The Influence of Academic Discipline on News Consumption Patterns: A Study among Undergraduates at the University of Ruhuna, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

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1. Introduction

In the arena of media consumption, understanding the factors that influence individuals' news consumption patterns is vital. Scholars have consistently shown that the norm for news consumption is reliance on multiple media formats, rather than a single medium or source, and this is especially the case in the news media landscape of today (Su et al., 2015). The digital age has transformed the way people access and engage with news content. As individuals who are following higher education, their exposure to various academic disciplines may shape their perspectives, preferences, and habits regarding news consumption. This research explores how the academic disciplines offered at the University of Ruhuna influence the news consumption patterns of undergraduates, specifically within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. The central question guiding this research was whether academic discipline has a noticeable impact on undergraduate news consumption patterns. By examining this relationship, the study aims to uncover the existing yet hidden connections between academic activities and the way students stay informed about current events. The primary objective is to analyze and understand whether there is a significant influence of academic discipline on the news consumption patterns of undergraduates. The study explores whether students from different departments exhibit distinct preferences in terms of news sources, languages, and content types, if there is an influence involved.

2. Materials and Methods

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to measure the number of students following each habit and to analyze the instances where news is being related for the lessons. By using convenience sampling, data were taken from 40 respondents representing various academic departments and among these participants, fourteen are specializing in English and Linguistics, eight in Social Statistics, six in each Geography and Sociology, four in Economics, three in History while only one participant is specializing in Archaeology. The data were gathered through a google form in which the questions were approved by my supervisor before sharing it among the participants. Data were analyzed with the help of the graphical representations according to the Google Excel sheet, identifying patterns and relationships between academic discipline and news consumption. The data collection process involves two main phases, using a survey, qualitative data were gathered through one open-ended question to explore and test whether the students can remember of any occasion where the lecturers have ever referred to a current or past news affair when teaching a lesson. Those were analyzed thematically, highlighting each scenario related to their academic discipline. Then, quantitative data were collected through the same survey that includes 13 closed-ended questions to measure specific aspects of news consumption patterns. Among that, multiple-choice questions were used to gather quantitative data, providing measurable insights into participants' news consumption patterns.

3. Results and Discussion

According to the survey which was conducted among the university undergraduates, it reveals a variation of patterns in news consumption and its relevance to their academic studies. These are the key results of the study and the analysis based on that.

3.1. News Consumption Habits

In this research, participants were supposed to be tested according to their way of gathering news using different media. Here, almost all respondents (95%) consume news, with the majority favoring online platforms such as social media (72.5%) and news websites (37.5%). Television remains a popular source, with 62.5% watching news on TV. The preference for physical newspapers and radio is comparatively lower at 35% and 10%, respectively. Students' engagement with the radio news is low because of the limited access and they prefer visuals over listening. Furthermore, students prefer watching news over reading news, indicating their learning style as visual learners.
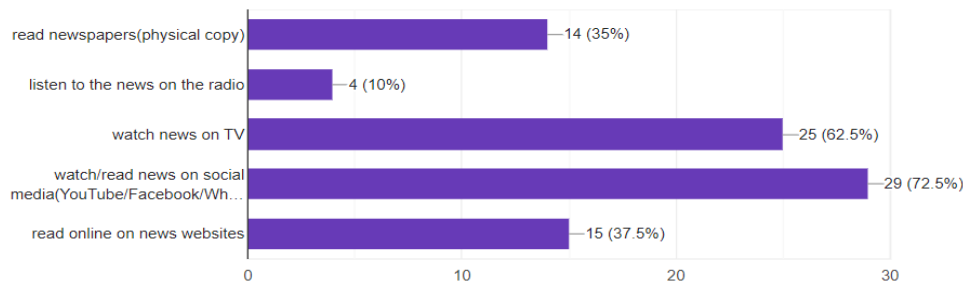

Figure 1: Ways of news consumption using different media ()

3.2. Types of News Content

According to the below bar graph, it reveals distinct preferences among respondents regarding their choices in news content categories. The most prominent category, with 60% exhibits a willingness towards news related to entertainment, emphasizing an interest in cultural and amusing aspects of current affairs. For Cinema/Theatre and Crimes, participants have showed equal interest of 47.5% as well as 25% for Sports and Science. Notably, a considerable 37.5% of participants express a fondness for political news, indicative of a substantial interest in staying informed about political developments. Moreover, the category of literature captures the attention of 42.5% of respondents, highlighting a significant interest in literary and artistic dimensions of news coverage.

When analyzing deeper, it is revealed that the students from the English department show their preferences towards Literature, Entertainment, Cinema/Theatre and Crimes. History and Geography students showcase their preference for Weather. Students who are specializing in Sociology and Economics have voted for Crimes and Politics. Those who are majoring in Social Statistics, have selected Sports and Gossips as their interests, which seemingly lack an apparent thematic alignment with their chosen academic discipline. The participant who is from the department of Archaeology has voted for Fiction, Crimes and Cinema/Theatre which also depicts a hint of relevance to historic and archaeological extracts in those categories. This has happened because the students are attracted to the type of news which relates to their study focus intentionally or unintentionally, perhaps due to the familiarity and interest.
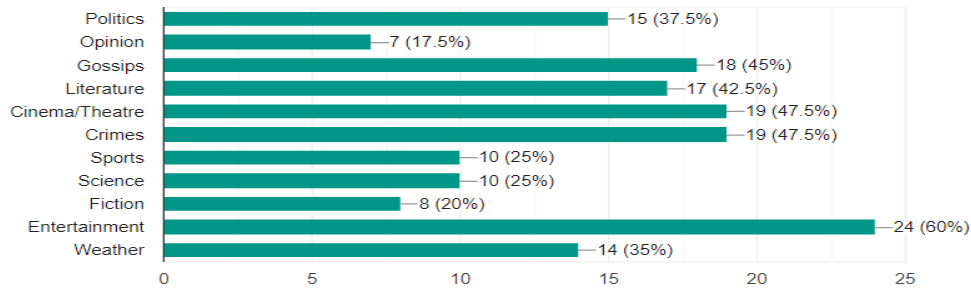
Figure 2: Genres of news content

Moreover, a remarkable focus emerges concerning the disparity between the popularity of local and foreign news. An 85% of respondents marked a preference for a combination of both local and foreign news, highlighting their enthusiasm towards the issues and events worldwide and the importance of knowing both types of news to their academic focus, while the remaining 15% shows their choice to stick to the news on the local and cultural context. In contrast, the appeal of foreign news alone appears relatively passive, emphasizing a prevailing weight on local narratives among the surveyed participants.
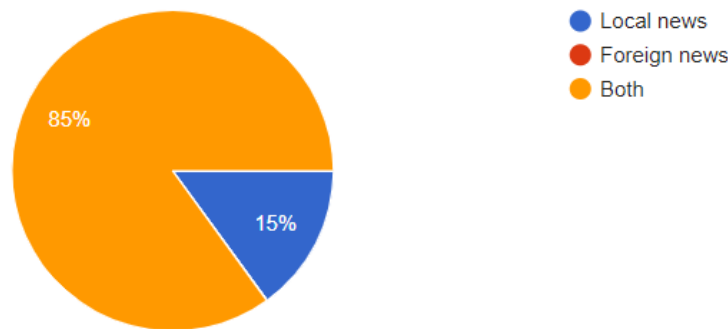

Figure 3: News content based on geographical area

3.3. Incorporation of News in Lectures

A considerable number of respondents, specifically 30 out of 40, have reported that their lecturers referred to current or past news affairs while teaching. The occasions mentioned topics such as journalism, economic situations, disaster management, and social issues like violence against women. This practice suggests that the lecturers often incorporate real-world examples into their lessons, linking theoretical concepts with practical scenarios. The open-ended question that was asked from the participants was, "Have your lecturers ever referred to a current or past news affair when teaching a lesson? If yes, can you share the occasion if you remember of any?". For example, these are some of the responses provided by the participants. *"Yes, our lecturer taught about writing news articles and feature article where he shared links of online news articles and feature articles that were published."* (Participant No:29, English a Linguistics), *"Yes. in the lecture talking about current economic situation."* (Participant No:12, Economics), *"Yes. In the subject of disaster management, the lecturer always mentions past disasters and always tells us to search about it."* (Participant No:34, Geography). These responses highlight the diverse range of relevance of news to the academics.

3.4. Attraction to News which Related to Subject Specialization of the Participant

The majority of respondents (70%) reported that their eyes sometimes catch news related to their subject area. This suggests that students are naturally drawn to news content that aligns with their academic interests depending on the content, further emphasizing the integration of current affairs with their studies. 27.5% respondents strongly agree with the question answering affirmatively without hesitance. Only 2.5% have reported passively saying 'No' to the question.
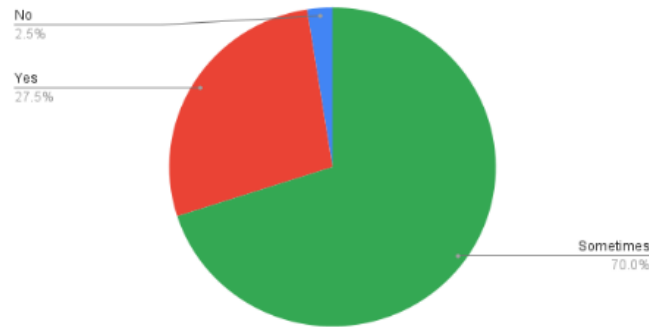

Figure 4: Attraction to news, related to subject specialization of the participant

3.5. Changes in News Consumption Patterns after University Entry

An amount of 82.5% of respondents noted a change in their news consumption patterns after entering the university. This shift could be attributed to the academic environment, where students may find increased relevance in staying updated with current affairs to complement their coursework. The reasons behind this transformation could be the change of the attitudes of the undergraduates and the prepared mindset within an academic environment. Majority has identified that being updated about news is important as an undergraduate academically and personally.
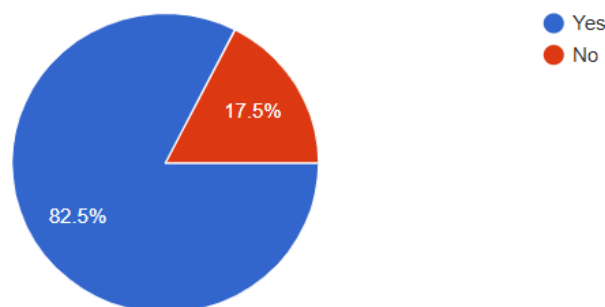

Figure 5: Changes in news consumption patterns after university entry

4. Conclusion

This research has revealed understandings of the relationship between academic discipline and news consumption patterns among undergraduates at the University of Ruhuna, within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. The findings underline the nuanced ways in which academic exposure shapes preferences, habits, and perceptions regarding news content. The detected shift in news consumption patterns after entering the university suggests a dynamic interplay between academic context and media engagement. This study contributes to the broader understanding of the harmonious connection between education and media consumption behaviors, emphasizing the importance of considering academic discipline in shaping individuals' news consumption.

5. Acknowledgment

1. Keywords

Academic discipline, News, News consumption, Undergraduates

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