Integrated News Literacy Concepts and Skills
in Teaching Mobile Journalism

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ABSTRACT

This mobile journalism course is designed for third-year students in the Faculty of Journalism and Communication. Since 2015, we have integrated certain news literacy concepts and skills into the course to enhance students' ability to determine the reliability of information and sources in the process of producing mobile news. The idea is to have students carefully verify the accuracy of information before it is tested by readers. After a period of teaching and according to course surveys, we have come to realize the efficiency of the source-evaluation tool I'MVA/IN and many students have applied the tool in their news reports. In other words, students are more confident in determining the accuracy of information in social media as well as other news sources. Our teaching experience also shows that interactive learning methods help increase students' engagement and facilitate their understanding of complicated concepts such as balance, fairness, and bias. Indeed, the class is much more interesting when role-playing games, case studies, or group discussions are used.

Over the past few years, the media has undergone significant changes, particularly with the advent of mobile communications and social media. Mobile phones are not just a means of communication but also a publishing channel with the most convenient way of transmitting messages. According to the "Entering Vietnam Mobile Market 2017" report by the Appota Company, Vietnam has 131.9 million mobile subscribers and 38 million network users. Within five years, the number of mobile users in Vietnam has increased by 23 million compared to 2012 (109.1 million). Mobile users in Vietnam have spent 94% of their time on social media, and more than 60% of this time is used to search for information, consume news and/or to entertain. That's why there is a demand for mobile content. The increasing demand has put great expectations and pressures on mobile journalists. When an incident occurs, mobile users want to consume news immediately on their smartphones. The "mobile first web later" trend requires mobile journalists to be able to do fact-checking faster and more accurately.

In fact, social media have become convenient sources of information for mobile journalists. Social media are now an integral part of the reporting process as it can be used for tracking, gathering information and publishing information. But social media also gave birth to the "salon journalist", a term referring to lazy journalists who just sit in their offices and collect information via social media, personal blogs, forums. Many journalists even write stories based on gossip and rumors due to poor verification skills. That's why inaccurate and fake news has flooded the media. In 2016, for instance, many Vietnamese news organizations posted a series of articles with false content such as "Mercy for 6th grade student who does not have new clothes to school," "11-year-old boy committed suicide because he did not have new clothes: Extreme pains felt in his poor house," and "11-year-old boy committed suicide: Tragedy exists in life". In fact, the police confirmed the 11-year-old boy committed suicide due to a family issue. The Ministry of Information and Communications punished 14 online newspapers for publishing inaccurate content. In another case, the mobile version of VnExpress published a photo of luxury cars with green license plates (only issued for top officials of the state) to criticize corrupt politicians. The photo was provided by a social media user who hated corrupt politicians. It turned out to be a photo of toy models downloaded from Otofun, an online forum for car lovers.

As the above examples demonstrate, news reporters have to sharpen their fact-checking skills to be able to provide the public with accurate facts, figures, and photos. That also means no matter what platforms are taught, journalism lecturers need to teach students verification skills.

INTEGRATED NEWS LITERACY CONTENTS AND SKILLS INTO MOBILE JOURNALISM COURSE

We have realized that it's a must for students to master news reading skills before writing mobile news stories. The concepts and skills we chose to introduce at the beginning of the MoJo course are: distinguishing types of information, evaluating sources, evaluating evidence, and establishing the credibility of information.

The course at first consisted of six 5-hour lessons: (1) Introduction to Mobile Journalism; (2) Mobile News Production; (3) Mobile Design; (4) Mobile Newsroom; and (5) Ethical issues in reporting for mobile platforms. We later integrated news literacy content in the first two lessons (information neighborhoods, sources evaluation) and the last one (fairness, balance, and bias).

Warm up exercise for the first class

We asked students to give opinions on our revised folk tale, "The Turtle and The Rabbit." We created and provided students with conflicting evidence. We then instructed them to interview various sources such as local businesses, local newspapers, celebrities or social platforms. Through the assignment, we looked forward to evaluating students' ability to deal with multiple information sources under complicated contexts. Feedback from

students after the exercise were as follows: *"I feel awkward at receiving too many news streams at the same time"; "I was confused by too much information "; "I do not have enough evidence to evaluate this information"; "I trust the celebrities because their voices are valuable"; "I found that sources from the press seemed more credible than the rest."* It became evident that many students do not have the skills to check and evaluate the news based on the evidence and sources. Instead, they made choices based on their feelings. In addition, students are confused by rumors circulating on social networks, especially when celebrities also discussed them. From this activity, we further affirmed the need to integrate News Literacy into the mobile journalism course to enhance students' ability to verify and evaluate sources.

Lesson 1: Decide information neighborhoods

Chapter 1, "Overview of the development of mobile journalism," addresses the current trends of producing more tabloid news than high-quality news. Integrating news literacy concepts in Section 3 of Chapter 1 helps students improve their skills in screening information and including useful information in their stories. When teaching these skills, we provided students with local examples retrieved from mobile news apps. After that, we explained SBU's Information Neighborhoods table (see below) and asked students to think about the following questions:

• Who creates this story?

• What is its purpose?

• How is it told?

A Taxonomy of Information Neighborhoods

	Journalism	Entertainment	Promotion	Propaganda	Raw Information
Primary Goal	To Inform	To Amuse or engage people during their leisure time in activities in which they are passive participants.	To Sell goods, services and talent/personalities by increasing their appeal to consumers.	To Build Mass Support for an ideology by canonizing its leaders or demonizing its opposition.	To Bypass institutional filters and distribution costs in order to Sell, Publicize, Advocate, Entertain, and Inform.
Methods	Verification, Independence, Accountability.	Story-telling, performance, the visual arts & music.	Paid Advertising & Public Relations activities. Press releases, public statements, staged events, sponsorships, product placement, web sites, viral videos, etc	One-sided accounts or outright lies, relying on emotional manipulation through images, appeals to majority values and fallacious reasoning.	Facebook, YouTube, blogs, Twitter, websites, website comment sites, chain email, text message forwarding, flyers, graffiti.
Practitioners	Reporters, Photographer/Videographers, Editors, Producers	Writers, actors, artists, musicians, designers.	Ad agencies, Publicists, Public Relations experts, government spokespersons.	Political operatives and organizations.	Anyone with a web connection, photocopier, or can of paint.
Outcomes	Empowers citizens by educating them.	Distraction from or changed view of daily life. Reinforcement or critique of social norms.	Increased sales of products and services or higher fees for talent being promoted.	Helps an ideological group seize or maintain power, by influencing public opinion and motivating the public to take action consistent with the ideology.	Outlet for self-expression, entertainment, promotion, advocacy, propaganda.

(From the Center for News Literacy, Stony Brook University School of Journalism)

We also designed a game called "Identify the news" to test students' ability to pick good news stories from a box full of information pieces printed from mobile apps, forums, news sites, and on the web. Students were instructed to use the Taxonomy of Information Neighborhoods Table to classify the information and select the most reliable news stories. Students then compared their choices across groups. Each group then explained why they chose what they did.

Lesson 2: Verify information

This skill is integrated into Section 3 of Chapter 2: Building content for mobile journalism. Journalists are under great pressure in terms of time, leading to their ignorance or lack of careful scrutiny of information from many sources. On the other hand, journalists themselves are also biased, which makes the reception and evaluation of information subjective, potentially distorting the truth and making the reports inaccurate. This lesson is designed to help students build verification skills. News Literacy's verification skills include:

• Evaluate sources from individuals, social networks, forums, online information sites using I'MVA/IN, a tool invented by Stony Brook University professors:

- ✓ Independent Sources are better than self-interested sources
- ✓ Multiple sources are better than a single source.
- ✓ Sources who Verify are better than sources who assert.
- ✓ Authoritative/Informed sources are better than uninformed sources.

✓ Named sources are better than unnamed sources.

• Evaluate the weight of evidence when producing mobile news using the Indirect-Direct Scale, or a scale ranging from first-hand to second-hand accounts.

Our goal is to help students realize that if they do not witness the situation, they must always ask the following questions: (1) How did the source know the information? (2) Who was the source? (3) Why did the source proactively provide information?

We provided students with articles from controversial blogs or Facebook notes and asked them to evaluate the sources using I'MVA/IN. They were required to discuss the sources they thought were most credible and explain why. Students were also asked to review the context and background information, check the identity and purpose of the author/publisher, even what they published in the past. These steps helped them deeply understand the story.

To illustrate the Indirect - Direct Scale, we asked students to analyze the case of an accident that happened on Thai Ha bridge in Hanoi at the end of 2015. After his car hit many motorcycles, the driver jumped from the bridge to commit suicide. The social media community offered evidence contradicting police statements: a video clip extracted from another car's dash camera showing that the cab driver did not intentionally cause the accident but had been chased by two other cars. We collected a lot of evidence—the video clip, public comments, investigators' findings, ethanol concentration testimony, witness testimony, news from the press, lawyers' opinions—and asked students to assess the reliability of each piece of evidence and to weigh the evidence.

At the end of the lesson, we emphasized the requirements for a good news story: having reliable sources, credible evidence, passing the VIA (Verification, Independence, Accountability) test. Our next activity was a 60-minute game called "Trustworthy or not?" We collected controversial statements on socila media, blogs, forums such as:

• The HIV virus is not capable of causing AIDS
• Genetically modified foods that cause cancer
• Detox gravel method with coconut oil cure all diseases
• Rabies vaccination should not be used because of serious health effects
• Eating lychees can cause encephalitis for children

Students had 60 minutes to search, collect, synthesize and analyze various pieces of evidence and sources of information from their mobile phones with internet access to judge whether the information was reliable or not. This activity helped students develop good habits in fact checking.

Finally, students were assigned a homework: choosing a news story and deconstructing the story by going through 6 steps:

1. Summarize the main points in the article and check that if the title and lead are relevant to the main content.

2. Evaluate the reliability of sources using the I'M/VAIN tool.

3. Is there anything unclear or ambiguous?

4. Does the writer put the story into the right contexts?

5. Are the main questions fully answered?

6. Finally, what's the conclusion about the reliability of the story?

Lesson 3: Balance, Fairness and Bias

Due to much criticism on the commercialization of the news as well as bad reporting practices, we discussed ethical issues with students carefully in every course taught at our department. Especially, we explain the concept of bias as a pattern of unfairness over time from both the media and the news consumers. While the Vietnamese media are sometimes biased due to their mainstream ideology and commercial pressure, news consumers are more often biased due to their own prejudices (formed by education background and cultural norms). That's why understanding media bias and audience bias becomes the two-pronged goal of this lesson.

To be more specific, we especially stressed the principles of being balanced and fair in reporting a news story. Using "The Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf" story, we taught students the importance of reporting from multiple sides, reducing one's own bias, and being fair to the evidence.

The main activity in this lecture was a roleplaying game. We created a controversial story based on a Vietnamese folk tale titled "Mai An Tiem, a good farmer who grew watermelon on a remote island." Mai An Tiem has long been perceived as a good, hardworking character in Vietnamese folklore. Now we made him a controversial public figure in local newspapers. More specifically, he was reported by a local newspaper to have overused food preservatives in his watermelons, but he denied the charge. We provided students with statements from the hospitals, his competitors, his partners, his family members, and asked students if they still believed Mai An Tiem was a good person. Students were very excited participating in this roleplaying game and quickly understood the three complicated concepts: bias, balance, and fairness.

COURSE EVALUATION

We conducted a survey of 78 students before and after the end of the course to evaluate our teaching.

Statistics shows that students were not aware of the importance of news literacy. Only 25.6% of students were able to identify reliable sources in our warm-up exercise. When asked how they felt about the exercise, the rest provided us with following statements:

| 1 | I do not like to think much about this information |
| 2 | I feel embarrassed because there are much different information and sources |

3	I can not identify reliable sources
4	I believe in the masses in social media
5	I do not weigh the evidence to evaluate this information
6	I can not conclude the rightness or wrongness of the information received
7	Lacking of logic based on feelings when evaluatation the news
8	Does not recognize the purpose subtext behind the information

At the end of the course, we conducted an assessment by asking students to deconstruct a news story about Tan Hiep Phat, a local company accused of setting a legal trap for its beverage consumers who discovered unhealthy objects inside its products. Statistical results show that students' scores have improved compared to the previous survey: 48.7% of students were able to identify reliable sources and make fair news judgments.
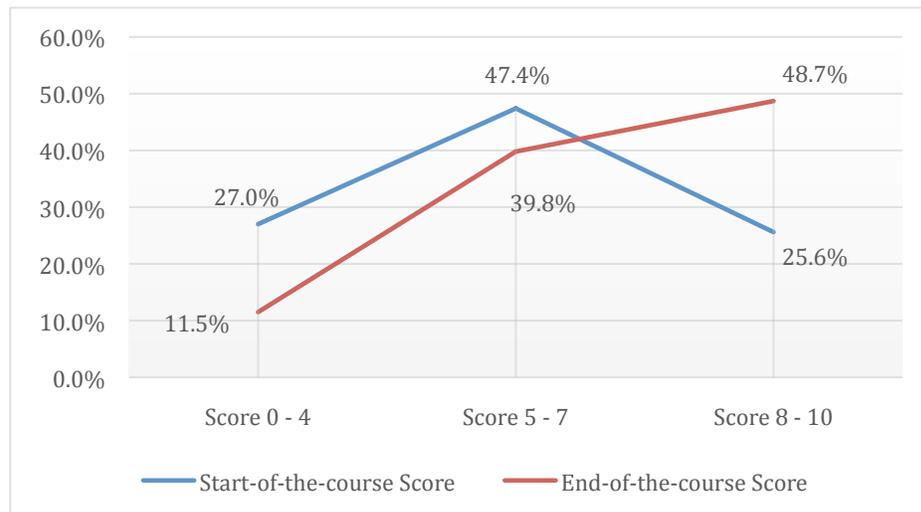

Figure 1. The survey scores of students before and after taking the course

We also conducted a survey to measure the effectiveness of the use of News Literacy concepts and skills in June 2017, and again a year later. 63/78 students took the survey, representing over 80% of the class. The results are as follows:

- 66.7% agreed with the statement "The I'MVA/IN tool is very helpful."
- 33.3% said they "could apply I'MVA/IN in daily news consumption".
- 28.6% said they "could apply the I'MVA/IN tool when doing their internship". We notice that most students from this group are collaborators or reporters working in the journalism industry. Students who are working in Public Relations or other sectors hardly use verification skills.
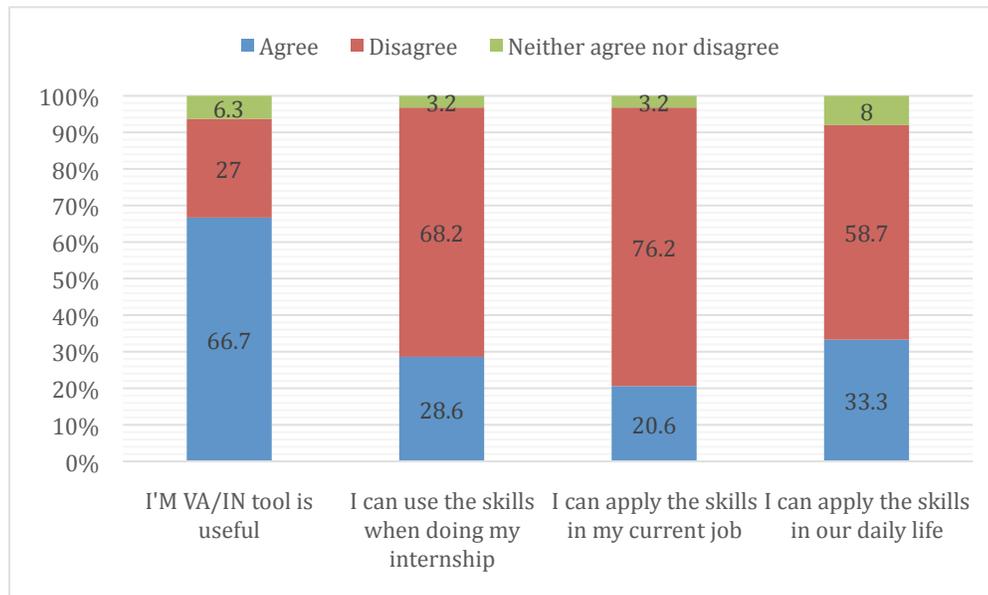
Figure 2. The effectiveness of the use concepts and skills of News Literacy one year later

(Q: Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement)

Comparing results from the three surveys, we found that although nearly 50% of students scored well at the end survey and more than 60% agreed with the usefulness of the verification tool, only 28.6% said they would apply these tools in their journalism practice. Explaining this, Dang Ngoc Thang said, "this verification tool is only suitable for private press and our country's press is not easy to apply because there are many factors involved." From students' opinions, we also found other reasons, as follows: (1) surveyed students who are working for PR companies did not find reasons to apply verification skills; (2) some students couldn't manage to acquire the tools within a short time; (3) not all elements of the I'M/VAIN tool can be applied in the Vietnamese context, especially the I (for Independent sources are better than self-interested sources).

Also, from the surveys, students think the most valuable lesson is "*Verifying information using the I'M/VAIN tool*" and that our games and activities are very interesting and helpful for their understanding of other concepts.

CONCLUSION

The Mobile Journalism course has been offered for only a short time, so the survey results may not look good right now. But we are confident that in the future, we can help more students master verification skills in their daily news consumption as well as in their journalism practice. Through the integration of the two basic lessons, we have found that the knowledge and skills that the News Literacy program builds are very specific and may be integrated into multi-disciplinary courses. Students also become more motivated and active in the learning process, as they perceive useful skills that can be applied immediately to their lives. In the process of teaching, we found that the application of News Literacy concepts and

tools through games creates excitement in the classroom while students also digest information more easily.

In order to have better results, we suggest integrating news literacy concepts and skills in various courses from the basic to the advanced levels so that at each level, students' skills become sharper over time. By our initial assessment, we believe that the problems on verification in the news cannot be resolved solely by the knowledge of a subject or the integration into one subject. Rather, it is a long and persistent process with coordination and support across many different subjects. On the other hand, when many subjects integrate News Literacy, there is the risk of duplication of content, even causing ''over'' knowledge to students. Therefore, we believe that the effective training of News Literacy skills needs to be done through interdisciplinary integration. Integration of News Literacy through interdisciplinary subjects will alter the structure of the current curriculum. Instead of vertical knowledge structuring and using News Literacy without aligning its concepts across different subjects, integrated interdependence will allow the curriculum to combine the vertical and horizontal structures in which the knowledge of the News Literacy is linked to different subjects. Specifically, the same knowledge and skills will be taught in many subjects, divided into several levels and improved throughout each school year.

In the future, when teaching mobile journalism, we hope that we do not have to spend much time explaining the basic news literacy concepts and skills, but can go directly to analyzing real examples and show students good/bad practices. Actually, when integrating News Literacy concepts into this course, we found that the concepts and skills need to be learned over a long duration so that students can form good habits of evaluating facts, sources, and evidence as well as developing strategies to cope with their biases.

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