well regarding questions about the media system. Burson (2010) asserted that, “this may indicate that although the students have some understanding of the effect of the media, they may not have as clear an understanding of the elements of media messages that can be altered to create certain effects” (p. 80).

5.2.3 Limitations

There are several limitations within this study. First, it is not possible for the findings of this study to be generalized among all undergraduate students. There are countless communication programs across the nation, which allows for media literacy and the field of communication to be taught in numerous formats; no two programs are the same. Therefore, the data collected from the ten communication students at this one university could vastly differ if another sample was taken from another university. While the same themes may be present with another sample, that is not for certain. It was also difficult to ask questions concerning media literacy skills and participants’ knowledge of how media messages are formed without being leading. To eliminate the risk of asking questions that may have been leading, it was difficult to engage participants in in-depth media related questions. Orr (2008) discovered in her study that middle school students could speak about media and briefly touch on concepts related to media literacy, but could not engage in complete discussions of media literacy since they did not have the necessary vocabulary to construct a clear understanding of media concepts. Like Orr’s study, this media study ran into similar issues of participants having difficulty conversing about media related topics. In addition, since participants ranged from freshmen to seniors, this could have been due to the fact some participants are early on in the academic careers. Later on in their academic careers- participants may receive more of an educational framework of learning about media effects and influences through their courses and by professors. The ethnicity of the participants was also another limitation for this study. All of the sample size of participants were
mainly Caucasian or Hispanic, there were no other ethnicities largely represented within this study. While this study did not use ethnicity as an identifying factor for participant responses, it would have been beneficial to hear testimonies from participants of other ethnic origins. In addition, the selection of a political topic could have limited the participants’ interests in seeking out information for this study. As it was revealed through the interviews many participants did express an interest in seeking out political information in their spare time outside of requirements for class assignments.

5.2.4 Future Research

This study revealed that communication students had more of an awareness of feeling obligated to occasionally consume news media based upon their major. Further research could entail utilizing different interactive activities concerning students’ media awareness and consumption habits. Participants could have to complete a media diary where they log their media consumption patterns over the course of designated period of time. This media diary would allow participants to write down how they use media as it is happening instead of having to recall how and when they use media, like they had to during the interview. Participants also would be able to reflect on their decisions with more detail by writing it down in a journal rather than having to verbally express their actions. Furthermore, this would give a researcher a candid look into how a participant consumes media on a daily basis. Cross-media comparisons could be used as an activity to conduct a similar activity. Through this process participants could compare and contrast two texts that address the same topic and be prompted to examine the genre, purpose, form and content, and point of view of each text (Hobbs, 2010). This could gain insight into how participants recognize how different media shape message content. These suggestions would provide researchers a look into the thought process of an undergraduate student.
APPENDIX A

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
APPROVAL LETTER
Kristen Phillips  
Dr. Andrew Clark  
Graduate School  
Box 19107

Protocol Title: Identifying Media Literacy Skills in College Students

RE: Exempt Approval Letter

IRB No.: 2012-0251e

The UT Arlington Institutional Review Board (UTA IRB) Chair (or designee) has reviewed the above-referenced study and found that it qualified as exempt from coverage under the federal guidelines for the protection of human subjects as referenced at Title 45 Part 46.101(b)(1)(2). You are therefore authorized to begin the research as of November 29, 2011.

Please be advised that as the principal investigator, you are required to report local adverse (unanticipated) events to this office within 24 hours. In addition, pursuant to Title 45 CFR 46.103(b)(4)(iii), investigators are required to, “promptly report to the IRB any proposed changes in the research activity, and to ensure that such changes in approved research, during the period for which IRB approval has already been given, are not initiated without IRB review and approval except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject.”

All investigators and key personnel identified in the protocol must have documented Human Subject Protection (HSP) Training or CITI Training on file with this office. The UT Arlington Office of Research Administration Regulatory Services appreciates your continuing commitment to the protection of human research subjects. Should you have questions or require further assistance, please contact Robin Dickey by calling (817) 272-9329.

Sincerely,

Patricia Turpin

Patricia G. Turpin, PhD, RN, NEA-BC  
Clinical Associate Professor  
UT Arlington IRB Chair

Digitally signed by Patricia Turpin  
DN: postalCode=76019, o=The University of Texas at Arlington, street=701 South Nedderman Drive, st=TX, l=Arlington, c=US, cn=Patricia Turpin, email=pturpin@uta.edu  
Date: 2011.12.21 13:53:18 -06'00'
APPENDIX B

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY BAKERSFIELD
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
APPROVAL LETTER
Date: 13 January 2012

To: Kristen Phillips
   University of Texas-Arlington Student

cc: Paul Newberry, IRB Chair
    Donna Simmons, Communications Department

From: Steve Suter, University Research Ethics Review Coordinator

Subject: Protocol 12-02: Authorization Following Exemption from Full Review

I am pleased to inform you that your protocol, "Identifying Media Literacy Skills in College Students", has been approved, following exemption from full review. This research activity was exempted as defined in Paragraph 46.101 of Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations based on the following criteria: (1) Research involving the use of [standardized] educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior. UNLESS, (a) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and (b) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, or reputation. Approval is based on your IRB protocol received on January 11th, 2012, and your clarifications and revisions, in response to IRB reviewer comments, completed on January 12th, 2012.

This authorization is strictly limited to the specific activities that have been authorized by the IRB. In conducting this research, the investigator must carefully review the final, authorized version of the protocol to ensure that the research is conducted as authorized by the IRB. If you want to modify these activities, notify the IRB in advance so proposed changes can be reviewed. If you have any questions, or there are any unanticipated problems or adverse reactions, please contact me immediately.

The following person(s), only, are authorized to interact with subjects in collecting data, with data containing personal identifiers, or in obtaining informed consent. Investigator is responsible for ensuring that any research assistants interacting with data having personal identifiers are HSPT certified

Human Subjects Protection Training Certified:

Any signed consent documents must be retained for at least three years to enable research compliance monitoring and in case of concerns by research participants. Consent forms may be stored longer at the discretion of the principal investigator [PI]. The PI is responsible for retaining consent forms. If the PI is a student, the faculty supervisor is responsible for the consent forms. The consent forms must be stored so that only the authorized investigators or representatives of the IRB have access. At the end of the retention period the consent forms must be destroyed [not re-cycled or thrown away]. Please destroy all audio tapes after scoring.

This authorization will be valid until the end of December 2012.

Steve Suter, University Research Ethics Review Coordinator
APPENDIX C

COMMUNICATION STUDENT RECRUITMENT EMAIL
Hello.

For those of you in the class who are also on campus this quarter, Kristy Phillips, who is a comm graduate is doing research now on our campus to complete her master's thesis.

She needs students to spend about a half hour with her for the research this week or the first part of next week.

If you are interested in helping her out, you can contact her at

kristen.phillips@mavs.uta.edu

One of the hardest parts of conducting research is to locate people to volunteer to participate, so I know she would be grateful to you if you could help her out.

The research is simple and doesn't require in depth detail from you as it's about students' use of media sources.

Thanks.

Prof. Simmons
APPENDIX D

GENERAL RECRUITMENT LETTER
Dear Student,

I'm working on my master thesis at the moment, and am conducting interviews with current undergraduate students and was wondering if you would be interested/willing to be a participant in my study.

Rundown of Study:

You are being asked to participate in a research study about how college students use media outlets. Participation in this study will last approximately 45 minutes. You will be asked to participate in an interactive activity of selecting news outlets, and be asked to complete a follow-up interview.

Thank you for your time,

Kristen Phillips
APPENDIX E

MEDIA OUTLETS AND STORIES
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outlet</th>
<th>Story</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Rise of the Frontrunner</td>
<td>December 10, 2011</td>
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<td>ABC</td>
<td>The Real Newt Gingrich</td>
<td>December 11, 2011</td>
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<td>ABC</td>
<td>Romney, Gingrich Attacks: Are They Effective?</td>
<td>December 13, 2011</td>
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<td>AP</td>
<td>Trailing Rivals Question Gingrich, Romney Records</td>
<td>December 15, 2011</td>
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<td>AP</td>
<td>GOP'S Gingrich Scrambles in Iowa for Caucuses</td>
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<td>AP</td>
<td>Gingrich Pokes at Rivals in New TV Ad</td>
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<td>Bakersfield Californian</td>
<td>Candidates Attack Gingrich During Debate</td>
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<td>Bakersfield Californian</td>
<td>GOP Closing Gap with Obama</td>
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<td>Bakersfield Californian</td>
<td>Gingrich’s War on Shariah</td>
<td>December 14, 2011</td>
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<td>CBS</td>
<td>Mitt Romney: Newt Gingrich is the Frontrunner</td>
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<td>CBS</td>
<td>Romney: Gingrich an “unreliable” conservative</td>
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<td>CBS</td>
<td>Gingrich Keeps his Perch on top of GOP Polls</td>
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<td>CNN</td>
<td>Romney, Gingrich Zero in on Each Other</td>
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<td>CNN</td>
<td>Gingrich Maintains Positive Promise</td>
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<td>CNN</td>
<td>Romney: Gingrich ‘Doesn’t Understand the Economy’</td>
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<td>Colbert Report</td>
<td>Trump’s Cancellation &amp; Stephen’s Serious South Carolina</td>
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<td>Serious, Classy Re-Announcement</td>
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<td>Colbert Report</td>
<td>Christine O’Donnell’s Endorsement</td>
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<td>Daily Show</td>
<td>Indecision 2012- ABC News GOP Debate</td>
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<td>Daily Show</td>
<td>Newt Gingrich’s Poverty Code</td>
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<td>Indecision 2012- The Great Right Hope- Newt Gingrich</td>
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<td>FOX</td>
<td>Gingrich Continues to Lead in Iowa, but…</td>
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<td>Romney Sharpens Attack, tests Gingrich’s Promise to Stay Positive</td>
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<td>Romney: Gingrich has ‘Extraordinary Lack of Understanding in How Economy Works’</td>
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<td>LA Times</td>
<td>In N.H. Visit, Gingrich Takes on Rivals</td>
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<td>LA Times</td>
<td>Perry Launching a Stretch Run in Iowa</td>
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<td>LA Times</td>
<td>Huntsman, Paul Woo N.H. Independents</td>
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<td>MSNBC</td>
<td>Obama Campaign Shifts, Targets Barbs at Gingrich Too</td>
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<td>MSNBC</td>
<td>Gingrich Worse Against Obama Than Romney:</td>
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<td>Matthews: American Needs Many Things but Gingrich</td>
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<td>Romney vs Gingrich: GOP Face-off</td>
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<td>NBC</td>
<td>Gingrich Takes Big Lead in NBC/WSJ Poll</td>
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<td>Romney Steps up Attacks on Gingrich</td>
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<td>NY Times</td>
<td>At Front of GOP Pack, Skirmishes Escalate</td>
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<td>NY Times</td>
<td>Romney Attacks Gingrich as ‘Zany’</td>
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<td>NY Times</td>
<td>Gingrich Push on Health Care Appears at Odds with GOP</td>
<td>December 16, 2011</td>
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<td>USA Today</td>
<td>Resurgent Republicans Close Gap in Key States</td>
<td>December 13, 2011</td>
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<td>USA Today</td>
<td>Gingrich gets Backing of Atlanta-based ‘super PAC’</td>
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<td>USA Today</td>
<td>Weak Iowa Organization could be Problem for Gingrich</td>
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<td>Jane</td>
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</table>
APPENDIX G

INTERACTIVE ACTIVITY DIRECTIONS
Welcome to my WordPress.com page for my thesis study! After you read this introduction, you should be ready to engage in this interactive study. Below is an overview of how this study will be conducted.

**Interactive Activity**

The current events topic for this study will be Newt Gingrich’s reemergence into the GOP presidential race. With this topic, you will be given a number of media sources to select from in order to learn more information about this topic. On this Word Press blog you will find ABC, AP, CBS, CNN, The Colbert Report, The Daily Show, FOX, MSNBC, and NBC. In addition you will be given folders containing articles from *Bakersfield Californian, LA Times, NY Times, and USA Today*.

Once provided with the collection of media sources, you will be prompted to select source(s) that you would turn to if you had to write a 2-minute news story about this current event topic. Please write your answers on the worksheet provided to you.

Please notify the study prompter once you have completed this activity.
APPENDIX H

PARTICIPANT WORKSHEET
Major: 

Age: 

Please list the media outlets and stories you would select for this activity:
Follow Up Interview
Participants will be asked a list of questions that relate to how they selected sources for the previous activity in addition to questions pertaining to how they view the media.

Activity Specific Questions-
1. Participants will be asked to give reasons why they selected or did not select certain stories during the activity.

2. If multiple sources were used during the activity, why was it important to select more than one source?

3. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
   - Headline catches your attention?
   - Photos?

4. Do you think the sources you selected fairly represent all sides of the issue?

5. Which one left you with questions, wishing you had more information about the issue?

6. Would getting all your news and information from any one medium make you an informed citizen? Why or why not?

7. If you weren’t given a list of sources about this topic, where would you turn to gather information to learn more about this topic?

General Questions-
1. How many hours do you spend consuming news media per week?

2. How many hours do you spend consuming news media per day?

3. What types of media do you consume? Are some types of media more frequent than others?

4. Do you watch news on television?
   a. Do you watch more national or local news? Explain your response if you prefer one to the other.

5. What three sources do you turn to on a regular basis (2 to 3 times per week) for news?
   a. Why these sources?
   b. If listed less than three sources, why?
   c. Do you feel these sources give complete coverage of an issue? Why or why not?

6. How often do you use more than one form of media at a time (i.e. newspapers, television, internet?) Never- Rarely-Sometimes-Most of the Time- Always

7. Have you watched The Daily Show and The Colbert Report?
   a. How often have you watched?
   b. Do you feel this show gives complete coverage of an issue?
   c. Would you turn to additional sources to learn more about an issue featured on the show? Why or why not? Which media outlets would you then turn
8. Do you follow political coverage regularly in the media?
   a. Do you view yourself as politically competent?
   b. Do you plan on voting in 2012?
   c. Do you view yourself as part of a specific political party?

9. Please define media literacy in your own words. (Students will be prompted to give a written response)

10. How media literate do you view yourself to be?

11. Do you think courses you have taken make you more media literate than others?

12. Do you think media literacy skills are important? Should they be taught in school?

**Current Affairs Questions**

1. What country did US troops most recently pull out of?
2. Who is the current Speaker of the United States House of Representatives?
3. What month will the 2012 presidential election be held?
APPENDIX J

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Kristen Phillips, Communication, kristen.phillips@mavs.uta.edu/ 661-304-0884

FACULTY ADVISOR
Andrew Clark, Communication, amclark@uta.edu/ 817-272-1246

TITLE OF PROJECT
Identifying Media Literacy Skills in College Students

INTRODUCTION
You are being asked to participate in a research study about how college students use media outlets. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinuing your participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

PURPOSE
The specific purpose of this research study is to identify what media sources are commonly used by college students.

DURATION
Participation in this study will last approximately 45 minutes. You will be asked to participate in an interactive activity of selecting news outlets, and be asked to complete a follow-up interview.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
The number of anticipated participants in this research study is 20.

PROCEDURES
To begin the activity, you will be given a current events topic such as: the economy, 2012 Presidential Election, or war/international affairs. After being presented with your topic, participants will be given a number of media sources which they can select from to learn information about their topic. Outlets will include: national newspapers, local newspapers, MSNBC, CNN, FOX, CBS, NBC, CNN, The Colbert Report, AP, and The Daily Show. Once provided with the collection of media sources, you will be prompted to select sources they would turn to if they had to write a 2-minute news story about this current event topic. Within these sources, students will either highlight (hardcopy sources) or take note (digital sources) what pieces of information from the sources you would find beneficial to use for their summary and how you would create a 2-minute story. Once you notify that you have completed this activity a follow up interview will immediately be conducted.

Audio/visual recordings will be used
The interview will be audio recorded. After the interview, the tape will be transcribed, which means they will be typed exactly as they were recorded, word-for-word, by the researcher. The tape will be destroyed after transcription.

IRB Approval Date:
IRB Expiration Date:
POSSIBLE BENEFITS
Possible benefits to this study include having to make educated decisions on what types of media outlets to select when trying to create a 2-minute news story. While conducting this study, students may discover that there is a difference in how media outlets cover the same current events topic.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS
There are no perceived risks or discomforts for participating in this research study. Should you experience any discomfort please inform the researcher, you have the right to quit any study procedures at any time at no consequence.

COMPENSATION
No compensation will be offered for participation in this study.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES
There are no alternative procedures offered for this study. However, you can elect not to participate in the study or quit at any time at no consequence.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION
Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to decline participation in any or all study procedures or quit at any time at no consequence.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of this signed consent form and all data collected [including transcriptions/tapes if applicable] from this study will be stored in the Communication Department Lab for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the UTA Institutional Review Board (IRB), and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at UTA has reviewed and approved this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review your research records, the University of Texas at Arlington will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

IRB Approval Date:

IRB Expiration Date:
Informed Consent Document
UT Arlington

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS
Questions about this research study may be directed to Kristen Phillips [Researcher] at Kristen.phillips@mavs.uta.edu or 661-304-0884, Andrew Clark [Faculty Advisor] at amclark@uta.edu or 817-272-1246.

Any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant or a research related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-2105 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

_______________________________________________________________________
Signature and printed name of principal investigator or person obtaining consent
Date

CONSENT
By signing below, you confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study’s purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time.

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.

_______________________________________________________________________
SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER
DATE
IRB

Approval Date:
IRB Expiration Date:
REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Kristen Phillips graduated from California State University Bakersfield in 2010 with her B.A. in Communication, concentrating in public relations and journalism. While completing her undergraduate degree, Kristen was avidly involved on campus through her involvement with Gamma Phi Beta Sorority and Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). Towards the end of her undergraduate career, Kristen decided to continue her education at the master’s level. In 2012 Kristen earned her M.A. in Communication from The University of Texas at Arlington.

Tracing all the way back to junior high, Kristen has always been interested in media studies and media influences on society. Kristen has held several internship and volunteer positions in various communication fields ranging from broadcast news, political campaigns, and film. Each one of these opportunities has allowed Kristen to gain valuable experience on how to tailor communication messages through various mediums in order to effectively target different demographics. After graduation Kristen will begin her career within the field of communications due to her passion for writing and communicating with others.